

Family business leaves College Street after 74 years

Paul Lungen
Staff Reporter

The outdoor mall in Downsview doesn't have quite the same haymische character as the College Street neighbourhood that Exclusive Paints called home for 74 years.

Then again, how many mom and pop businesses can survive for that long, let alone thrive, and have the confidence to try a new location?

The Shiewitz family is still moving into its premises at Chesswood Drive and Sheppard Avenue, but it's business as usual as the familiar cast of characters continues serving customers. Behind the counter sits Esther Shiewitz, pretty much as she did back in the store's heyday in the 1970s, as revealed in vintage photos from the era. Joe Shiewitz, who's run the family business since 1978 but who started there in 1959, is pleased to share his knowledge of paints, mixes and tints.

There's son Aron, the third generation to work in the store, and you can't forget Habib Azulay, a sales consultant and paint specialist who has been with the firm since fleeing from Tangiers, Morocco, 47 years ago.

Daughter Cheryl, who works in real estate, acts as the family's media contact

and informal family historian, relating tales from the days her zaide, Izzy Reingewertz, started the business in 1938.

Between them, they provide the kind of personalized attention you're not likely to find at a big-box store. And they know more about paint than those upstarts starting out with a small store and barely any inventory.

Still, in an era of Home Depot, Lowes, Rona and Canadian Tire, making a living selling what the big boys do is a challenge. Sales drop pretty much every year, by something like 10 to 15 per cent, Joe concedes. They've gone from \$2 million a year to something like \$600,000. When you have one outlet, it's hard to compete with the multiple locations other companies offer.

The key to retaining clientele and enticing new ones is personalized service and expertise, explained Joe Shiewitz. "I have personal relationships, and we know what we're doing," he explained.

Clients appreciate the company's ability to order specialized paints from boutique suppliers in New York, as he did for one designer client. And they are attracted to Exclusive's ability to match colours better than anyone else.

More than once, customers have come into the store asking for help matching a



Joe Shiewitz and his daughter Cheryl [Paul Lungen photo]

colour. Big-box outlets aren't nearly as accurate in rendering colours as we are, Joe stated. Some of the new computerized mixing machines are way off. Better to rely on the tried and true method he and Habib mastered years ago. Shiewitz said they could eyeball a colour in a piece of fabric, a cushion or some other object, and match it accurately, using equipment that preceded computerized machinery.

"I am old school," Shiewitz stated.

At the very least!

Shiewitz was born in eastern Europe in 1940 - not a good time or place to be a Jew. During the war, his family escaped the Nazis by fleeing to Siberia. Afterward, he landed in Toronto and went to work for Izzy at his first paint store on College.

"The paint store was always a Jewish hub in

the community," Cheryl writes. "Often people would come by for a free cup of coffee, a shmooze and the potential to get some work.

"My grandfather helped people in any way he could, either it was helping them find work, lending them money or giving them product on credit."

One of them was Frank O'Dea, a down-on-his-luck individual who would work in the shop and who eventually turned his life around and founded the Second Cup coffee business.

Joe started working in the paint shop after it was well established. There he met his future wife, Izzy's daughter. They were married and Joe worked as a painting contractor. When his father-in-law took ill in 1979, he took over the busi-

ness.

Like his father-in-law, he's a gregarious individual who relied on personal relationships to create business. But unlike his father-in-law, he wasn't willing to extend credit to people on a whim, or to load up on so much paint he had to scramble to find a warehouse to store it in. When he took over the shop, he was faced with boxes of bad cheques from contractors and customers, who had received paint and supplies from Izzy.

"They saw my father-in-law as a pushover. He got them a big job and they paid him with a fake cheque," Joe said.

Another change he implemented was moving the store to a larger location on College Street, going from an 18-foot frontage to 54 feet and more than 10,000 square feet.

The big accounts kept coming in and, of course, the store catered to local walk-in clientele as well.

It continued as a community hub "for many people to come and share stories, shmooze and, of course, buy paint," said Cheryl. "It is a family owned and operated business, all three of Joe and Esther's children have worked in the store, as well as their daughter-in-law. It is truly a family and community centre."

Their new store is continuing the tradition. On a recent visit there, all the Shiewitz kids were at the store, helping to arrange the shelves and unpack product. Esther was at her post, behind the counter, and Habib was ready to assist customers.

Oh, and there isn't a Home Depot for miles.

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