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Pair take basement start-up to recognition, success

BY GILLIAN SHAW
VANCOUVER SUN

AWARDS | Two 27-year-old Vancouverites who have put everything from games to online dating into the hands of more than five million wireless consumers around the world have been named British Columbia winners of the Business Development Bank of Canada's Young Entrepreneur Award.

Fred Ghahramani and Vincent Yen were a couple of wireless phone geeks, as they describe themselves, working out of the basement of Ghahramani's aunt's house in Burnaby while they pursued their studies in engineering science at Simon Fraser University.

After a little trial and error — those were the start-up companies Ghahramani calls their "complete failures" — the pair found their focus in providing applications that would make money for wireless carriers seeking a way to add value to the straight delivery of voice and data.

The result was AirG, a now Vancouver-



Frederick Ghahramani (left) and Vincent Yen have won the Business Development Bank of Canada's Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

ver-based company that has doubled its numbers in the past year to 70 employees and has chalked up a 100 per-cent growth rate year-over-year for the past five, profitable years.

"Focus is a challenging thing to achieve

in a start-up; the grass is always greener on the other side when you see what others are doing," said Ghahramani. "Our ah-ha moment came from going out and listening to people.

"We were sitting down with Telus one time and we were pitching X and they wanted Y. They started telling us about their problems and it was a very positive moment for the company because it was then we turned to solving problems and taking feedback from customers and making the products they needed."

The result is a two-business unit company, with one selling multiplayer, interactive games for mobile phones and the second selling a full mobility solution including instant messaging, photo, video and other wireless services. More than 85 carriers in 33 countries deliver AirG's applications worldwide. The company has moved twice to accommodate its growth since its basement start-up days, has taken up three office spaces for its Robson Street headquarters and is considering a fourth.

Ghahramani is quick to share the glory with AirG staff, which he describes as "a fantastic team, creating some of the most cutting-edge products in the market."

The pair started while they were in their teens and now, at 27, are veterans of a sometimes unforgiving business world. Ghahramani has this advice for others who might follow a similar path:

"My best advice — and that's not to sound like an expert because I think we have been fortunate and lucky — but the moment we stopped spinning our wheels and started to grow rapidly was when we started to do due diligence," he said. "Before jumping into a business, losing your hair, your social life, losing your girlfriend — make sure you do your due diligence, even if you spend an extra half year doing your due diligence, it is worth it."

The hair has survived the entrepreneurial trial by fire — if a little receding from their student days. As for the girlfriends and the social life, Ghahramani isn't telling.