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Business pillar turning 80; still up for work at 6 each day

Mario Durante also celebrates 50 years in business this month

By Julie Slack
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Mario Durante needs a lot more than two hands to count the ways he's shaped business in Milton.

Tomorrow he turns 80, but still looks as though he might only be approaching retirement age. May is also the month he celebrates 50 years of doing business here.

From the gas station on Hwy. 25 to the storage business on Peru Road, the Durante business name has been synonymous with success.

Personally, Durante has grown from a small-town Italian immigrant to a smart, successful businessman.

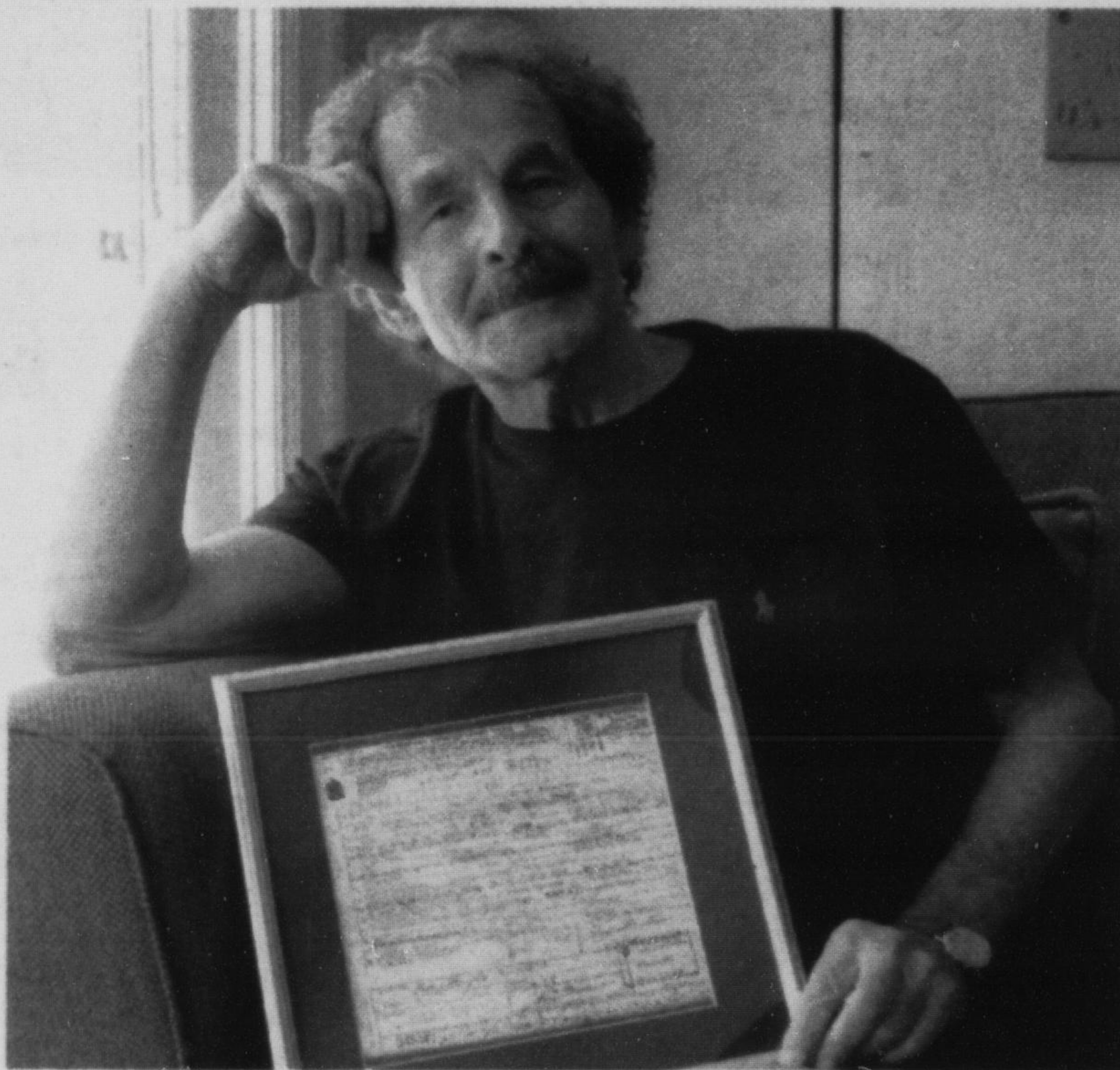
Along the way, he's maintained the same down-to-earth humbleness that's won him friends and a valuable reputation.

As he puts it, "I'm still down here," he, raises his hand a foot off the ground, "not up here," pointing to the ceiling.

"I've stayed the same...I'm still the same guy." Hard worker doesn't come close to doing Durante justice. He's worked his tail off and then some. Even now, approaching 80 years old, he's up at 6 a.m. ready to go to the office off Steeles Avenue.

"I've got stacks of mail this high to open," said the curly-haired gentleman, "and phone calls to make...business to do."

In 1953, the same year Queen Elizabeth II was crowned Queen of England, Durante arrived in Halifax and headed directly to Milton with \$19 in his pocket — money he borrowed from his dad in Italy to come here. His brother was his sponsor, having arrived two years earlier.



Mario Durante has two reasons to celebrate this month with his 80th birthday approaching tomorrow. May also marks his 50th anniversary as a Milton businessman.

Michael Ivanin / Special to the Champion

Life here started out tough for Durante, who was only 19. His brother told him he could stay with him in Milton for a week, free room and board, but after that he was on his own.

Fortunately for him, Durante wasn't afraid of hard work.

The only words he knew in English were "Have you got a job for me?" so he landed a job crushing limestone at the quarry near

Kelso. Pay was \$1.25 per giant pail-full. The back-breaking job was five days a week, but being a clever businessman, Durante says he found a way to get into the site after hours on Saturday so he could work an extra half day, fill four more buckets and be ahead \$5 come Monday morning.

He was living on Peru Road at the time, "where most of the immigrants settled at the time", he said. He saw his future wife

one day when she was visiting from Toronto at 17 years old.

"Whoa, she was looking good," he said. "I'm going to marry her."

A few years later, he did just that, shortly after the first time he talked to her, when he asked her "do you want me to carry you across that mud," referring to the mucky ground in front of the house one day when she arrived, all dressed up, wearing a bright red blouse and red shoes. Reminiscent of the movie *Life is Beautiful*, she refused his offer, but agreed to go on a date.

Noemi was a housekeeper in Toronto. They married in 1956 and they've been in love ever since. She turned 78 on Sunday.

Soon after their wedding, they were expecting their first child and they'd go on to have three boys: Larry, Dennis and Marco and a daughter Michelle (Mangotich). All of them live within 10 kilometres of him today.

Durante began working at P.L. Robertson, where his brother worked.

Eventually, he built his first home — it's still standing, a yellow-brick home on Highway 25, north of No. 5 Sideroad. He dug his own well, climbing down the hole, digging out buckets, one at a time that his wife, who was seven months pregnant, would empty.

On weekends, the couple packed the crib into the back of their 1949 Chevrolet, which Durante bought from the auto wreckers on Steeles Avenue for \$25, and drove to a farm in Hornby on Ninth Line. They'd set up the crib under a big tree in the shade and Noemi would feed the baby when he woke up. Together, they'd work for \$1 an hour, picking tomatoes or cabbage. After the day, with \$16 in their pocket, they'd do their grocery shopping.

By now, he was working part-time at a gas station each weekend while his boss vacationed up north.

"I thought to myself, 'if he can do that, I can do that.'"

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