

COMING
CANADA

This is the first of a four-part series by Bob Owen featuring local Cramahe Township people who came from elsewhere to settle in Canada.

When Chris Theofilopoulos was in his teens living in the little town of Gianaka, Greece, his mother cautioned him as he prepared to head off to Athens to seek a better future: "You will have to work hard and long to earn a living."

Many years later, he can look back and realize the value of her advice.

Now a successful restaurateur with almost 30 years serving the needs of Colborne and the surrounding area, the man who owns Vito's has a fascinating life story of determination and drive to succeed.

Chris grew up the second youngest in a family of five kids. His parents were poor, Greek farmers. He finished his elementary school education but there was no opportunity for more. There was no money. He had to make a living.

He was off to the city of Athens to join his siblings.

An older brother landed him his first job in an upholstery shop. At the end of his first week, he was given the equivalent of 50 cents. He quit.

His brother threatened him, his former employer demanded to

Hard work and determination spell success

COLBORNE CHRONICLE JULY 10/02

know where he had gone, but he was not going back.

So, the young teen set out on his own to find work and it didn't take long.

Next door to his boarding house there was a carpenter/furnituremaker. Across the road, they made steel desks. He went to the steel shop first and knocked, but they couldn't hear him.

The man who operated the furniture business did and called him over. He was now making \$5 a week.

It wasn't enough but he worked as a waiter with his brother at night for another seven-hour shift.

For two years, that was his routine - until he met a relative with a brother in Belleville.

On a visit to Athens, Chris's Canadian uncle, Jerry Tsalamatas, asked him if he wanted to come to Canada. The 17-year-old said, "Sure."

Together, they went to the Canadian embassy to fill out the papers. A month later, a letter came advising Chris his application had been rejected. At 18, he was required to join the Greek military for mandatory training. There was no way out.

Not believing that his impending military service was the cause of his rejection, he applied for Canadian papers again with the same result.

Outside the embassy, there was a travel agency. The proprietor recognized the boy on his second visit and told him to come and see him.

The agent had the solution: go as a tourist. But, he failed to explain the rules.

Chris is certain now that the man knew he would not be able to get a visa to stay long-term in Canada.

The travel agent got him a passport valid for three months and was ready to get him a ticket and visa good for 14 days. The catch was that Chris needed a co-signer; he was underage.

Full of excitement, Chris met his sister Katerina at a bus stop, hoping to get her name on the paper. When she refused, the agent told the boy he could fix his problem for about \$3.50 Canadian.

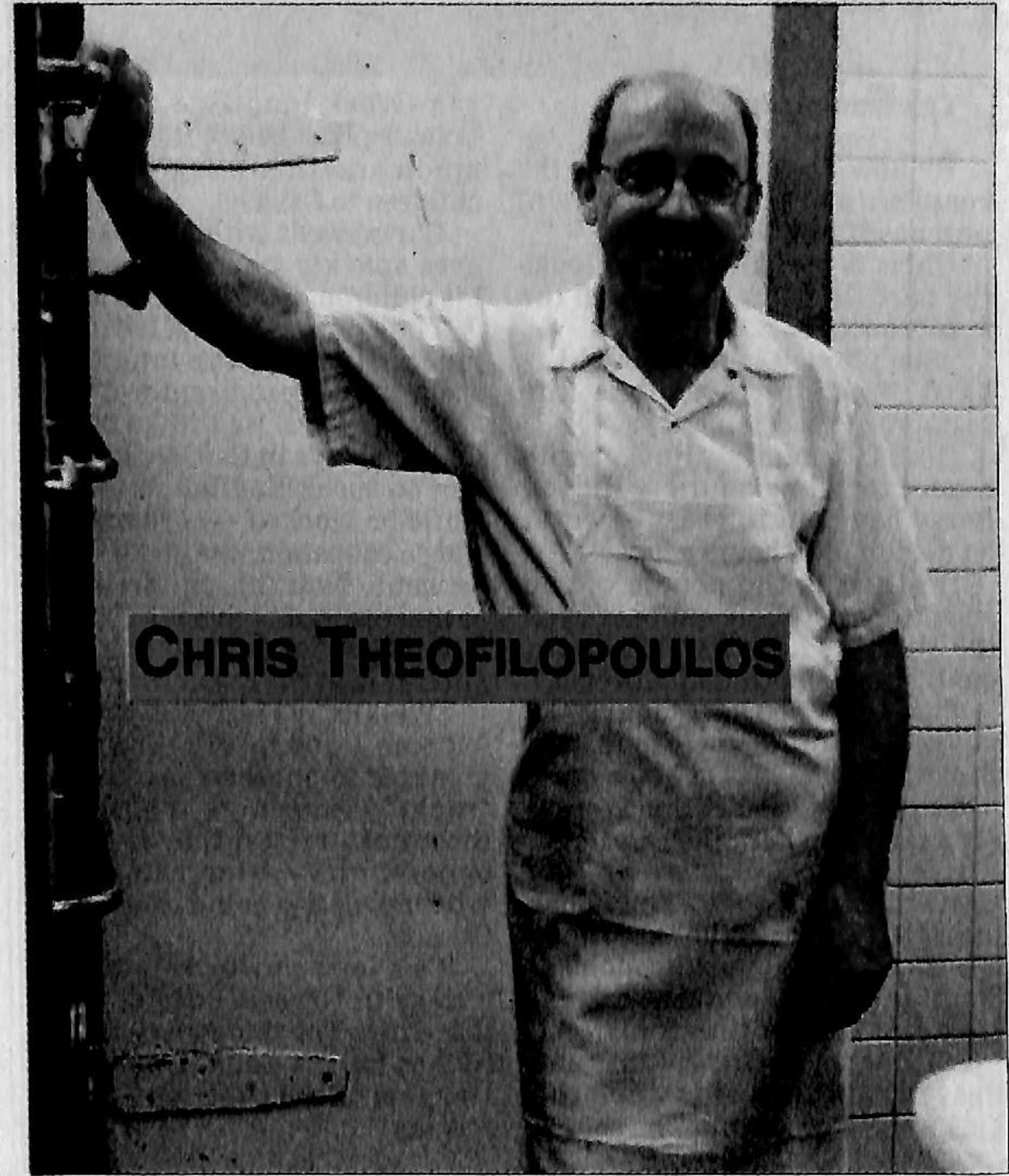
In 1971, at age 17, Chris Theofilopoulos was on his way to Montreal. He spoke no English and had no idea how far it was from Montreal to his uncle's home in Belleville. He was young. It would work itself out, he trusted.

Customs was a linguistic disaster. He didn't know where he was going and the agents couldn't speak Greek. A female employee took him past the entry agents and told him to wait while she sought a translator.

But, Chris didn't understand her. When she failed to return, he assumed he had arrived and walked into the arrivals area, his passport unstamped.

He had arrived - but the Canadian government didn't know it.

Using his wits, Chris caught a cab to the train station. He didn't know how far it was to Belleville, but he knew he could go by train.



CHRIS THEOFILOPOULOS

BOB OWEN / SUN MEDIA

Pausing between orders, Chris Theofilopoulos leans against his pizza oven Vito's Apple Country Restaurant in Colborne.

A good Samaritan got him through the next step - contacting his uncle by phone. Chris still remembers the gentleman refused to accept payment for the call and then took him to a cab driver who spoke Greek.

Chris hoped this might be his ride to his uncle's home. But the cabbie said the fare would be \$115. It was all Chris had; it was too much, and what if his Uncle Jerry turned him away? There would be no money for his return trip to Montreal.

Chris then learned about the other side of life.

The cabbie offered to take him back to buy a ticket to Belleville. When Chris noticed his wallet was back in the car, the cabbie went back - and took some of the money.

immigrant, Chris's life took a lucky turn.

He and another illegal Greek met up with a real estate agent who checked with immigration - there was an amnesty.

Chris was now legally in Canada. Soon after, he sponsored his little sister Voula to come to Canada.

And, he was back in the Belleville area managing two Mr. Sub outlets.

Once more, his life was about to take a turn - this time toward Colborne.

The manager of Dixie Lee Chicken wanted to meet Chris's sister. They soon became an item. Chris's new brother-in-law, Frank Georgatos, knew he couldn't support a family on his wages and bought Vito's in Brighton. He suggested to Chris

23