



A long slog but it's been fun!

By Ben Burd

In 1992 two very successful people, living on the west side of Toronto, were looking for a change. One was a twenty-five year veteran of corporate Canada and the other had been making waves in the highly competitive and risky musical industry for thirty years, they had just become 'empty- nesters' and like many others yearned for a change. They wanted to be restaurateurs. Not knowing anything about the business side of eating out they signed up for part-time work in the industry. He became a part-time bartender at Jake's Boathouse in Brampton, she went to work as a waitress in a local restaurant. Not content to learn the business they also scoured the want ads in the major papers looking for a place to buy. Intrigued by an advertisement in the Toronto Star for a thirty seat restaurant they came to see it. He was familiar with Cobourg, having played in local folk festivals in the sixties, but she had never seen Cobourg in her life up to that point. Impressed by what they saw they decided to buy-in. Don and Carol Owen had come to Town and the Oasis restaurant was reborn!

The Oasis restaurant they purchased is no longer here. The thirty seat upscale eatery previously owned by Mark Pollard is now an emporium called the Oasis Bar and Grill, with a section called Crabby Carol's. The thirty seats inside have now ballooned into ninety indoors and, in the summertime when the patio is in full swing, one hundred and eighty-five

in total. All of this became possible when the building came up for sale in 1995. The Owens purchased it, moved into the space occupied by 'Tradewinds', spent three months renovating the space and have never looked back.

Another major move came about in 1998 when the patio was expanded. Music had been a part of the operation from the start. Every Wednesday evening a band was performing. Drawing on his musical experience and the knowledge of the industry Don took advantage of the industry trend. "In Toronto music is played in the clubs and bars from Thursday to Sunday. I put out the word that if bands came down here on Wednesday they could get another day's pay - it worked and we've had music every Wednesday night since. Musicians come in early at seven-thirty and are done by eleven and can be home by midnight. Consistency has paid off and the audience really seems to like the variety of styles that come in, they know that they are going to get good music" Don told *Business Times*. In 1998 Don decided to pick up the guitar again, he had not played in public since 1992, the time of the purchase; too busy looking after the restaurant. He and a couple of friends from the day formed a house band and started "open-mike" sessions on the patio on Sunday evenings. And they have been at it ever since. Calling themselves PHLO (named after the first initial of the bandsmen's names - Page, Howard, Longman and of course Owen) they play all styles of music and it goes down well with the patrons - you have to come early to get a seat.



Don playing at the RibFest

Talking with Don, a veteran of the music scene since the sixties, is like taking a walk down memory lane, if you are a music buff. For instance he will tell you that opened in a band with Kenny Rogers and the First Edition, working with Ian and Sylvia Tyson and regular stints on CBC musical shows. Asked about the most famous band that has played the Oasis and he reels off a list, "The Good Brothers, Jimmy Bowskill, Mose Scarlett, and we have had Tam White from Scotland.

We also have an arrangement with an agent friend of mine who tells me when the up and coming East Coast bands are coming through and we will book them."

Behind every man is a good woman, and in this case Carol has been either with Don or one step ahead. Armed with twenty-five years of organisational and administrative experience at Nortel networks she was in good shape to run the business side of the restaurant. The group of four part-timers held over from the original sale has grown into forty-five paycheques in the summer and thirty in the winter. One day-bartender has been with the Owens from day one and the chef has been there for the last nine years - a lifetime in the industry. These owners must be doing something right. John Russell, a waiter in the old Oasis, but now a development officer at the Northumberland Hills Hospital' stayed with the new Oasis when the Owens bought in and attests to the skill, ability and



One of the employee awards - the best hairdo

fun of both Don and Carol when it came to running the place. "They (Don and Carol) are super fun people. They work well with the staff, they're open and fair and they implement a lot of fun things. Each year they have a company lunch where all kinds of people get awards for the year, best dishwasher, best haircut, best drinkmixer you get the idea." And we did after seeing the plaques displayed on the wall. The Oasis has been around so long that John's son has now started in the kitchen. "Adam was born when I was working there." John said attesting to the longevity of the establishment.

With seven people working in the kitchen one can see that food is a big part of the appeal of the Oasis Bar and Grill. In 1992 the food was high-end eating, the Owens could see that because of the low prices being charged and high-end food being served the value was only going one way - to the customer. Things had to change. When Don arrived at 31 King St. East he had a powerful weapon tucked under his arm - the recipe book from Jake's Boathouse. Using their business sense and the recipes in the thick binder the menu was gradually changed to what it is today a mix of styles and tastes at value prices. "For instance we have gradually moved the menu to reflect the times, we have moved into smaller burgers for one. We want to provide good food to regular diners, high-end menus have not really been an idea of mine - our menu is very broad and affordable ." Don explains. Asked about the challenge of keeping ahead of customers' tastes Don tells that he uses local meat and produce - lamb from Roseneath and fresh trout from Linwood Acres in Garden Hill, but because deliveries of some stock are weekly, especially shellfish

and oysters, they may be out of stock from time to time, “But customers understand”. The recent holiday weekend - Canada Day especially was a challenge “On the Saturday we served over a thousand meals!” But the Oasis met the challenge and served them all with their customary smiles.

So that’s what has happened in the last twenty years, how about some comments from today and the look ahead to the future. Don told *Business Times*, in a recent interview, the best experience was moving to Cobourg twenty years ago, “We meet all types of people and we’ve become involved in the arts as well as community organisations (Don has been a Rotarian for fourteen years, his son Todd - one of the managers - is one too). We really like the role we have had been privileged to be given; that of a community asset. People come here for weddings and after funerals (They are located opposite the busiest funeral home in Northumberland -



Don outside on the front patio

MacCoubreys) and any other type of celebration. We are a place in the community.” Just to prove that the guest book holds the names of more than a few celebrities, Mickey Rooney and Kevin Bacon to name a couple, as well as Sylvia Tyson and Blue Rodeo. Not wanting to be a taker the Oasis team also gives, their name is to be found on the donors lists of all of the major Northumberland fundraising campaigns every year even going so far as being an integral part of the Northumberland Hills Hospital Gala in 2010 with their Oyster Shucking table.

Asked about the future Don revealed in his interview that succession planning is a big part of it. “The plan is to have a plan, we have doing this for twenty years, it’s a bit like being a farmer, it’s seven days a week. But the decision [to handover] hasn’t been made yet.” And it is a good job too, the Oasis is too precious to hand over, so go on down and visit, listen to music and eat a bit.