

FAMILY TIES

A FOCUS ON BUSINESSES THAT SPAN THE GENERATIONS

'Family Drive' Takes on New Meaning at Houston Ford

By Kinjal Dagli Shah

Walk into Houston Ford and two things could happen: If you meet Connor Houston, you will likely come back with a car, but if you cross paths with his father, Bill Houston, there's a good chance you will leave with both a car and some interesting life stories about the family business.

"My father, Ben Houston, was a car dealer in Scarborough, and owned three dealerships along with his partner," said Bill. However, being possessed of a fierce independent streak, it wasn't a natural transition for Bill to join his father in the family business. He instead opted for a brief stint in the oil business out west. "I worked for three years on an oil rig and worked my way up from a roughneck to an assistant driller. After a season in the north of the Arctic Circle, I came back home and was picked up from the airport by my dad and his partner," said Bill.

The ride home changed Bill's career path. "Somehow, they convinced me that it was time for me to get into the car business," said Bill. However there was no easy ride for Bill. He worked his way up, running a successful body shop that looked after all three of his dad's dealerships. When the time came for Ben to retire, Bill was on his own to look for a dealership to run. He took six months off to be super-dad to his youngest child, then after a great deal

of cold-calling ended up buying the Ford Lincoln dealership in Stouffville. "We were on Highway 48, right across from Farmer Jack's up until 2000, after which we put a deal together and bought the property on Main Street."

A decade and a half later, the business that sits on three acres on Main Street Stouffville is going strong, having just undergone a massive renovation. The family ties are continuing as well. The oldest Houston, Ben, is now 87, and still comes into the office on occasion with an idea or two. Bill's older son Connor, who started out cutting the grass on the front lawn when he was 13, took over as General Manager last year.

"Over the years, I've done every job you could do at a dealership," noted Connor. "At times I explored different industries but was never as happy as when I was working in the car business with the hustle and bustle of every day being different. Being third generation in this business means that I am blessed with an abundance of very smart people I can reach out to for advice and opinion whenever I need a hand."

Bill couldn't be more thrilled to have his son with him in the business. "I

think it's fantastic but I wasn't going to pressure him to join," he said, adding how it's the joy of any parent to see one of their children become so interested in carrying the family business forward. Bill credits a 35 per cent increase in new car sales to Connor.

Connor feels blessed to be able to add to a family legacy while doing something he genuinely loves.

However, he insists his commitment to proper ethical business practices is paramount. "The most challenging thing about my job is the fact that there is such a stigma with the car business and ethics that it bothers me when people paint us all with the

same brush and can't see the fact that it is such a priority for my family that we do the right thing by our customers at all times," he said. "It is a point of pride for me whenever I see a vehicle on the road with my last name on the license plate frame that we have been able to help someone find the right vehicle as well as the best service we can provide."

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Connor Houston

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Bill Houston and his son Connor have followed in the footsteps of Bill's car dealer father Ben. Bruce Stapley photo.

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