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- Tony Pasilabban

week as a student. “I quit Ryerson after two years, because I figured if I’m going to help my brother anyway I might as well work for the company full-time,” he remembers his decision to join his brother, father and brothers-in-law in the business.

A significant contributor to the early growth of Downsview was the company’s work for local home builders. Toronto and Southwestern Ontario were growing at a rapid pace, resulting in new subdivisions going up in many locations. Downsview benefited from a foundational shift that had occurred in the home building industry: by the 1970s, virtually all builders were buying prefabricated kitchen cabinets for their new home builds from increasingly specialized manufacturers instead of the earlier practice of having them fabricated on site by a general woodworking contractor.

The kitchens Downsview supplied for new home construction were quite simple by today’s standard, consisting of mostly melamine and some oak finishes in a limited variety of colors, usually with L-shaped laminate countertops and an island. Achille remembers delivering product to Downsview’s first subdivision in Hespeler, now part of the City of Cambridge. “We left after work at around 6:00 p.m. and delivered at night time, with the kitchen cabinet hanging two feet over each side of the pick-up truck.”

When Tony Pasilabban joined the company in 1977 as a draftsman, the kitchen design process was rather basic compared to today’s standard as well. “My drafting table was a desk. I started drawing with two triangles on a sheet of paper. There were no computers yet,” Tony remembers. He would receive orders in the form of a sketch on a piece of paper and sometimes even on the back of a pack of cigarettes. “From that I did the actual shop drawing by hand,” he adds.

The early Downsview crew were mostly young men in their twenties and thirties. Most early employees were recent immigrants from Italy and Portugal, among them skilled craftsmen who had learned the cabinet making trade back in Europe. Downsview was a small family business where the notion of family naturally extended to the employees as well. Cabinet maker Joe Notte remembers: “It wasn’t just people that worked here. We were like a family—everybody was together. It was good.”

MIKE D’UVA BECOMES THE SOLE OWNER OF DOWNSVIEW WOODWORKING

Frank and Mike continued to own Downsview as equal partners. By the late 1970s, however, dynamics had become more complex as both Mike and Frank had brought family members into the business. At a more entrepreneurial level, Mike was determined to keep growing the company aggressively whereas Frank was content with continuing the path Downsview was on. When modern European kitchen designs and systems were starting to enter the North American market, this provided the opportunity for Downsview to reposition itself to become a true leader in the North American kitchen industry. A decision needed to be made and Frank and Mike decided to go separate ways. “I asked Frank to write on a piece of paper how much he thought the business was worth and I did the same thing. After we agreed on the number, we went to the accountant and a lawyer and I bought him out,” Mike reflects on the two partners parting ways in 1980.