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Irving's Famous Clothes: Another family business goes dark



Abigail Cukier

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February 15, 2013

The carpet at Irving's Famous Clothes is showing its age, but owner Sid Leon wouldn't have had it any other way.

"His mother had gotten that carpet for him and he wouldn't get rid of it," said Leon's wife Celia Berlin. "I told him, 'It's 32 years old. Why don't we take it out? We can cut a piece of it and hang it on the wall.' It never happened. It's still the same carpet."

And that's the way it goes when your business is a family business.

Leon died in the store in December and there is no one left to run the custom tailoring business, which has been in Hamilton since 1915. Leon's father, Irving, bought the business in 1948 and moved it to its current location on James Street North at Rebecca Street.

Leon worked on weekends. When he was older, he went to school at night and worked in the store by day. "He had some regrets," Berlin said. "But on the other hand, he adored his dad and would do anything to help him."

Leon loved to help his customers – adding pouches to the pants of Hamilton Police Service uniforms for pregnant officers and making sleeping bags for each child at Berlin's Temple Playhouse Enrichment School.

"He was the greatest guy in the world," said Berlin, who was with Leon for 20 years. "You



A liquidation sale at Irving's is the end of the road.

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couldn't find a kinder person."

Family members are holding a liquidation sale and Berlin doesn't know what will happen to the store. She said Leon encouraged his two children to get an education and not be involved in the business.

Up the street on James North, Morty Morgenstern feels the same way. His mom, Magda opened the store in 1968 and when it started to grow, his father, Fred, joined her. Morgenstern has run the family clothing store since 1983, when his dad got sick.

At the time, Morgenstern and his wife were living in Vancouver. "I didn't want the store to close up. I can't even tell you why. I just felt I couldn't let it close."

Morgenstern now runs the store with his brother, Mark, and sister-in-law, Patricia. "I have no regrets. It was a great decision," Morgenstern said.

"But it is more challenging today for an independent business owner. My kids are educated and have other interests."

Indeed, fewer than 30 percent of family businesses survive into the second generation of family ownership, while 15 per cent endure into the third, according to McKinsey and Company, a global management consulting firm.

And the 2011 Global Family Business Survey report from PricewaterhouseCoopers showed that 48 per cent of Canadian business owners plan on passing their business to the next generation – a significant drop from 90 per cent in 2007.

Reasons include business owners who are living longer and having fewer children and parents who have never discussed a succession plan are finding out their children are not interested in stepping in.

Despite this, 60 per cent of Canada's GDP is generated by family businesses and more than six million Canadians are employed by a family business, said Beverly Johnson, national chair of the Centre for Family Business, KPMG Enterprise.

KPMG Enterprise and the Canadian Association of Family Enterprise (CAFE) conducted a 2011-2012 survey to explore opportunities and challenges facing family businesses in Canada.

Half of the respondents said that one or two family members work full-time in the business, with another 40 per cent having three or four full-time employees who are family members. The most common reasons for working in the family business included a sense of history, pride and tradition.

But Johnson stresses that families need to communicate with each other to make it work and ensure a smooth succession. She said outside family business advisers can help open communications between family members. Family businesses can also develop constitutions or rules and it is important to have wills, power of attorney and shareholder agreements in place.

"It is most important that family members talk to each other about the future of the business. They should establish clear-cut objectives. Even before the children start working, they should set guidelines."

As for the day Irving's closes, Berlin tears up at the thought.

"It's going to be dreadful," she said. "It was such a part of our happiness."

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family business

Hamilton

Irving's Famous Clothes

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