

Prof. Thomas Chang

Saint-Lambertan wins the Greatest McGillian

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St-Lambert resident Thomas Chang was named the Greatest McGillian of all time this fall – defeating the inventor of basketball, an Olympic skier, and the first francophone prime minister of Canada in an online voting contest on McGill's website.

Chang, who is most well known for developing the first artificial blood cell while a student at McGill and is still a physiology professor at the university, gathered more than 7,500 of votes in the contest – defeating singer Leonard Cohen who came in second with approximately 6,000 votes and Noble Prize scientist Ernest Rutherford, who landed in third place with 4,100 votes.

Chang will be officially honored by McGill at homecoming alumni brunch on Oct. 16.

"It was a pretty substantial victory for Dr. Chang," said McGill spokesman Derek Cassoff, admitting that he was a little bit surprised because he thought "James McGill might be a potential winner just because of the name."

Chang himself said he was not surprised. He said he sees his win as a victory for medical research, not for himself personally.

"People voted actually for the work I'm doing rather than me. They find that the work I'm doing is useful for the future," he said.

Chang said that although he is not as famous in Canada as Leonard Cohen – he is actually very well known around the world.

"I'm better known outside of Canada than in Canada," he said, noting that many of the votes for him came from the United States, Italy, Germany, and China.



McGill University organized the voting contest on its website to celebrate the school's 190th anniversary, according to Cassoff, and promoted it on Facebook with trivia contests, on Twitter and on Youtube, with short videos about the 20 finalists. The most surprising thing of all, Cassoff said, was how much interest the contest generated. The school received 60,000 votes in the contest which was open from February until the end of August.

"It's the first time we've done this sort of contest," Cassoff said. "We got 700 nominations which totally overwhelmed us, totally overwhelmed the system."

Despite being named the Greatest McGillian of all time, Cassoff said there are currently no plans to name any buildings or streets on campus in Dr. Chang's honor. McGill does have other buildings named after famous

graduates, including the Rutherford Physics Building, the Leacock Building – named after humorist Stephen Leacock – and the student center building, which is unofficially known as "Shatner". McGill also has streets named after alumni, such as Dr. Penfield Avenue – which is named after neurosurgeon Wilder Graves Penfield – and Promenade Sir-William-Osler, named after a McGill graduate who is sometimes called the father of modern medical training.

"I'm not in for buildings. I'm in for research. I don't go around and try to win prizes," Chang said, but added, "Maybe there should be one (building named) after my name. Maybe it's about time."

Dr. Chang is most famous for inventing the first artificial blood cell at the age of 23, when he was a physiology student at McGill. At that time, he transformed his dorm room into a home-made lab, and

created a permeable plastic sack that could carry hemoglobin nearly as well as a natural blood cell. The invention has led to the use of artificial cells in nanomedicine, stem cell therapy, and cancer therapy to name but a few. It also had an impact on agriculture and the food industry.

In the 1980s when HIV became a global threat, Chang's work on finding a safe blood substitute earned him an Order of Canada award. At one point, he was even considered for a Nobel Prize.

Today Chang still teaches physiology at McGill and is still involved in the school's Artificial Cells & Organs Research Centre. He has lived in the same house in St. Lambert since 1966.

Chang said he is happy about his victory in the contest, but is still busy with his research, which

is now focused on improving artificial blood. This artificial blood, Chang explained, acts as a substitute to blood transfusions, allowing patients to survive longer without needing real blood. The artificial blood is used in war zones where the injured cannot get to the hospital quickly, countries with high prevalence of HIV/AIDS such as South Africa, and by Jehova's Witnesses, who cannot get transfusions for religious reasons, according to Chang. The medical researcher said he is currently working on eliminating the side effects of artificial blood, which include heart problems.

The alumni brunch officially recognizing Chang as The Greatest McGillian of all time will take place at 11:30 am on Sunday, Oct. 16 at the McGill Faculty Club which is located on 3450 McTavish Street in Montreal. Tickets are \$35. For more information, call 514 398 8288. While the event is geared to McGill alumni, members of the public are also welcome to attend.