

Jim Balsillie

Jim Balsillie was the kind of kid who held down five paper routes at one time and played hockey and basketball. At the age of seven, the budding entrepreneur sold greeting cards door-to-door and in his teen years he managed summer camps and student painters.



It was the perfect training ground for a man who has gone on to become the co-chief executive officer of Research In Motion (RIM), a Waterloo-based company that has changed the way the world communicates. RIM's BlackBerry, a wireless e-mail device used by millions of people every day, has emerged as one of the iconic products of global communication.

Balsillie's drive and competitive nature has helped bring RIM, which had fewer than ten employees when he joined forces with Mike Lazaridis in 1992, to a business with offices around the world, serving corporate clients as well as government bodies like the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Congress.

Even after so much success, Balsillie was quoted as saying in 2001: "We still don't feel that we've made it. It's everybody's terror that everything you have is going to be immediately eclipsed and that whatever you have will be completely deleted."

Born into a middle-class family in 1961, Balsillie's father Raymond was an electronics technician and his mother, Laurel, stayed home to care for the family's three children. Balsillie was born in Seaforth, Ontario, but grew up in Peterborough after the family moved there when he was five years old.

Balsillie, who as a young man vowed he would get an MBA from Harvard, attended the University of Toronto and went on to the Harvard School of Business. A chartered accountant, Balsillie also holds honorary degrees from Dalhousie and Wilfrid Laurier Universities.

Balsillie returned to the area after finishing his MBA studies with a job as the executive vice-president and chief financial officer of technology with Sutherland Schultz. He left that job in 1992 when the company was sold, and the timing proved fortuitous for the 31-year-old new father.

Balsillie joined forces that year with Mike Lazaridis.

"I thought they would be the perfect fit. Mike was so technically clever and Jim had the business acumen that Mike didn't have," Rick Brock, an owner of Sutherland Schultz has been quoted as saying.

The partnership has obviously proven profitable.

“We share the strategizing. Everything flows together; there is no absolute dividing line. It’s grey because so many issues need synthesis,” Balsillie said once. “RIM and our lives are synonymous. This is what we do. This is what I want to do, am trained to do, dream of doing.”

Away from the office, Balsillie volunteers his time as a basketball coach and plays hockey in a recreational league. During the summer, he can often be found on the ice in Kitchener’s Auditorium at 5:30 a.m., improving his skills with the help of a former Kitchener Ranger. A widely-publicized offer to purchase the NHL’s Pittsburgh Penguins fell through in late 2006.

Balsillie has also used his wealth and connections to found the Centre for International Governance and Innovation with \$35 million of his own money. The international affairs think tank is based in the former Seagram Museum in Waterloo.

Heidi Balsillie, Jim’s wife and the primary caregiver for the family’s two children, is very involved in community fundraising. She has raised money for local agencies that help children who have suffered various forms of abuse.

Jim Balsillie reflected on his remarkable career once saying he has no regrets. “I don’t think in the past, because everything is in its own place and time. It’s all a continuum, so you’re here where you are through fate and a cascading set of circumstances.”

Photo courtesy of Research In Motion