

Immigrant from Haiti gives St. Michel a high-tech boost

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It's not exactly known as a hive of high-tech, but Frantz Saintellemy had no qualms about setting up his burgeoning business empire in the downscale district of St-Michel.

He was raised there after moving to Montreal from Haiti as a child, and has an enduringly favourable impression of a part of town, and large immigrant population, many others have written off.

“My friends thought I was crazy to go there. The building (on Crémazie Blvd. E.) was rundown. You needed a vision to see the potential. But I wanted to prove to myself I can do it, that there are other models of success (for the black community) than athletes and entertainers, that you can be a successful professional and come from St. Michel.”

The fluently-bilingual Saintellemy, 41, is proof of it. Speaking neither English nor French when he first moved here, he went on to complete studies in electrical engineering at Boston's Northeastern University and

the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.). He worked first in the U.S. for semiconductor company Analog Devices, then returned to Montreal as chief technology officer for one of Quebec's largest tech operations, Future Electronics, in 2004,

Four years ago, Saintellemy decided it was time to strike out on his own, initially as a consultant. His ultimate goal was to start a company creating unique products.

With three colleagues, he developed an innovative compressor technology for heating, ventilation and air-conditioning. The company created to market the product, Hydro HVAC Solutions, then partnered with an Asian manufacturer, licensing the technology to them in exchange for production at cost.

"We sell about 10,000 units a year to other companies, and we don't need a plant of our own. If I don't have to invest in infrastructure, there's value in that," Saintellemy said.

Hydro HVAC was just the start. Buyers of the ventilation and heating systems often had structural or environmental issues in their buildings that limited overall efficiency, so Saintellemy and partners started another company, Groupe Réno-Mérix, which designs comprehensive upgrades and eco-overhauls for individual and commercial clients. It's been in business since 2012.

His latest project is Q-Links, which in conjunction with a German partner and U.S. software company is developing the thermostat equivalent of a smartphone, incorporating everything from home security to lighting control and fire and carbon-monoxide detection.

"It will be a fully integrated wireless platform that can communicate with a smartphone, easy to use. The prototype is about a month away," he said. "We hope to be on the market by the end of 2016. Our goal is to market it first in Canada, as a test, then the U.S., Europe, Asia and the rest of the world."

All three companies are housed on two floors Saintellemy bought three years ago in a highrise on Crémazie, overlooking Highway 40. The premises are now being extensively renovated.

The building has become a sort of entrepreneurial incubator. In addition to the five businesses with which he's associated — and which now have combined annual revenue of almost \$14 million — there are others providing services to Saintellemy's companies. They include consulting, financing, accounting, technical support and legal services. It also houses the fashion and interior-design business run by his wife, Vickie Joseph.

Saintellemy isn't a partner in all the enterprises, but he's the glue that brought them together.

"I had no trouble attracting employees and companies here," he said. "There are close to 70 people working here now, 20 of them engineers. The businesses are independent but connected, a sort of eco-system where they can benefit from each other's successes and all grow together. Most of the companies are owned by Haitians, including four that are run by women. We didn't set out to do that, it just happened that way. These are mostly people I knew from school or socially, people I knew had skills and the same business goals and could work together."

His sister Marie-Guirlaine presides over one of the companies, Omni Invest, an electronics wholesaler, while brother Wilson heads Hydro HVAC.

"Wilson was a big influence in my life. He looked after me in Haiti when my mother followed my sister Roseline here," Saintellemy said.

"It was a challenge at first when I moved here at 8 years old. I understood French but didn't speak it well. My first friends here were Haitian because they spoke the same language."

Saintellemy credits a teacher at his elementary school in Ahuntsic, Gérard Jeune, with putting him on the path to educational success. "Because I didn't speak the language, I didn't really participate in class, but he saw me organizing games in the schoolyard and he saw potential in me. He said if you get good grades, you'll get a gift. I wanted to win that bet, and I did. He gave me three books. Two of them I still remember: *Les Fables de LaFontaine* and *Le Bossu de Notre-Dame*. I wasn't an easy student, but he understood the dynamics of being an immigrant, and he cared. And he didn't do it just for me. He did this a number of times. To me, he's a real hero."

Another mentor was Robert Miller, head of Future Electronics. “He also gave me a chance. He’s a great man, a genius, and inspired me a lot. I’d work for him anytime.”

Saintellemy also is grateful to the city and country that took him in and gave him the chance to bloom and prosper.

“I’ve travelled a lot, and from what I see, Montreal has the best quality of life. It’s diverse, safe, relatively low-cost.”

But he can’t understand why Quebec schools don’t emphasize bilingual education. “Being able to speak English and French gave me a unique advantage. It was always a differentiator for me. I was competitive from the get-go. People I meet in Europe speak three or four languages. In Asia, they learn English early on. I want my children to be able to speak French, English and Créole. We should be celebrating our linguistic duality, not limiting it. ”

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