



A new generation, a new brand but the same old familiar place.

Set in a “greenfield” on the East side of Port Hope and in plain sight of the 401 highway sits a four year-old automotive complex, which would have been abandoned but for the business acumen of the Lauria family.

The former Pontiac-Buick showrooms, which faced shutdown, because of the demise of the GM dealership, have taken on new life as the latest addition to the Hyundai empire. The changeover took place in the first week of October 2009 and business opened as a rebadged and rebranded enterprise immediately. “I’m excited.” exclaimed Bud Lauria, the General Manager, and son of Frank Lauria, the President. “In fact we are all excited, the family, the staff and everybody we have come into contact with!”

Bud Lauria, aged 32 and involved in the automotive industry all his life, told Business Times, in a recent interview that he is a third generation automotive person. His father, Frank, came to Port Hope in 1984 to buy the Pontiac-Buick dealership, on Peter Street from Brian Kane. Frank came from Sutton and his father, Bud’s grandfather, also owned a dealership. Talking about the family, and Bud’s roots, it is apparent go back a long way. “It’s all we have ever known for three generations, Never any hesitation about being in the automotive industry. Pontiac was 60-70% of our business.” So when GM sent the notice terminating the GM operating agreement, in May 2009, it was a body blow.

But there was a way out. Four and a half years ago, when Frank and Bud moved to a greenfield East of Town they had more land than the GM business needed and were looking for uses for the extra land surrounding the new building on Benson Court. Hyundai Canada was approached about locating a dealership and creating an Automotive Mall. They were told by Hyundai Canada that the time for a Port Hope franchise was not right for Hyundai as they were involved in establishing a new franchise in Clarington and the corporate effort was to get that market developed before moving into another area. Undeterred not one bit the Laurias’ concentrated in building up new business for GM in a new building thinking, as all the world did, that GM could not fail.

Frank was on his boat on the St Lawrence when Bud phoned to tell him of the termination notice. It only took one night to develop a plan and Frank sailed back to Port Hope the next day. Made a phone call to Hyundai and a meeting was set up for the following day, the Laurias were back in the game. The process consisted of much paperwork and research. Using the Hyundai Canada application process and their own business plans they started working to obtain the brand. When asked what the hardest part of the whole changeover process was he stated, “The application process filing the paper and then waiting for a decision” Although Frank told me there was no “Plan B” when I asked Bud the same question he answered after a long pause, “None really we had already decided to expand our used car business to include all makes and models and the repair side was working on every make available and with an AC-Delco partnership we can keep the repair side of the GM business”

“This is the most exciting part of my life, this is a generational change. My dad built a business base and a successful GM dealership. General Motors was his thing and you get the sense this move is for the next generation. To get hooked up with a Company that has exciting product, won many awards and is the fourth largest auto manufacturer in the world, well it’s - exciting.” Well Bud was just so excited when talking about the future, even this old cynic was infected.

With the new Hyundai dealership firmly established, on the site, in a four-year old building built for

GM, but one that will rebuilt to conform with Hyundai's corporate image, Bud now sees his job as one of slow steady growth of the brand. "We didn't lay anybody off when we transferred and everybody decided to stay, that was a great feeling of confidence." That means that Bud can now expand the business into the full West Northumberland region. "I went to school in Cobourg, I have friends in Cobourg and we know that we will have customers in Cobourg."

Expanding the business means more than just selling cars. The Lauria name is synonymous with community involvement. Sponsoring Festivals, Hockey teams and selling many many raffle tickets is all part of the marketing strategy. Admitting that cashflow might be tight, due to reorganisation, Bud explained that instead of cutting back on sponsorships now as they are looking at a regional marketing strategy the sponsorships will expand to Cobourg. That will take getting used to for many a Cobourg resident. And with Laurias sponsoring the Port Hope "Panthers" hockey team this year it will be an interesting battle of the sponsors locally. "It's exciting to be in Cobourg, we've always sold in Cobourg but now we will be able to do more."

When asked about business plan for the new enterprise it was revealed that initial research showed that area residents drove Hyundais although there was no local dealership. The nearest Hyundai dealerships are located in Clarington to the West, Peterborough to the North and Belleville to the East. "In a regional market you need to have a local base." Bud explained. "You have to be accessible to the market. That's why Hyundai agreed so quickly to listen to our application. We knew that there was an appetite for Hyundai (demonstrated by local owners who purchased out of town). We have a terrific staff who can develop the market and existing customers are giving us a good reception." As a note when working a couple of hours on the Sunday after the announcement, he noticed that the "lookey-loos" were driving around the lot all day. "The number of visitors to the lot was the largest I have ever seen on a non-working day."



Frank and Bud Lauria standing in front of a new Hyundai at a new dealership with the flag in the background,

Walking outside as the interview closed a comment was made about the local Port Hope landmark - the large Canadian Flag that is located on the Northern lot boundary. Colborne may have the "Big Apple" Port Hope has the "Big Flag". Bud tells the history of the flag, a feature of the carlot that has acquired a life of its own. A cousin who was running a Toyota dealership in Clarington suggested to the Laurias, when they were setting up the business on the 401 at the new site, "Hey don't forget the flag" So having a flag pole on the side of the highway meant that you needed a big one. This flag is thirty feet by fifteen feet and can only be handled in good weather, high winds are dangerous to the

person handling the lines. The dealership rotates two flags and repairs either one of them if a nick or a tear is noticed, at a cost of five to six hundred dollars each they are worthy investments.

The flag went up at about the time that the Highway of Heroes was established and in tribute to the fallen and as a mark of respect the flag is lowered to half staff for each and every fallen soldier and their families to notice when the funeral cortege passes. "It has got the point now that this flag represents Port Hope." Bud states with pride. "It is not just Lauria Hyundai any more!"

Leaving the lot it is easy to imagine that given a healthy automotive market this business is in good hands and will easily absorb another generation of Laurias ready to serve the public. They've made it this far, haven't they?