

Saint John professor awarded one of France's highest honours

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A professor at the University of New Brunswick Saint John has received one of France's highest honours.

Thierry Chopin, a marine biology professor from France, has been named a knight in the National Order of Merit.

"I felt honoured," he said. "It's the second highest medal you can get from France so that was something. It was both an honour and a pleasure."

The medal, which is second only to the Legion of Honour, is awarded to civilians or military members for distinguished achievements. Recipients must be at least 35 years of age, have a minimum of 10 year of public service and "distinguished merits."

Chopin fits the bill. Since 2011 he's been an honorary consul for the French government, being promoted from honorary vice-consul, a position he held for 10 years. He's spent the past 14 years facilitating things for students and companies on both sides of the Atlantic.

"What we do is mostly help citizens," he said. "Sometimes we're helping businesses get connections in France or do economic missions. If they visit the region we put them in contact with companies to develop partnerships."

The consul general, Vincent Hommeril, is in Moncton and represents the Atlantic provinces.

Some of his favourite achievements stem from his work as honorary consul. He's particularly involved with helping Canadian students who want to study abroad in France and has received positive feedback.

"As an honorary consul of France you do a lot of work and you don't always appreciate it. But when you get a nice letter from the parents saying their daughter is enjoying her time, well that was worth the time trying to help her."

But Chopin also has a full-time job. He has been a marine biology professor

at UNBSJ since 1989 and has been working on a project called integrated multi-trophic aquaculture for 14 years.

"In New Brunswick, in the Bay of Fundy, we have a lot of salmon aquaculture and we're trying to diversify it by putting invertebrates on seaweeds," he said.

The process involves fish, seaweed, and invertebrates – usually mussels – relying on each other. They recycle left-over nutrients and become sustainable.

The project is entering the commercialization phase and Chopin is proud of the work the team has done.

Twice a year people are awarded the French honour. Chopin was actually named to the order in November and was given his medal by Hommeril in a ceremony on campus on Friday.

Hommeril pointed to Chopin's education and research as a reason he was chosen for the honour.

"His academics are very good and very complete," he said. "He's appreciated by his students and the university."

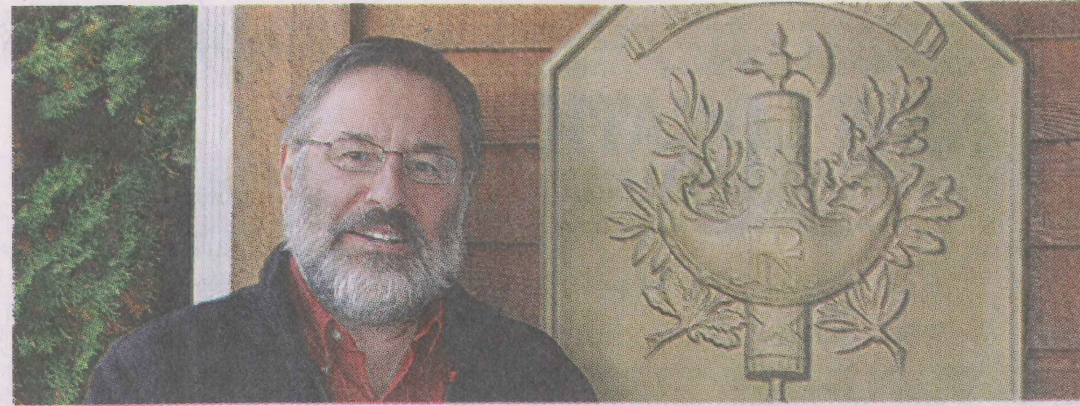
Hommeril, who has known Chopin a number of years, is familiar with the professor's work and said he finds it both fascinating and important.

Of course, Chopin has also helped Hommeril as the honorary consul in Saint John. That and his other accolades make him the perfect recipient, Hommeril said.

"He's helping the French consulate in Moncton and we are very thankful to him. He's doing a great job in welcoming the new French nationals and helping them in everything they have to do. He's really a big help."

Chopin has been in Canada for 25 years this month and said receiving the medal is the perfect way to top off a milestone. He's now spent half his life in France and half his life in Canada.

"I have a family in Canada so I consider myself Canadian with, of course, roots in France. I have a certain way of thinking and behaving and taking the best of both cultures."



Thierry Chopin, a UNBSJ professor, standing next to the Agence consulaire de France. Chopin has been named a knight to the French National Order of Merit and received his medal Friday. PHOTO: SUBMITTED