

# **Charles Khabouth – King Of Hospitality, Emperor Of Entertainment, Overlea/Marc Garneau Graduate?**



Guvernment, The Spoke Club, Spice Route, Bisha Hotel, Ultra, Patria, Byblos, Uniun, Sofia, Dragonfly, Club Z, Still Life, Cube, Cabana, Rebel, This is London, La Société, Figo, Kost.

If you've been to any of these Toronto establishments and enjoyed the vibe, atmosphere and experience, it's time to reveal the man responsible.

Charles Khabouth – ruler of Toronto's hospitality and entertainment scene, bearer of the "King of Clubs" moniker, consistently featured on Toronto Life's 50 Most Influential People list and written about incessantly in media. Charles is the CEO and owner of INK Entertainment, a company worth upwards of \$75 million that does restaurants, night clubs, day life, concerts, hotels, art galleries, private member clubs, corporate events and weddings. In Charles' own words – "There is no [one] company in the world today, that I know of, that does what we do."

Along with all of the above, another little-known fact is that like me, Charles Khabouth is a graduate of Overlea Secondary (Marc Garneau Collegiate today).

I had the privilege to snag a few minutes of this legendary entrepreneur's time to chat about his life, his time at Overlea and get some advice for future graduates of Marc Garneau. Despite being in the middle of a pandemic that has wreaked havoc on the entertainment/restaurant industry, Charles stuck to his commitment to have our chat, even though it meant stepping out of a meeting to deal with an impending shutdown that might be announced any day. "I'd made a promise, so here I am", he said. His integrity immediately impressed me!

I found Charles to be extremely easy to engage with, down-to-earth and genuine. He is clearly a conversationalist and I appreciated his anecdotal approach to conversation. I began by congratulating him on his prodigious success and acknowledging him as a Toronto legend, to which the winner of EY's Entrepreneur of the Year Award, humbly remarked, "Thank you – that is a big statement, I do what I can, thank you."

With that, we dove right in:

***When were you at Overlea?***

C: I came to Canada in '76 and went to East York CI for a short time before switching to Overlea and was there '77, '78 and '79.

***Why did you make the switch to Overlea?***

I found East York to be extremely European and I was considered a "camel jockey". I felt uncomfortable and wasn't having a good time. My first job in Canada was working at the McDonald's on Overlea and there, I met kids that were going to Overlea school and they suggested that I should transfer, so I did.

***What was your experience at Overlea like?***

Great! There was definitely a sense of belonging at Overlea, it was a much friendlier environment and very multicultural. I hung out with a mixed group of kids and it was easier to belong and be part of it as a new immigrant. I was never a great student, but I knew I wanted to get out there and start my own business and do it early.

**"People are  
born with a  
certain desire  
in life"**

***And where do you think that drive comes from? What do you credit that to?***

Listen, I think people are born with a certain desire in life and then it's what you experience going through life – it does help to go through good times and bad times - it helps structure your life, set goals, it makes you want to get better and to make a difference.

***I know your dad had the entrepreneurial spirit as well. I understand your dad opened a night club in Lebanon...***



Yeah, my dad opened a night club in Lebanon when I was 9 and put all his life savings into it. It went bankrupt in 6 months and he ended up returning to his old job and died of a heart attack that same day at the age of 43.

***It's remarkable that you saw that happen – he ventured out on his own and took a risk – and yet, you decided to take out a \$30,000 loan to open a night club at the age of 22. Where does that drive come from?***

I truly think people are born with a certain desire in life, but then you've got to focus. For me, when you're 22 or 23 years old, and all your friends are going out to party, you've got to focus to succeed. At 22, you're not going out, you're going to work every night, getting up early – you can't wing it – there's no such thing as winging it – can't go out and party and then do an exam and get an A+ in the same way, you can't go out and party and run a business. I decided at an early age that I was going to focus on work and business and it has paid off – but it's a tremendous amount of stress – all you need is one person saying, "I didn't like the chicken"! and it affects you.

***“You can't wing it...there's no such thing as winging it”***

***You seem to get intimately involved in all of your restaurants and businesses, to the point of adding your eloquently eclectic style to the space and interior. Every time I've been at a beautiful restaurant, it turns out to be one of yours!***

I start with a concept – you have to have a concept – people want to go to a concept restaurant – people don't want a mish-mash place that serves all kinds of stuff.

People now are so educated because of social media/internet – they know what they want, what the price should be – so you have to be that much better.

Today, you can Google just about anyone and have all their info at hand – it's the same with food, concepts, prices, etc. I essentially want to give people an experience that is young and fresh – and this has been especially important during the pandemic, which is why I opened Amal this August.

There was no Lebanese restaurant in Toronto where people went to hang out, usually, it's "get the bill as soon as you're done eating". At Amal, we've got a DJ on the weekends, and young servers we had to train up - I wanted the space to be filled with young energy and a fun vibe. We are basically a lifestyle brand.



***What advice would you have for young graduates of Marc Garneau CI today?***

It is really important to try and find what you enjoy doing, to have a target and then to focus – it's very important to focus. It's important to find what you love to do - like a relationship, when you find somebody you really get along with and can sit with them for an hour driving , not talking but still feeling



fulfilled – when it comes to business, it's the same thing. Find something that interests you and fulfills you more than just financials because the financials will drop, no matter how much money you're making...I mean, we've all seen people walk away from very lucrative jobs. Sometimes it takes time to find that something, it's not easy but the time to find out is at a younger age; once you get older and you have responsibility, expenses, etc. you become more inflexible – there's a window of opportunity when you're younger which narrows as you get older.

**“You have to have a target and you've got to be focused...everyday!”**

As long as you've got something that you set your eyes on, then the sky's the limit and you've got to be focused everyday – you've gotta get up and do it!

Set a target of where you want to go with it, be focused, do your research. With any business, you have to do your research so you go in ready, knowing your stuff. And when you're not sure, don't say much – ask questions – surround yourself with people who know more than you.

Sit, listen, learn. It's not important to dominate the conversation. It's not about “let me tell you” – I want someone to tell me, every once in a while. That's what keeps me excited. Otherwise, how do you learn and grow?



*It's clearly not been about chasing the money for you. I mean, to come up with an idea like putting wild animals on display at a club, like you did at Club Z, your very first club. It's got to be passion that inspires such out-of-the-box thinking...*

[bursts out laughing] That was desperation – I would rather have been eaten by a tiger than go bankrupt!

By: **Melissa Krishna**  
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