

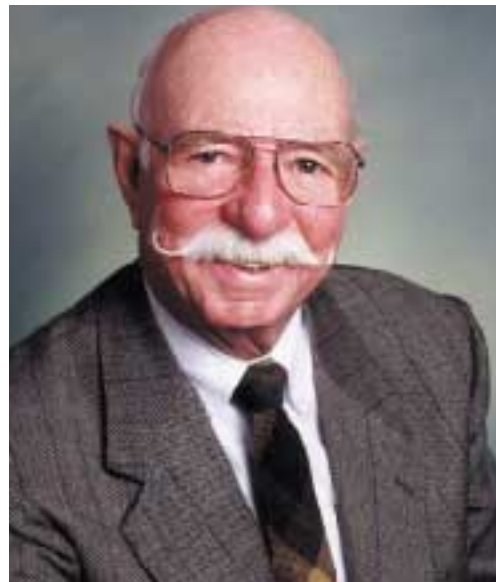
Leading by Example

Customers keep coming back – some even after 25 years
– to Toronto's own Tin Man

BY WILLIAM ROEBUCK

George Kent is the longest operating of Toronto's so-called Tin Men – one of the many people in the city who market various aluminum products for home improvement. The entrepreneur, well-known throughout the GTA for his trademark handlebar mustache and fleet of double-decker buses, has been doing business in the region since 1949. And although at 73 he's taking a little more time for his beloved golf than usual, he's still at the helm of his company – Mississauga-based George Kent Home Improvements Ltd. – and at his desk or making sales calls pretty well every day. "I don't think I'd ever want to do anything else," he reports.

That's not to say that the energetic gentleman who grew up in Cabbagetown doesn't have other interests. There's the golf, of course – he proudly displays plaques for the two hole-in-one shots he's hit so far, the most recent in 1997. But there's also dancing – tap dancing to be exact. "If I had to do it all over again, I could be a song and dance man," he reflects. Kent loved watching Fred Astair movies as a child and found he had a natural talent for tap dancing, so his father signed him up for lessons. He soon found himself in slight discomfort as the only boy in a line of girls, and was teased by classmates at school, so he didn't stick with the lessons too long. But he's carried what he



White shirt complements his striking handlebar mustache, giving Kent an appropriately distinctive look. He's been bald since his early 20s.

learned with him ever since. "I love it!"

He also has a love-hate relationship with double-decker buses – the company owns three. They're used for promotions, in weddings, and for various charitable projects. "But getting replacement parts is a problem," he adds.

Kent's daily passion is still his work. "I've enjoyed the business because of the people

“A lot of hard work has gone into this business. I started out as a pedlar. I remember the first door I knocked on. I was trying to sell a head of lettuce to a lady for 10 cents and I was so nervous the lettuce leaves were shaking in my hand.”

I've met. People are interesting,” he says. And there's plenty of them. Kent tells of long days building his business, starting early in the morning helping work crews get set up, spending the day in the office, breaking for supper and a 10-minute nap at home (“exactly, not a minute more or less”), and then going back on the road, knocking on doors to drum up more business.

There have been ups and downs in his operation, though. During the last recession, he had to sell his manufacturing plant. Now the company specializes in what it does best – selling, installing and servicing – and that's what has maintained the company reputation for quality products and workmanship. “We now have a joint-venture relationship with a manufacturer. In fact, I can buy windows now for less than I was able to make them.”

Kent specializes in vinyl siding, aluminum soffits, fascia and eavestroughing, as well as windows, steel-clad entrance doors, garage doors and roofing. He pulls out some discoloured cards from a file of completed jobs – they're sorted by street name for easy reference – and reviews a few from Peel Village, where homeowners who placed orders in the early 1970s are still doing business with the company today. As well, some of his staff have been

with the company just as long, which is unusual in the home improvement business. “We have a lot going for us – including our longevity in the business and our reputation for service.

“A lot of hard work has gone into this business,” he says. “I started out as a pedlar. I remember the first door I knocked on,” he says, reflecting on his early sales career. He was taking fruits and vegetables door-to-door in Toronto. “I was trying to sell a head of lettuce to a lady for 10 cents and I was so nervous the lettuce leaves were shaking in my hand.”

There's not much that would make Kent nervous today. “People buy from people they like. The strongest weapon I have in my sales case is the truth.” For example, he won't guarantee to someone that new windows won't condensate. “There's too many variables to promise that, and anyone who does is lying to the customer,” he suggests. “I believe in treating customers with respect and courtesy, and solving problems quickly. Our sales staff all sell on these principles.”

With beliefs such as these, it's no surprise that the gentleman with the handlebar mustache has succeeded so long in a business fraught with companies that come and go. He's a distinctive contributor to the city's entrepreneurial mosaic. 🍁