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*“An entrepreneur defies the conventional. They pursue something they are passionate about, regardless of the naysayers.”*

—Jay Hennick.

## The enterprising philanthropist

Business leader Jay Hennick runs a global corporation providing commercial real estate brokerage and property management services. He also finds time to support many charitable causes in education and health care.

by LOUIS DE MELO AND MIKE FOSTER



Jay Hennick, who was awarded a 2014 honorary doctorate last month, addresses hundreds of graduates at the fall graduation ceremony. Photo: Robert Lacombe.

Jay Hennick (LL.B. '81) grew up in a poor neighbourhood in Toronto. While still in high school, he got a job as a lifeguard but was soon running his own staffing services company for commercial swimming pool and recreation facilities. From that first business, he built up one of the largest property management companies in the world, FirstService Corporation, which generates almost \$3 billion in revenue annually and employs over 24,000 people.

At the University of Ottawa's fall convocation last month, Hennick was one of three exceptional alumni to be awarded a 2014 honorary doctorate. Louis de Melo, the University's vice-president, External Relations, sat down with him to find out more about his unconventional approach.

**Q: You were a successful corporate lawyer at Fogler Rubinoff but then decided to change paths to found [FirstService Corporation](#) in 1989. Perhaps you could describe how you came to this decision?**

A: First, I would say that I loved the practice of law, it was a great experience and I practised for 13 years. The thing I loved the most was learning from great entrepreneurs and business leaders. But after practising for several years I began to get an itch to create something of my own. I watched what others were able to accomplish and I saw an opportunity to create a sizable business in the service sector. So I established FirstService and pursued my dream.

**Q: You say that you had this itch, but you have always been an entrepreneur at heart, founding Superior Pools when you were a teenager. Could you tell me how that came about?**

A: You are quite right. I did have an itch earlier on and probably throughout the practice of law. And I think having a business background brought a lot to my practice as a lawyer. I grew up on the other side of the tracks and unlike many other people I did not have the luxury of going on summer vacations and traveling in Europe. I had to work my way through school and got a job as a lifeguard one summer while in high school. During the winter months, while going to school, I conceived of an idea of providing a full staffing solution to owners of apartments, hotels and condominiums. So I established Superior Pools. That was a long time ago now. I started with one pool and today the company is still part of FirstService. I am very proud of the fact that my original company, together with the growth we enjoy, generates about \$100 million per year in revenues in about 36 major cities across North America. Now it is called American Pools, but in many ways, this is the foundation of FirstService.

**Q: How do you stay one step ahead of the competition? FirstService has had terrific growth and has acquired several businesses along the way. What is your secret?**

A: For me, I am an incredibly paranoid guy. It reminds me of what Andy Grove from Intel used to say – “only the paranoid survive”. I continue to think about what we do every day, how we can differentiate our services to our clients and how to retain the ideal culture for success. It is not just an internal thought-process. We look at our competition all the time, how do we compare in terms of margin, growth rates, innovation, people, among many other things. We are always trying to find ways to differentiate what we do. I think there is a parallel with the University of Ottawa’s new “[Defy the Conventional](#)” branding. It is all about trying to create unique, tangible differentiators for your business whether in the private or public sectors. And the only way for you to do that is to look inside, but more importantly, to look outside of your business to determine how you are doing.

**Q: Last year, we launched an entrepreneurship hub at the University to foster a culture of entrepreneurship. What advice do you have for**

## students who want to become entrepreneurs?



FirstService Corporation provides commercial real estate brokerage and property management services to more than 2.5 billion square feet of residential and commercial properties. Photo courtesy of FirstService Corporation.

A: There is a lot of discussion around whether being an entrepreneur is something you are born with or can be learned. I believe it is something you teach and having experience in the field will always be an advantage. An entrepreneur is a prudent optimist but he or she is also a rebel in some

ways. An entrepreneur defies the conventional. They pursue something they are passionate about, regardless of the naysayers. And in many cases, they become even more motivated when the naysayers begin to speak. When I started FirstService, many people said “Why would anyone invest in the service business”. That created even more incentive to succeed.

### **Q: What do you remember most about your time as a student at uOttawa?**

A: First of all, I am most appreciative to the University for accepting me and I get goose bumps as I think about it. Because I had applied to other law schools but initially the only acceptance I got in Ontario was from the University of Ottawa. They were the first to show confidence in me and I was appreciative. I remember the first few days in law school. I was excited and tried to anticipate what the future had in store. I spent time speaking to some of the older students in second and third years to get the lay of the land. But at the end of the day, the entire experience of being in the Nation’s capital, a different city than the one I grew up in and the prospect of making many new friends was intoxicating. One of the great things about law school is that you spend your time with the same people day in and day out and make many life-long friends. In many ways my graduation was almost anti-climactic because it meant I had to move on to the real world.

### **Q: You have a very strong philanthropic side, forming the Jay and Barbara Hennick Foundation to support a variety of educational, health care and medical research causes, including the JD-MBA Program at the University of Ottawa Law School. You are also chair of the Mount Sinai Hospital board of directors in Toronto. Why is it important for you to give back?**

A: Both my wife and I have been very fortunate in so many ways. We have worked very hard to achieve success in both our personal lives with our children but also in business. And as you develop, you are exposed to gaps in the way education or healthcare is delivered among many other areas and you take it upon yourself to do something about it. In legal education for example, I believe that more lawyers should have a business degree, not just to enhance their practice but potentially to leave

the practice and go into business. So my wife and I have helped to fund students who wish to spend the extra year and get a business degree so their career options are expanded or enhanced. Health care is obviously another area of critical importance to all of us. We need to find more ways to fund research to find more cures. One of the things I enjoy most as Chair of Mount Sinai Hospital is meeting donors who want to make a difference in so many areas of importance to them. It inspires me and it inspires others to give back. If you are in the fortunate position of being able to give to support worthy causes, why not make a difference to others in a tangible way?

**Q: The unique global social giving campaign, Everyone Gives, was set up by FirstService subsidiary Colliers International. Is an ethos of doing social good something you expect from your corporation?**



Jay Hennick.

A: This is a very interesting initiative. The whole idea is – give to whatever charity you want to give to while encouraging others to do the same. In the first year, the campaign ran for 30 days and thousands of charities around the world signed up. Put simply, I would make a gift to a charity of my choice, tell my friends about it, and ask them to do the same in whatever amount they wished to a charity that meant something to them. The succession of gifts created vast trees of charitable givers and the amalgam of gifts in a 30-day period was something like \$750,000 in the first year. The second year was \$1.4 million. The program gave us the opportunity to multiply personal giving

many-fold. Over time, we found some people who started to match gifts if people gave to specific charities. We have 4500 commercial real estate brokers around the world. It was a way for us to give to a variety of charities while creating engagement and collaboration across the company. I won't take credit for it, but I was behind it 100% and it turned into an overnight success.

**Q: Finally, what do you like to do in your spare time? What books are you reading right now?**

A: There are a couple of books I read regularly. You are going to laugh at this but I actually read and re-read: *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (by Dale Carnegie) every couple of years. Right now I'm reading *The Leadership Principles of Colin Powell*. I have also been captivated by President Harry Truman, and in particular, David McCullough's book on the 33rd U.S President, 1945-1953. I have a particular interest in the biographies and autobiographies of unique people who have changed the world.