

# BUSINESS

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Gilbert's Big and Tall store opened in 1954. Reliable service has helped it succeed.

## It's been a good fit

BY SUZIE CHIODO

For a large section of the Canadian population, one size definitely does not fit all.

Bigger and taller guys struggle with too-tight cuffs, straining shirt buttons and pants that dangle just above the ankle.

Try telling that to most clothing manufacturers, says Tom Lazich, whose parents Gilbert and Stella own Gilbert's Big & Tall Men's Shop on King Street West in Hamilton.

He measures a shirt that has been altered to make it bigger, and minutes later the customer leaves the store wearing it.

"The customers that come here have searched other stores, but we can give them the tailoring and service they're looking for," says Tom, whose sister Katy Yelovich also works at Gilbert's.

"So many stores are selling the wrong sizes, and our tailors end up fixing those mistakes."

And it's not just size that matters. Clothing specially designed for larger men is in huge demand, like Gilbert's low-rise pants that sit comfortably below a bigger stomach.

Created in partnership with Copley Apparel, it's an example of the Canadian manufacturing favoured by the store.

"Canadian products are well-known for their quality and workmanship," says Tom.

"The manufacturers here can get us the sizes we want, and it keeps jobs in the country."

This commitment to well-made, well-fitting clothes has won the store loyal customers from near and far (including movie producers, who love Gilbert's unsold clothes from the 1970s).

Tom estimates that three-quarters of all customers come from out of town — one guy even came from Detroit just to pick up some shirts.

Sports fans are also huge fans. Shortly after opening up his store in 1954, Gilbert Lazich began making jackets for wrestlers.

The big and tall market soon grew so much that Gilbert decided to sell clothes exclusively for it.

Tom now coaches basketball, and an ex-player of his helps out at the store.

Marko Gacic says a lot of his teammates are customers. "We got fed up with our shirts coming to here," he says, pointing three inches below his wrist.

"Guys usually hate shopping," says Tom.

"But here we try to make it a little more fun."

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HAMILTON SPECTATOR FILE PHOTO

If someone needs it, like these 80-inch waist pants, Stella and Gilbert Lazich have provided big service since opening in 1954.

### At a glance

WHO: Gilbert's Big & Tall Men's Shop, owned by Gilbert and Stella Lazich

WHERE: 439 King St. W.

WHEN: Since 1954

WHAT: Clothing, tailoring and alterations for bigger and taller men

EMPLOYEES: Eight

### Getting there

BIGGEST CHALLENGE:

Tom: "Getting inventory. It's hard getting manufacturers to understand our needs in terms of size specifications."

BIGGEST SURPRISE:

Gilbert: "We've lost a lot of suppliers that we thought were decent, but turned out to be unreliable."

BEST DECISION:

Gilbert: "Keeping family in the business has been a great help."

Tom: "Expanding in 1972."

We're now the largest big and tall clothing store in one location in Canada. We also have our own parking lot, which is a lot more convenient for our customers."

WORST DECISION:

Tom: "I regret that the clothing industry and the government seem to be giving up on Canadian manufacturing."

LEARN THE MOST:

Tom: "We go to clothing shows all over Canada."

Gilbert: "You have to work in the industry and learn from the differences year to year."

BEST ADVICE GIVEN:

Tom: "I've learned from Dad that the little things are the big things. They have to be done the right way."

BEST ADVICE TO GIVE:

Gilbert: "I tell my son that if you're sure of yourself, it's a gold mine."

SECRET TO SUCCESS:

Tom: "Discipline and working together. Being able to motivate people and get the best out of them definitely helps, too."



KAZ NOVAK, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Bill Dowd is head of Humane Wildlife Control, which uses the software.

## New city firm wins Microsoft award

BY LISA GRACE MARR

A new Hamilton business information systems company has just captured a top international Microsoft award away from 1,800 other global competitors.

Integrated Business Intelligence (IBI), located on George Street downtown, won Partner of the Year for Small Business Specialist at the 2007 Microsoft Worldwide Partner Program Awards announced in Denver recently.

"What (the award) gets us is ... the recognition that we are doing a great job. We want to expand in the Hamilton area, so our team is feeling pretty good," said Garnet Lasby, CEO.

Lasby and partner and president Barry Dowd submitted a case study of Humane Wildlife Control, another Hamilton company, as an example of how they help small business using Microsoft's customer solutions software.

Humane Wildlife Control has employees all over Ontario and Quebec who rescue critters from homes. Company executives were frustrated with their unreliable customized scheduling and tracking system for employees.

IBI staff used Microsoft's customer relationship management and accounting software designed specifically for small to medium businesses and the results were great.

Humane Wildlife Control had a 20 per cent increase in sales ratios in one year.

Lasby said he and Dowd met years ago while articling as chartered accountants. They both had careers as senior executives and decided to leave those careers to launch IBI two years ago when both wanted to stretch their entrepreneurial muscles.

"We had both spent a lot of time and money on systems that didn't live up to expectations," he said. "We understand what business people need."

IBI targets small- to medium-sized businesses that are growing quickly and need software solutions to grow with them. Their market includes Hamilton, Burlington and Mississauga with an eye to expanding into Niagara.

IBI has received gold certification from Microsoft, a recognition of its expertise and sales. It has six employees, with one more technical staff member to start in August and more to follow.

lmarr@thespec.com  
905-526-3992

## Via reaches tentative deal with CAW

MONTREAL Union leaders for Via Rail workers will be in Montreal today to begin reviewing a new tentative contract.

The Canadian Auto Workers union is unanimously recommending ratification of the agreement, which averted a strike deadline set for early yesterday.

The passenger railway and the union announced the three-year deal overnight.

Via spokesperson Malcolm Andrews says it covers such issues as wages, benefits, work conditions and work rules.

Via Rail's CEO and president Paul Côté said that the settlement is good news for Canadian rail passengers.

The CAW represents 2,600 Via Rail workers, including ticket agents and on-board and skilled trades employees.

Negotiations had been going on for several weeks with the help of two federal conciliators.

Neither side would comment on the deal's terms.

*The Canadian Press*