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Clothier caters to untapped market

By SHARON LAIDLAW

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

Brown is owner of Short Man Brown's, a specialty clothing store that provides proportioned clothing for gentlemen five-feet eight-inches 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.

A short man himself at just five-feet seven-inches, Brown, a resident of North York, 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," said Brown.

Lou joined his father in 1944 at the age of 16 after quitting school. "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 St. store and haggle (bargain). 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 department. "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," said Brown. "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."

After 30 years and having established a loyal clientele, Brown decided that it was time for a change - again. He saw a need in the market to provide short men, typically five-feet eight-inches and under, with well-made, tailored clothing designed to fit their unique proportions.

"I wanted a challenge and I saw a need in the market." With a loft for a store, the original name for his new concept was The Short Man's Loft, a tiny 500-square-foot facility located on the second floor of the Queen St. store, that when officially opened in 1972, "took off phenomenally" says 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 later died in 1995. "My father remained very active in the business until the end."

One store was not enough for Brown, though, and he decided to open another location at 1975 Avenue Rd., also two floors, in 1982. "I'm proud to say that we are the largest specialty store that we know of in North America that caters to this market."

Today, Brown carries the



TBT photo/IRVIN MINTZ

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

largest selection of Hugo Boss clothing in "Shorts" in Canada, their most popular line. They also feature labels from Bugatti, Stelman, Tommy Hillfiger, and Mond di Marco, among others, 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 sown a little higher, so when you sit, you're not sitting on your wallet," said Brown. "It's these small details that make the difference for the shorter man."

Always looking for a chal-

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

"We wanted to create an atmosphere that wasn't intimidating for the short man," said Brown. "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."