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Clothier stands tall for diminutive customers

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"I'll talk to you shortly," Lou Brown ended his conversation, no pun intended.

Brown is owner of Short Man Brown's, a specialty clothing store providing clothing for men five-foot eight-inches tall and under.

"Our unique clothing patterns are exclusively designed and pay particular attention to proportion where it's essential, like garment and sleeve length, pocket and elbow location and correct waist silhouettes," he said.

Brown, a North York resident standing five-foot-seven, inherited the company from his father, Willie, who started the business in 1928 as a second-hand clothing store located at 545 Queen St. West. The Brown family recently celebrated 73 years at that location.

"We are the only original store with the same owner to still be here on Queen Street. In fact, we're on the fourth generation now. The business has evolved a great deal since that time," Brown said.

He joined his father in 1944 after quitting school at the age of 16. "The decision to quit school was based on need. Our family was very poor, so I quit to make money instead. We had to make a living."

At the time, shopping on Queen Street was a very multicultural experience. "People could go into any Queen Street store and haggle. It was the era we were living in."

To his embarrassment, Brown's reputation of selling second-hand clothing was costing him points in the social depart-

ment.

"When girls found out that I was working for my father in a second-hand store, they wouldn't want to go out with me, so I suggested to my father that he replace the used clothing with updated, trendy, new fashions," Brown said. "My father thought I was crazy, but he went along with it anyway and believe it or not, he never looked back. The business took off and we were quite successful."

having established a loyal clientele over the next 30 years, Brown decided it was time for another change. He saw a need in the market to provide short men with well-made, tailored clothing designed to fit their unique proportions.

The original name for his new concept was The Short Man's Loft, a 500-square-foot facility located on the second floor of the Queen Street store. When it opened in 1972, it "took off phenomenally," according to Brown.

"When we decided to change our merchandise to cater to short people, we lost all of our regular customers that we had built over the last 30 years. So we had to build the business all over again."

In the same year, Brown decided to buy the business from his father, who died in 1995. "My father remained very active in the business until the end."

But one store was not enough for Brown, though, and in 1982 he decided to open another location at 1975 Avenue Rd., also two floors.

"I'm proud to say that we are the largest specialty store that we know of in North America that caters to this market."

And the concept keeps getting bigger:

when shorter men said they could not identify with the Hugo Boss chain of clothing, it was Brown who eventually convinced Boss, after many discussions, to supply a perfectly proportioned garment for the shorter man. Today, Brown's carries the largest selection of Hugo Boss clothing in "shorts" in Canada.

Brown's also features labels from Bugatti, Stellman, Tommy Hilfiger, Cambridge Clothes, Hathaway and Mondri di Marco, for business and weekend wear in a wide selection of styles and fashions.

"Our clothes have a number of key features, for instance our longest sleeve length is 33 inches, so your elbow is where your elbow should be and our pants pockets are sewn a little higher, so when you sit, you're not sitting on your wallet," Brown said. "It's these small details that make the difference for the shorter man."

Always looking for a challenge, Brown decided to venture into new areas for the business, spawning a line of short men's shoes, manufactured in Europe and North America, as well as a selection of socks designed to fit the heel of a size six foot or smaller.

"Short men often feel they have to prove themselves. They feel as if they've got a strike against them," Brown said. "We wanted to create an atmosphere that wasn't intimidating for the short man. Our layout features shelves and racks that are a bit lower and our pictures hang a little lower on the walls and most importantly all of our staff are short themselves. Short men don't want to feel as if they're coming into a kids' store shopping for clothes."



Mirror photo/IRVIN MINTZ

Lou Brown is the owner of Short Man Brown's, a specialty clothing store for short men.