

Growing Together: Oliver Heating and Cooling



By Brock Weir

The Auroran continues our series on Aurora's oldest businesses this week with a business which marks its 90th anniversary in 2014, and brought a wealth of technical innovation to what was once a very small community.

When T.H. Oliver founded his namesake company in 1924, it was to deliver new technologies in heating and cooling to the farms and growing urban households in Aurora.

Now, one year shy of their 90th anniversary, they are still looking at new ways to stay innovative and keep ahead of the curve as they chart the course for the century ahead.

As one of Aurora's longest surviving businesses, it is a mantle they carry with great pride.

"What we have done is take the foundation from 1924 and continued it so people honestly feel they are giving something up by not doing business with us," says Steve Desjardin who, along with his wife Elise, bought the company 13 years ago. "The business was founded by somebody wanting to do something for their community and we're continuing that. It is important to us as a family to be able to do that."

It is this continuation that has been watched by Dr. Leslie Oliver with great interest. T.H. Oliver was his father and Dr. Oliver himself was essentially "born above the shop" in 1929.

The Olivers first sold the company in 1973, but given that their name is attached to it, they have continued to feel a vested interest in the company's success.

"When you sell a company and you sell your name with it, you shuffle your feet a bit uneasily and say, "Where is all this going to go?" says Dr. Oliver. "I must say we have a lot of respect for Steve and Elyse and the integrity of their operation, and I couldn't feel more comfortable with the way the name is being used, the way the branding is being used" and the philosophy and foundations have carried on."

Chatting around the Wellington Street East showroom, now situated just over the eastern side of the train tracks, the two men exhibited an easy relationship as they pondered how the business has grown and changed over the years to evolve along with the times.

To speak to Steve, the strength of his esteem for T.H. Oliver is clear, heralding him for a number of firsts, including bringing the

first commercial refrigeration units and oil burners to the Aurora area. Dr. Oliver, however, says in those days that wasn't such a feat.

?'[The 1920s and 30s] were very much simpler and it was a very embryonic period?and it wasn't difficult in many ways to make a big splash because there weren't too many people making a big splash!?' he says. ?He made a wonderful contribution because of his enquiring mind, his creativity and his sense of innovation.?

It is telling that this business was born in 1924 with the Great Depression just five years away. Despite that setback, the business has endured through prosperity and lean times and this drive to innovate became an ever more important cornerstone in the T.H. Oliver foundation.

?'We have had to keep diversifying and putting a lot of time and energy into our service department because we find a lot of our competitors are not interested in that part of the market; they are more interested in just selling the equipment, taking the money and running off into the sunset,?' says Mr. Desjardins. ?For us, we're based on our relationships with our customers and our families. We have branched ourselves into more of a full-service and we do a lot of community involvement to keep our name in the forefront.?

This philosophy, he says, is part of what secured them the Retail Business of the Year last year in the Aurora Chamber of Commerce's Business Achievement Awards. The retail market, he said, is particularly challenging because big box stores are ?jumping into the game? and trying to get a piece of the action.

?'Sometimes it is hard to thrive in that,?' he says. ?We have had to be on our toes and keep reinventing ourselves.?

Necessity may be the mother of invention, but technology could play a parental role in reinvention, particularly in this case. Things are evolving when it comes to your humble air conditioners and heat systems, such as the shift in some cases away from using bulky furnaces as the primary source of heat to gas and electric fireplaces, for instance, for more local shots of warmth.

?'It goes back to the days of T.H. Oliver,?' says Mr. Desjardins. ?One of his main philosophies was to bring modern technologies to better the lives of local families. None of that has changed. It has just become a lot of work! You have to be more creative to deliver that quality to the customer. They have a lot of choices and in order to get your opportunities you have to really work at it.?