

2015: OSCAR H. FRANCOIS

Oscar Francois has a dry, gentle sense of humour and an unassuming manner – but he also has a steely self-confidence and drive that helped him become a pioneer in his field. His vision and careful planning made him a success, and although he was an only child himself, he has built a rock-solid family who not only supported him in his business, but also followed him into it, ensuring that it will endure.

There's even a close family connection with the headquarters of Oscar Francois Limited, situated at 135 Duke Street, Port of Spain. That was where his mother's house once stood, and that's where he started his business in 1958, with a desk in the drawing room and a "warehouse" of pharmaceutical supplies in his bedroom. Now it's the site of a modern office building, named Alicia House in honour of Francois' wife.

Oscar H. Francois grew up in Port of Spain, attending Nelson Street Boys' RC under its legendary principal Arthur Roberts. He also took part in the plays written by Mr. Roberts and staged by the Nelsonian Players in cinemas all over the country and later found that the experience of performing in front of hundreds of people came in useful for his sales career.

But when Francois left Nelson Street Boys' at 14, while his friends went on to secondary school, he had to get a job. His mother, who worked in the hat department at Fogarty's, helped find him a position as an office boy at Ernest

Vieira, on Chacon Street. He made \$3 a week, gave \$2 to his mother, and kept \$1 for himself.

That wasn't good enough for young Oscar. He was fascinated by seeing Mr. Vieira's secretary, Mrs. Sampson, taking shorthand and then touch-typing letters. He wanted to learn those skills too. So he began taking evening classes—including book-keeping, though he hated that. Two months later, Mrs. Sampson moved to Agostini's and heard there was an opening for an Office Boy. Oscar applied and got the job, more than doubling his wages to \$7 a week.

He stayed at Agostini's for 17 years, moving up steadily to become a customs clerk, head customs clerk, and a salesman in the pharmaceuticals division. But at 31, he met his Venezuelan wife-to-be. Thinking ahead again, he wanted their future children to have a university education. He had to become an entrepreneur working for himself to finance the life he was determined his family would have one day.

So he left his job on February 28, 1958—and started his business from his mother's house. The next day: he packed his car with his products and drove to Point Fortin, leaving some of his goods there on consignment. Later he began visiting Doctors to detail them the products he was promoting, spending hours beforehand in the Library to educate himself in Latin medical terms, so that he could explain the benefits of the prescription medicines he was offering.

Francois had no mentors, and no family financial resources to fall back on—but he was sure he would succeed, thanks to the range of contacts he had fostered and the wide experience he had gained at Agostini's; and, with those advantages, and through his own determination, he did. After two years he moved into a real office, and in 1972 the company moved to its Duke Street home, later acquiring the house next door to expand its headquarters. Meanwhile he, his wife and four daughters lived in a two-bedroom house in Woodbrook until they could afford better.

Oscar Francois and Company didn't have much competition in the early days, but he expanded the range of his business nevertheless. He began distributing veterinary medicines, and set up a factory in 1967 with two partners (whom he later bought out) to manufacture aerosol products and toiletries, including the Fabergé brand, through Intersol Limited (now based in Arima). In 1962, he and other distributors founded a pharmaceuticals committee, the beginning of his long association with the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce.

Former Managing Director of Republic Bank Limited John Jardim became his bank manager in the 1970s, and remembers Francois as an outstanding customer.

“He was careful not to overextend himself,” recalls Jardim. “He managed his cash flow and looked for further business. He listened to what you had to say, and there weren't too many questions he had to answer—he had thought it through before he went to the bank.”

In those days, banks had quite a conservative approach to lending, and the pool of trained talent that a businessman could draw on was smaller. But Francois' judgement was sound. "He was astute," says Jardim, "and if he gave you a commitment, he fulfilled it."

Thanks to Francois' drive and dedication, the two companies now export a range of products around the region. They employ 220 people in distribution and 25 at Intersol Limited, the manufacturing Company.

Eventually, Francois' hard work took its toll on him, and in 1976 he had a heart attack. He was back at work within a month, but his wife Alicia joined him to take some of the strain. Till then he had been the household provider and she a traditional homemaker, but now she worked in the warehouse and collected payments from the Companies they supplied. After his daughters (Jacqueline Francois, Janine Low, Jasmine Winford and Gisele Marfleet graduated, they joined Oscar Francois Limited too. The reason they gave him was that they wanted to help their mother—they were never pressured to be part of the family business, recalls Jacqueline, now CEO of the company and Jasmine, Deputy CEO.

But, taking a position that was unusually enlightened for a man of his generation, Francois had urged during family dinner-table conversations that all his daughters should have an education and a career, so that even if they married, they could take care of themselves and their children. He was also aware that as women, they wouldn't have access to the old boys' network available to men, and hence

encouraged Jacqueline to join the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce from very early on.

As employees, his daughters didn't get any special treatment—on the contrary, they were thrown in at the deep end, though their father would also offer them informal training by sharing his own experience with them. But they were expected, for instance, to reach the office early, to set an example for the staff; and up to today, when they're at work, they refer to him as “Mr. Francois.”

At 88, “Mr. Francois” still goes into the office every day. On Mondays he helps his wife with her charity work, preparing food for distribution to the homeless. Likewise, the Company recognises its corporate social responsibility, making donations and raising funds to assist schools, NGOs and homes and charities for the disabled and disadvantaged.

When he got the call from the Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce to say he had been selected for its Hall of Fame, Oscar Francois admits that—despite his 57-year record of achievement—he was not only elated but also shocked.

But John Jardim explains why he deserves this acclaim: “He was a successful pioneer; he has shown that and the Chamber recognises that apart from the energy sector, the business economy depends very heavily on small and medium-sized businesses.”

The Trinidad and Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce is indeed honoured to induct Mr. Oscar H. Francois into the Business Hall of Fame on November 7th 2015.