

Surviving Success

A New Brunswick poultry mogul tells the true story behind his limitless ambition

BY ANDRÉ DUMONT

“**O**ne day, I’ll show them what I am capable of.” From his teenage years on, this became Jean-Paul Ouellet’s mantra. From poverty, he would grow so rich and powerful he could “buy them all out.”

Earlier this year, the New Brunswick poultry entrepreneur went public and published his story. Written by his psychologist and business coach Pierrette Desrosiers, the book *Survivre à la réussite* (*Surviving Success*) tells of the transformation of a man who built one of Canada’s greatest poultry empires.

The story is about poverty and humiliation, fast-paced growth and business success, family dreams and tragedy, drugs and alcohol addiction and, most importantly, overcoming rage and forgiving. Ouellet’s account alternates with professional insight from Desrosiers, who has worked with countless other clients in agriculture.

Jean-Paul Ouellet was born in 1954 near Rimouski, Que., as the 10th child of 16. In his early youth, his family moved to Saint-Hilaire, N.B., a small village close to Edmundston. The family farmed 60 acres of land, with everyone contributing to chores.

Despite the hard work, the Ouellets remained poor. Jean-Paul remembers being sent to the neighbours to borrow a screwdriver, only to be mocked about his family’s extreme poverty. In school, classmates would notice him wearing their old clothes and call him “Toilet” instead of “Ouellet.”



SOUGHT HELP

Jean-Paul Ouellet’s strive for success took him down a path towards self-destruction. With Pierrette Desrosiers’ help, he can enjoy life and the business he built.

School was a nightmare. After failing the same grade twice, teachers would move him to the next, only because he had become too big for his younger classmates. “When you get the belt in front of everyone because you didn’t do your homework (I understood nothing), that you are isolated in a corner, that your teachers tell you you’ll never do anything good in life, you lose confidence and you think you are really not smart.”

One Sunday after mass when he was 12, Ouellet went to the general store to buy his father a chaplet. He asked the owner if she could make him a loan, promising to reimburse 25 cents every

week. The lady accepted with a smile. “I told myself: Wow! One can borrow,” Ouellet tells in the book. “Without knowing, this lady gave me confidence in life. I understood that one day, I could do business. Big business. I saw that there were people who could trust me.”

At 16, Ouellet dropped out of school, without knowing how to read and write. “But I could count,” he says. “When I was small, I remember telling myself: I will hire people to work for me, because I am not good in school, but some are. I will find educated people that will help me.”

When he was 21, Ouellet obtained

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quota for 30,000 broilers and purchased his first three acres of land. The following year, he started a hog operation. Disease among the piglets brought him close to bankruptcy in 1981. Using his contacts and his charisma, he managed to reimburse his line of credit and escape losing everything.

From 1988 on, Ouellet started purchasing farm after farm. At one point, he owned property in 16 municipalities. His company reached a turnover of \$60 million annually, employing up to 150 workers.

His wife Monique was a shareholder right from the start. His controller Yves Durepos also took part in the ownership. Both supported Ouellet through phases of rapid expansion. Despite being illiterate, he had an incredible flair for business opportunities. There was always someone around he could trust to read important papers or to temper him in his boundless ambition.

Success drew admiration, but Ouellet was not a happy man. "When people told me I was successful, inside of me, I felt like I wanted to die." What was wrong? Blinded by ambition, he lived only to get bigger, every acquisition bringing nothing but short-lived satisfaction.

He remembers telling his 11-year-old daughter Annick she had grown. "Dad, I grow even when you are not there," she answered. He is also saddened to recall how his son Marc would sleep with a photo of him. He was nonetheless a loving and caring father, says Monique.

A major blow came in 1998, when Annick died in a car accident at 21. She and Ouellet had been on a mission to "feed the world." His son Marc had already left the family business, because he thought it was too big. Ouellet's dream of transferring the company to his children was shattered.

A few days after Annick's funeral, Ouellet received a phone call from a competitor, asking if his company was for sale, now that his daughter had passed away. He answered: "My daughter has died, but I am not dead. Just watch me." Ouellet hung up the phone and

said: "Now, we are developing."

That same year, he invested \$7 million. There was nothing stopping him.

In 2000, Ouellet started feeling tired. That's when he first called in Pierrette Desrosiers, a well-known Quebec farm psychologist. Her first diagnosis: Ouellet should slow down. Perhaps she's not the right person to advise me, he thought.

Desrosiers asked Ouellet why he had built such a large company. It took him five years to find the right answer. "It was getting even with all those who had hurt me in my youth," he said in an interview with *Canadian Poultry* magazine. "I did it for my ego, to prove that I was someone."

The rage that fuelled Ouellet's ambition had become unbearable. Alcohol and drugs brought no relief. It was time to get help. Desrosiers came back, lent an empathetic ear and therapy started.

"Very few men are able to admit they need help," Desrosiers says. "Jean-Paul is a man with a lot of discipline. All the energy he was putting in this company, he now put it on healing himself."

Ouellet's story may be set in a farming context, but in many ways it's universal, Desrosiers says. "We must lift the taboo on the myth of the rational businessman," she says. Many business decisions are based on emotions rather than reason, be it the purchase of a bigger and newer tractor or the acquisition of another farm.

Ouellet had to learn to manage his emotions and rid himself of negative thoughts that contaminated his everyday life, Desrosiers explains. The little voice inside that used to say, "Don't let anyone walk over you," "Show them that you are the best," or "If you are the biggest, richest and most powerful everyone will respect you," is now under control.

Most importantly, Ouellet learned to forgive those who had humiliated him. He accepted the need to let go of part of his business, in order to better enjoy life.

Today, Ouellet is a transformed man.

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"I feel good," he says. "I used to not even notice the birds or the sun. Today, I can look inside a flower and appreciate its beauty."

His company has downsized by 80 per cent. His son Marc and some 30 employees take care of several layer barns, a hatchery and a grading station. This has made the company attractive to Marc, who has come back for good. "He's not taking over to please me," Ouellet says. "He's doing it because he's really passionate about our company."

At 56, Ouellet now enjoys taking care of his wood lots and his sugar shack. He spends a lot of time reading, meditating and enjoying nature. He has his own private retreat, in the form of a large teepee.

Ouellet also gives talks and attends conferences, to tell his story and promote Desrosiers' book. People think that wealthy businesspeople are totally happy, he says. But a lot are truly unhappy, despite professional success. "People who have built large companies have to ask themselves: why have I gone so far?"

If only 10 people have been helped by his story, Ouellet believes it was worth telling. In fact, more than 1,000 copies of the book have been sold. Desrosiers receives e-mails daily, telling her how the book was passed around in a company, or how it has changed the life of someone.

Ouellet is an exceptional man, Desrosiers says. "This man was able to recognize his weaknesses. He had a big ego, but he didn't let it take all the space. He became aware of his limits and sought help."

Very few businessmen have gone public about failure and admitted that the decisions that drove the growth of their company were not rational, Desrosiers says. "We realize that behind great success, there is often great pain."

The book, *Survivre à la réussite*, is published by Les Éditions La Vie agricole. Pierrette Desrosiers may be contacted at pierrette@pierrettedesrosiers.com. ■

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