

Milton man teaches at a unique Canadian high school

By JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Like many of us, Milton resident Brian Walton gets up for work and heads off in his car to face traffic heading eastbound. After dropping off his wife, Alison, in downtown Toronto, he journeys further east still to the Danforth, an area of the city well known for its Greek restaurants and its ethnic diversity.

Brian teaches at the only high school exclusively for newcomers to Canada, where on any given day you may hear 34 different languages spoken in the hallway.

Brian may not necessarily like the traffic and the long hours he spends commuting to and from his workplace each day, but he and other staff at the school feel they have a purpose at Greenwood Secondary School. "Basically, the people who work here (at Greenwood) have an emotional commitment to these kids."

Greenwood began its life as a regular high school in a neighbourhood that has been flooded with successive waves of immigrants. The area, which was originally populated by Irish immigrants, has been home to people of Greek and Italian origin, and increasingly many people that come to Canada from Asia and Africa.

Today, however, Greenwood stands alone as a special school and Brian says it's attracted some attention from educators both here in Canada and in the United States. Even so, he says, "People just don't seem to know that we exist."

Brian says Greenwood has become a home for his students, but it's only intended to be a temporary one. "The kids can be at the school for one and a half years only," explains Brian. "Our job is to give them the skills to make it at other schools."

Greenwood does not offer a full high

school curriculum, but instead is what Brian describes as a reception school. "We take students who do not have sufficient English to find success in a regular classroom. In a year and a half we try to give them enough English to go on to a regular high school."

At Greenwood young people are taught English, but also study geography, computers, and math as well as a number of other subjects. Because of the cultural differences among students, courses are tailored to meet the needs of individual students from many different countries. Math, for example, can be taught beginning at the more basic level for an African student from a non-numerical culture and at a more advanced level for another student from China.

Brian says it's important to be "sensitive to the cultural differences" and there are many: there are Moslem and Hindu students in the school, students from Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia, Central and South America. "There aren't many places where we haven't had kids from." The task of assisting these students as they embark on their lives in Canada is one that he finds challenging as well as rewarding.

At 61, Brian hopes to continue teaching at the school until he retires. But there was a point in Brian's life when it would have been hard for him to imagine himself doing what he's doing now.

In the 1990s after an 18-year absence from the profession, he didn't believe anyone would want to offer him full-time employment as a teacher. So for about eight or nine years he worked as a supply teacher for the Halton District School Board until a school principal, who was also a friend, told him he was crazy. His friend urged him to seek full-time employment.

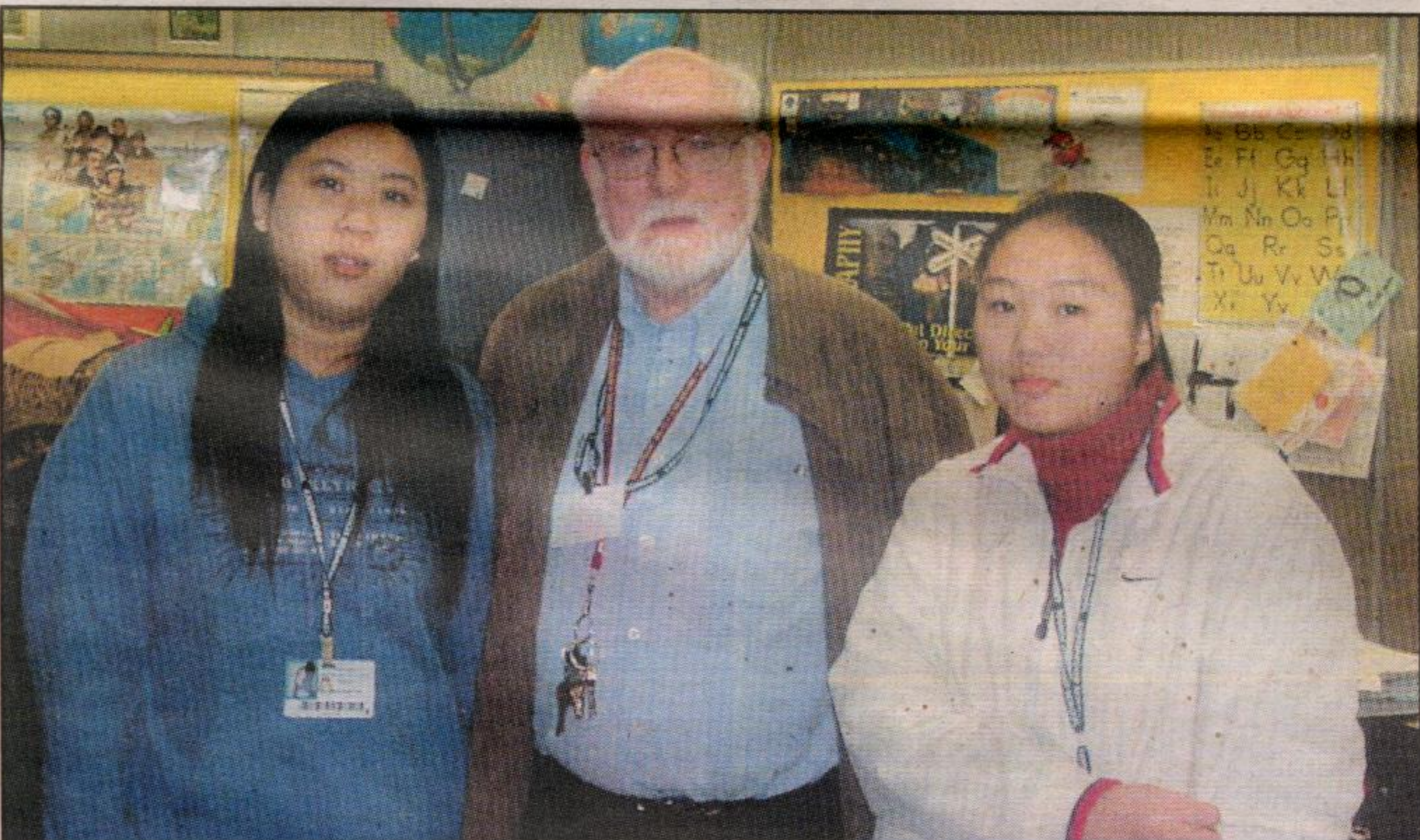
Marilyn Mendelsohn, the principal at

Greenwood, liked what she saw in Brian, and she decided to hire him about five years ago. Brian, who holds degrees in geography as well as education, had experience working at a school in northern Ontario and for many years he was a rehabilitation counselor for the Ontario March of Dimes. As well, he had travelled extensively outside Canada.

Brian believes that his past experiences made him a good candidate to work at Greenwood. As a teacher, he says he's benefited from his knowledge of other cultures and his counselling experience. He knows that many of his students come from countries where corruption and violence are a daily part of existence, and he's aware of the affect that can have on them personally. He's taught refugees from Africa that had no idea where their parents were. An African girl in his geography class told her classmates about horrors that she witnessed in her homeland. As part of their study of Canadian geography, his students are asked to examine the geography of their own countries and he says this can be a cathartic experience. "In the process of doing that, they start to realize and express things that they feel."

Brian says there are many students that aren't troubled by the emotional concerns of some of their fellow classmates; these are kids who are simply there to adapt as quickly as possible to their new culture and to learn English. But there are others who yearn to give expression to how they feel and they often find the strength to do this at Greenwood, miles away from their homeland. For Brian, giving them the security they need is critical. "You build trust. You let them know that you really do care."

In the process of teaching these students, Brian has also learned a lot himself. "They have taught me not to take the world quite so seriously, to get on with living because that's what you have to do. We spend a lot of time laughing."



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Brian Walton of Milton teaches at a school in Toronto that is exclusively for newcomers to Canada. Greenwood Secondary in the eastern part of the city is known as a reception school, a place where students get accustomed to their new homeland and become more proficient at English. Mei Feng (left) and Shirley (right) are two of Brian's students who came to Canada from China.

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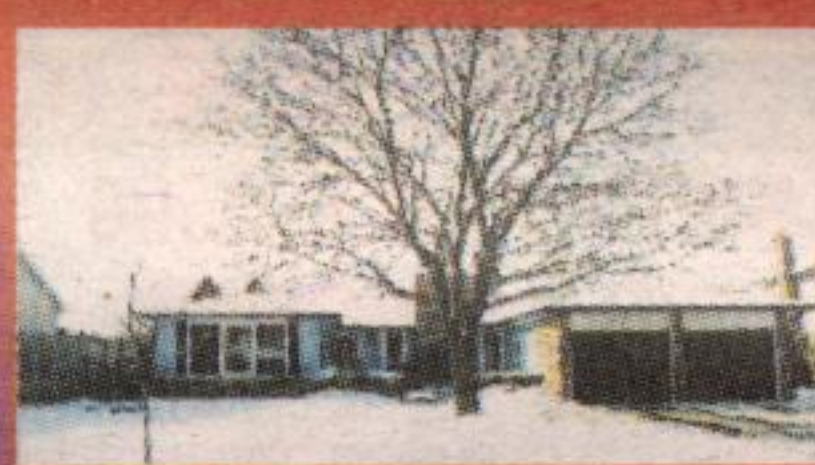
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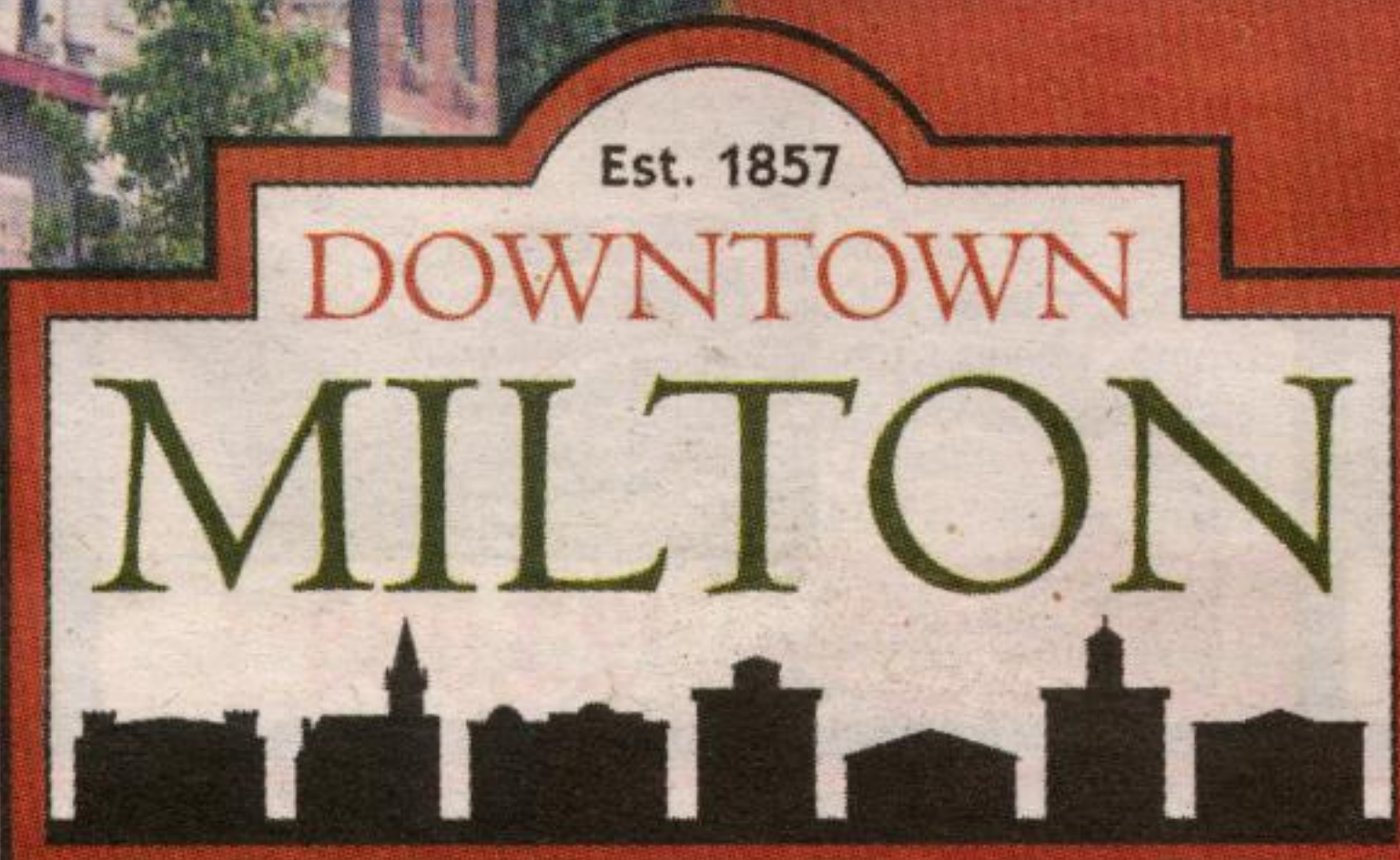
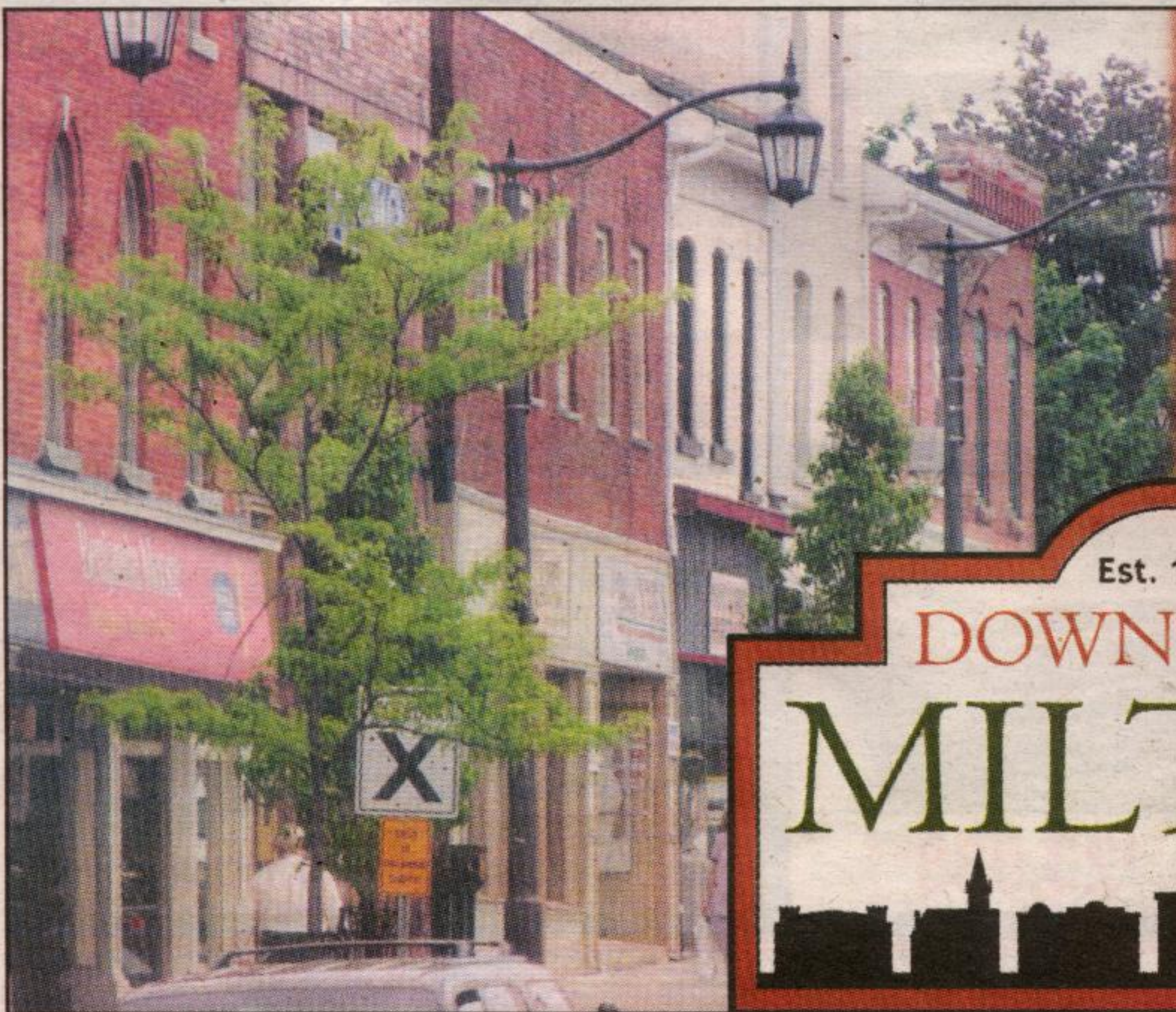
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The slogan should meet certain requirements, it should:

- Refer to the historical/cultural identity of the downtown business improvement area.
- Establish downtown as a distinct shopping, dining and gathering place.

Contest Rules:

- The slogan must describe and be appropriate for the downtown core.
- Six words maximum.
- It should incorporate the key ideas listed above.
- Deadline for entries is: Monday February 28, 2005
- Anyone can enter.

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