

Farhi gives back to his London

If home is where the heart is, London is home for Shmuel Farhi.

The successful businessperson was born and raised in Tel Aviv, Israel, but has thrown his heart and soul into business and charity in London, despite the fact he had “never given Canada a thought” until a chance encounter turned his life around.

HOW DID YOU GET HERE?



JANE ANTONIAK



It happened in Row 44 on a flight from Annapolis, Md., to San Francisco in October 1985.

Farhi was in Seat C and Londoner Mary Bray was next to him. He was 24, a graduate of Israel's Technion University, and was running a company that sold underground security fencing to governments in Central and South America.

“People say I was an arms dealer but, no, it was security fencing,” he says with a laugh.

Farhi and Bray struck up a conversation and by trip's end had exchanged contact information.

Before he left San Francisco, Farhi called Bray and she suggested they

meet again in Detroit, where both had business later that month.

“She brought me here to London and I froze,” Farhi says.

Farhi was ready for a major life change. He had been mulling over what a palm reader in New York City had told him: “She said I wouldn't live in the U.S. or in Israel, but in another country. And, you know, you have to believe in yourself, trust yourself.”

And so, in February 1986, Farhi returned to London, where he and Bray started a real estate company. The plan was simple: buy derelict London and St. Thomas properties, fix them up and rent them out.

Their partnership lasted more than two years before Farhi went out on his own. Now, Farhi Holdings Corp. has assets of \$500 million across Ontario. It won the Ontario Chamber of Commerce Business Achievement Award in 2004.

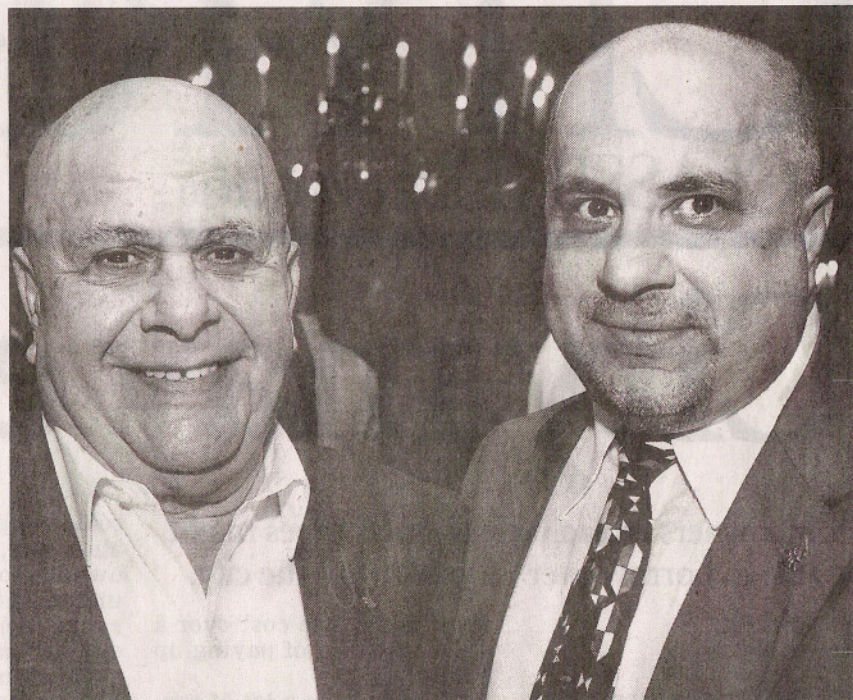
And Farhi, who describes himself as a proud Canadian, says this is definitely home.

Farhi says he has chosen to stay in London because of his children, Ben, 17, Shehnee, 15, and Natan, 19 months.

He's a typical dad in many ways, juggling family demands while running business from his Richmond Row office.

But the 46-year-old says he couldn't be happier. Not because of his wealth, but because of his new life here.

He has launched a new venture — to raise millions for the Ivey Heart



File photo

HEART TO HEART: Shmuel Farhi, right, and his father, Yehuda, at an April Heart to Heart campaign event.

Institute at London Health Sciences Centre. The Heart to Heart drive peaks June 16 when Farhi will play host to hundreds of people at a sold-out event on his Middlesex Centre estate.

He pledges to match, dollar for dollar, every cent raised — and that's expected to be in the millions. He also asks every Londoner to

make a donation, big or small, to help reduce deaths from heart disease — something that's hit his father.

“We are temporarily here and we have to do the right things to the utmost of our abilities,” he says. “Every moment won't come back and that is why we have to do everything we can to make our lives better and to raise the next generation.”

While he has grown from being a young man living on a kibbutz in Israel to starting a new life in a strange country, Farhi is clear on one thing: It's not all about money, even though he loves the opportunity Canada has afforded him.

“I do not want to be the richest man in the cemetery. I want to give back to my community.”

Jane Antoniak is a London writer.