

THE HOME TEAM

For Dundas Valley Collision Centre, success takes a village



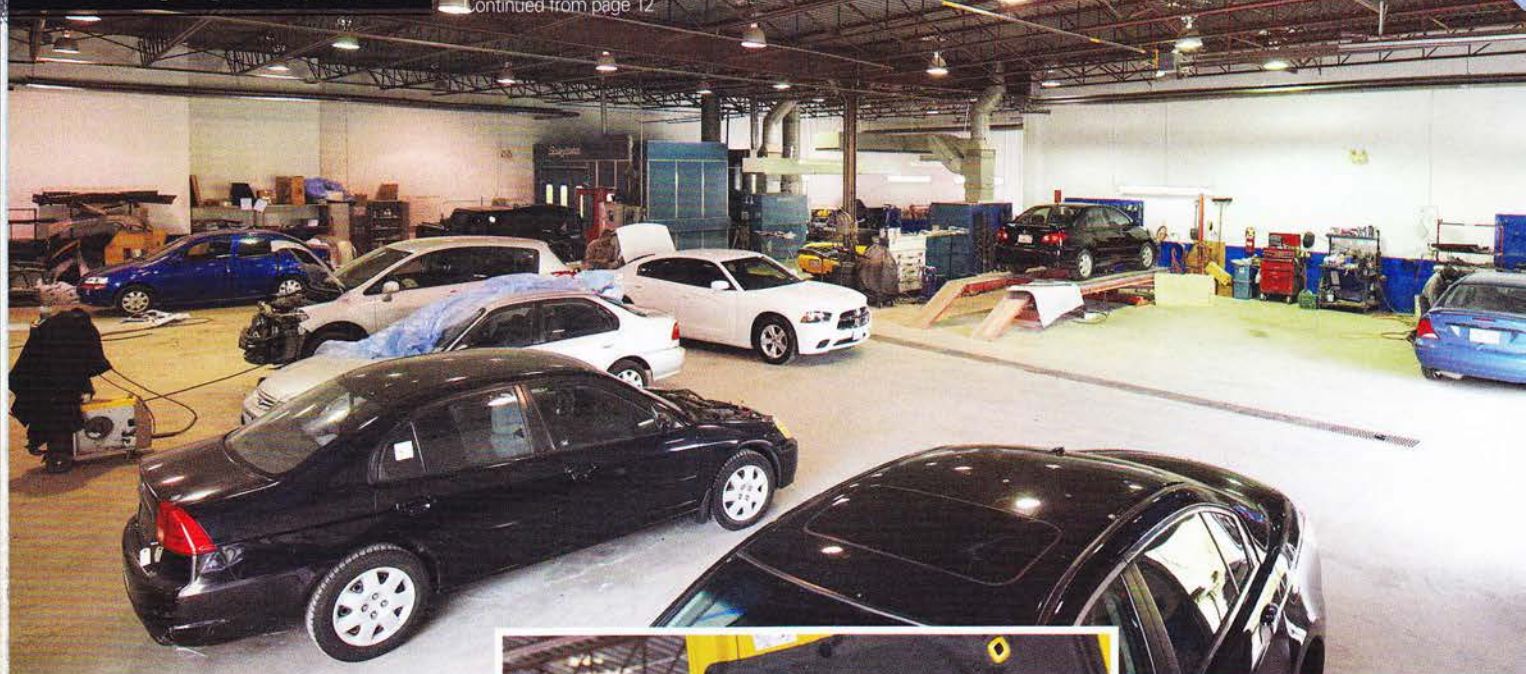
By J.D. Ney

Dundas, also known as the Valley Town, is the very definition of small-town Ontario. In fact, several Hollywood directors have peered through cameras at its picturesque landscape and early 20th-century architecture as small town anywhere, standing in for U.S. and Canadian towns for film and television.

It's in this bucolic setting that Alex Szabo, owner of Dundas Valley Collision, started his repair business in 1979. "At first

we rented a small place, and there were just two of us working," Szabo says of the company's humble beginnings. But it soon became apparent that the small repair space wasn't going to hold the booming business, and Szabo leapt into expansion mode. "Eventually we bought the building and were able to take over the building next door, as well as purchase the property next to that as well," he says. "So in 1991, we were able to build our 11,000-square-foot facility."

Continued on page 14



Today, that facility employs five technicians, two more in the office, one marketing specialist, and a clean and prep worker. Add to that list Szabo himself, along with a host of apprentices when available, and you have yourself a well-oiled machine; and that's just the way the owner wants to keep it, which is why he invests so heavily in the latest technologies and the best training for his people.

While some might struggle to find success in the small tight-knit community, Szabo says it wasn't always easy, but he also knew that the nature of the collision business was such that avoiding community involvement was the fastest ticket out of town. "Along the way, we've been very happy and proud to be so involved in the community, in a number of ways," he says. "This focus has worked out well in our small town, which is a very special, community-minded place."

Over his 32-year career in the community, there is plenty to be proud of. "We've been a sponsor of the Youth Volunteer of the Year award here for 12 years now, we helped build a youth drop-in centre, and we host golf tournaments for charities like the United Way," says Szabo.

As seems customary with the affable but straightforward owner, one gets the impression that charity work and community involvement are not a burden for the business but rather an extension of it. In fact, Szabo fields questions about his multiple charitable contributions as if he simply doesn't understand doing things any other way.

Fortunately, while Szabo himself is too humble to prattle on about work in the community, others are more than willing to lend a voice. "It's important to acknowledge Alex's extraordinary



commitment to this community, through his Service Club work and his ongoing sponsorship of the Dundas Youth Volunteer of the Year Award," says Ted McMeekin, the local member of provincial government. "Since 1994 the youth award grants a special financial scholarship, provided by Alex and his company, which has inspired young people to live lives of public service. Alex has been truly making an important and lasting difference through his many good works and particularly his affirmation of Dundas youth."

The team at DVCC certainly lends much of its time to the community at large, but it's also intimately connected with the broader collision repair industry as well. Far from operating in his own bubble, Szabo has long been a public advocate for the sector, sitting on multiple association boards and committees over the years. As a past president of HARA (Hamilton District Autobody Repair Association), he says he was given the opportunity to both learn more about the business, and work to improve it. "I certainly got to know some fabulous shops and their owners," he notes. "One important project we worked on at the time was after then premier Mike Harris asked the industry to organize and elect a board to design a self-management and self-regulation program."

Szabo would spearhead that task force, which became the Collision Industry Standards Council of Ontario, and says the group designed a program that was brought before the legislature. While in the end, Szabo says the political will at Queen's Park was too scant to truly take the collision industry's recommendations – the bill that the council helped produce was

Continued on page 16

passed but not enacted – Szabo maintains the work was worth the effort. “At the time, it could have really helped the industry, because the biggest issue was proper licensing procedures,” he says. “The bill would have ensured that all technicians were properly licensed, along with a universal code of ethics that would have ensured that all shops meet a minimum standard of service.”

What’s more, the spirit of industry self-regulation, an idea Szabo fostered while leading CISCO, factors heavily into the way he does business every day at DVCC. Not one to wait for the provincial government to force him into investing in the future, Dundas Valley Collision Centre converted to water-borne paints some two years before the legislation demanded it, becoming the first shop in the area to do so. And, what’s more, when it comes to making sure his technicians and employees stay up to speed with the latest trends and innovations, Szabo says training and constant learning is a top priority. With the help of industry partners PPG, in 2010 alone, Szabo says employees took courses in shop management, environmental procedures, air conditioning, and marketing training.

Even a short conversation with Szabo reveals the importance he places on building and fostering lasting relationships. And Szabo doesn’t just see the relationships with his community, his customers, and his fellow collision repairers as being of the utmost importance. In an industry that, let’s be honest, often pays only lip service to the positive working relationship between repairer and insurer, Szabo charts his own course, attaining astonishing results in the process.

Recognizing the inevitable influence of insurance companies in the collision repair business, Dundas Valley Collision made a point of reaching out to members of the insurance industry with more than simply a list of CSI scores and KPIs. “In 2010, Dundas Valley Collision offered free RIBO (Registered Insurance Brokers of Ontario) training to some ninety insurance professionals in the Greater Hamilton area,” says Szabo. “Each RIBO course offered is three hours in length and is worth three RIBO credits. Brokers are required to take RIBO courses each year so that they can sustain their insurance broker accreditation. Each attendee to the sponsored and hosted courses received a complete set of course notes and a RIBO certificate upon completion,”



says Szabo, adding, “The certificates were personally delivered by DVCC staff to the attendees.”

While the connection to the insurance agents in the area may seem like a small gesture, it’s certainly not going unnoticed. “I have always recommended them [DVCC] because of



friendly and professional service they provide and continue to do so,” writes Frank Bozzo, branch manager with Mainway Huron and Creighton Insurance in a letter of support. “More important to me is that they have been very helpful. These seminars are conducted onsite at the collision centre, which gives me a firsthand look at how the operation works... I can honestly say that I have learned so much more about our industry because of these seminars and I can’t thank DVCC enough for their time and generosity, and for their support.”

In the end, the last few years have been challenging but rewarding times for Szabo, a professional father of three daughters, says he spends his time away from the shop either on the golf course or with his family. With a solid plan for growth over the next five years, which included the opening of Dundas Auto Glass in 2010, the future looks bright for this shop in the Valley Town. As long as Szabo is at the helm, you know the shop’s role in the community and the industry will remain a hallmark. “Relationships are the biggest part of this

business,” he says. “Our industry is not just about brand awareness. People don’t just come to your shop because they see an advertisement on television. You have to be involved and a part of the community. You have to be at the forefront.”

Even in small-town Ontario, that’s exactly where Dundas Valley Collision Centre intends to stay.