

In search of its soul

Once Italian, now largely West Indian, an Eglinton West neighbourhood struggles to find an identity

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Nick Alampi is a big, friendly, Italian man with a soft but firm voice. That voice rises to a thick, passionate baritone when he is upset or moved, but even his loudest "polite" voice is not enough to deal with this.

The murmurs are thick in the crowded room, and many of the mutterings are not just pleasant conversation.

"If everyone can just calm down and take a seat —" Alampi begins.

"You sit down," comes a loud voice from the back of the room. There are a few roars of agreement.

"Let the man speak," comes a voice in his defence. "Let's do this the right way."

Another roar of protest begins, as almost 200 voices, each with a distinct regional accent, rise as one to demand that they — and only they — be heard right now.

"Listen," Alampi shouts, trying to regain control. "I know there are issues that we all want to talk about, but if we just wait until we get to new business —"

"This is not new business," comes the voice of Joe Torrone over the din. "It's old business. I already heard this stuff 20 years ago. It never did nothing then, won't do nothing now."

Alampi is standing at the podium in the overcrowded basement of St. Thomas Aquinas church on Eglinton Ave. W. on a dark November night, trying to shape the future of the Fairbank neighbourhood.

He wants to create an image, a public face, for the rest of the city, where in the past there has been only word of mouth among certain nationalities.

He has a vision of the next Bloor West Village springing up in the community he has lived in for most of his life, since his father opened the family business here in 1968. His eyes shine when he speaks of the unique opportunity he sees sitting along Eglinton West between Marlee Ave. and Harvie Ave. "It's unbelievable," he will say after the meeting. "Where else can you go on a 15-minute walk and go through Caribbean to Italian to Thai to Asian to Portuguese to Lebanese?"

"We have such a chance here, I really believe that, and it's wasted when we fight amongst ourselves."



RON BULL/TORONTO STAR
Nick Alampi, embattled head of the York-Eglinton Business Improvement Area, talks outside his formal-wear shop with Marjorie Renwick, owner of Roses Financial Services, and barber Melvin Crooks.

But thus far, about 10 minutes into the annual general meeting of the York-Eglinton Business Improvement Area, trying to realize that dream is proving to be a thankless job. His hands are raised in a gesture of surrender towards the chorus of voices assailing him. He is futilely attempting to reconcile this neighbourhood's past with its present, to reconcile its business potential with its cultural identity and its black with its white.

Alampi is president of this 5-year-old edition of the York-Eglinton BIA — a neighbourhood organization that collects a city levy from business owners and uses the funds to improve the neighbourhood and attract new business. Alampi runs the business his father opened, Anthony's and Andrew's Formals, east of Dufferin St.

Torrone was founding treasurer of the first York-Eglinton BIA, the liaison between the area's businesses and the city for more than a decade before it disbanded in 1985 — because, says then-president Dominiq Rotundo, "It was too big; we couldn't get anything done with the constant bickering."

Torrone owns Dynevore furniture, which he bought in 1967, west of Dufferin on Eglinton.

"West of Dufferin, we still have beautiful stores," he says, adding that 15 years ago, "we had people shopping. My area was 90 per cent Italian in the 1980s ... now I'm just getting killed."

The chasm between the two men and their visions of their neighbourhood is wider than the small Dufferin-Eglinton intersection that stands between them. But that intersection is an appropriate divider — it already divides much along this multicultural commercial stretch.

East of Dufferin, to Marlee Ave., the businesses are predominantly West Indian, with some Italian, Greek, Thai and Portuguese enterprises mixed in.

West of Dufferin, the cultural blend is a salad, but one with distinctly Italian dressing — many of the area's original immigrants still live in senior housing at the corner of Eglinton and Dufferin, and they, or their children, still run some businesses west of Dufferin.

This BIA — the largest, geographically, of 47 in the city — tries to work with the city on behalf of the entire neighbourhood, but is being pulled apart by the two cultures tied most strongly to the area, Italian and West Indian.

"We have too many captains, not enough sailors," says Marjorie Renwick, a Trinidadian-born woman who sits on the BIA board and runs Roses Financial Services, which she bought five years ago. "Everyone has their own version of what we should be. Unfortunately for the Italians, there are only 10 or so of them (who still own businesses and attend meetings faithfully) and more than 100 West Indians."

Torrone is among a small group of those Italian owners who are fighting to disband the BIA in hopes of forming a separate one west of Dufferin.

Alampi is trying to hold it together, in hopes of branding the neighbourhood as Toronto's International Village.

Torrone says the BIA has done little for the area since it was revived five years ago. Alampi disagrees, citing now twice-a-week garbage pickup, new streetlights, less graffiti and a façade improvement deal by which the city shares the cost of a new storefront.

While most of the West Indian business owners laud Alampi's improvements, they are not yet sold on the goal of branding the neighbourhood as an international marketplace. They like the sound of it, but not the price tag.

They would rather use the money — the BIA's budget for 2005 is \$162,000 — to host more Caribbean and West Indian events, such as the Junior Carnival, which was cancelled last year for lack of funds, and a new Jamaican pride parade they want to host next year.

**'The goal is to brand the neighbourhood
but to keep it real — Kensington Market
real'**

Juri Berzins, urban brander

"Yes," whispers Robert Osbourne, a manager at International Money Transfer, a branch of Jamaica National Finance, sitting at the back of the meeting. A motion to give the Junior Carnival Committee \$28,000 of the budget to ensure its return this year has just passed, with nearly every black hand in the room raised high in support.

"That's what we needed," he says. "To get out the vote for events like this."

Minutes later, amid confusion, a chorus of voices, the sound of several motions being raised at once and the disgruntled objections of some of the Italians, a second motion is passed to put aside \$26,000 more for a separate parade. Later, some will object, saying they thought they were still voting on the original carnival motion, and the decision will go to the city for review.

"If they want to spend the money on parties and parades and have a few nice days outside, they can do that," says Renwick, who argues that the neighbourhood could have used the funds allocated to parades to erect a neighbourhood gateway at Marlee Ave. and Eglinton, the first step in the branding plan.

"It's their decision," she says. "But if you're looking to the future, spending all our money on that doesn't make sense."

Torrone and several other Italians walked out of the meeting in a brief protest when the second parade motion passed. Their motion to pass a \$0 budget in hopes the BIA would disband was defeated soundly.

"Parades and picnics," says Torrone, "make the street a disaster. It's frustrating because they just agreed to give them \$26,000 for a carnival that's going to give me no business at all."

Torrone and other Italians appeal to Alampi as a countryman not to let the Italian culture vanish from the neighbourhood. The Torriones arrived on Eglinton West in 1957 and set up shop 10 years later on a street that was essentially a landing strip for thousands of Italian immigrants. Espresso shops and clothing stores lined the streets. Torrone recalls sitting outside on many days, eating sweets from nearby shops and chatting with fellow business owners about their own Little Italy.

"It was poor but it was honest," he says of the area in the 1960s and 70s.

"If the streets were dirty, you rolled up your sleeves and cleaned 'em off. You didn't run to the city and tell them to do it — nobody had to hand out brooms," he adds, referring to

Broom Day, one of Alampi's first BIA projects, when every business owner was handed a free broom and told to keep their storefront clean or face fines from the city.

Robert Osbourne and other West Indians appeal to Alampi to listen to the majority and help them develop the burgeoning Caribbean community the way they want to. The past is gone, they say, and the future of the neighbourhood lies in its Caribbean businesses.

Alampi listens to both visions and sighs, knowing that as long as the BIA's membership is divided along ethnic lines, the organization's dream of turning it into an International Village will remain just that.

"It's not just (that) I'm between a rock and a hard place," he says a few days after the meeting. "I'm between two hard rocks and an oncoming truck."

The "truck" is the poll, put forward following City of Toronto protocol, of people who were area landowners as of Sept. 29. It asks them to vote yes or no, by Nov. 28, on repealing the bylaw that created the BIA. If the bylaw is repealed, the BIA will dissolve instantly.

"It took us a few years to improve a few things," Alampi murmurs. "If this is repealed, it might take us 20 to get back on our feet."

To sell his vision of the neighbourhood's potential to the feuding factions, Alampi has hired Juri Berzins, a planner with Urban Design Associates who has helped brand more than 100 Ontario communities, including the nearby Corso Italia on St. Clair W., to develop a marketing concept for the area.

"We have to develop an image for you guys," he tells the crowd at the general meeting, once Alampi has quieted them down. "This is a global neighbourhood. Our challenge is to convey that to everybody."

His early designs are plastered to the east wall of the basement. The plans are simple and elegant, the branding unmistakable: A gateway at each end of the neighbourhood that reaches over the street, street signs with the "International Village" nameplate and flags waving from every lamppost, each featuring a prominent spinning globe.

There are other elements of the plan — more parking is a big issue, for instance, adds Alampi — but Berzins stresses afterwards that he doesn't want to change the feel of the street.

"It won't become upscale all of a sudden. We're not going for that," he says. "The goal is to brand the neighbourhood but to keep it real — you know, Kensington Market real."

He plans to accomplish this, should the BIA survive, in three to five years.

"It won't happen overnight. People want us to become Bloor West or Yorkdale all of a sudden, but those are neighbourhoods who have had their growing pains and found their identity," he says. "If we can focus on our (identity) here, and use the diversity as a strength, we can start down that path, and we will get there."

Walking down Eglinton Ave. W. on a sunny fall afternoon, the day after the fractured meeting that ended in a chorus of arguments, there's no visible evidence of the friction that runs like a streetcar through the businesses on the strip. Life goes on, as it has since the first wave of immigrants threw open their doors and waited for customers.

Melvin Crooks' ancient but sure hands are busy working the razors in The Barbers of Eglinton, a business the half-Jamaican, half-Scottish man has run for 41 years, predating even most of the Italian immigrants.

He is markedly unconcerned about the prospect of a BIA-less neighbourhood, and refuses to finger any culprit over the division on the street.

"I got along fine when I first got here, with the Italians," he says. "They were in the same position some of these new Jamaican families are in now. You come, you open a business, you try to go to work every day and put some food on the table, you try to pull yourself up.

"That's not going to change, no matter who (is in the majority)," he says in a soft voice nearly drowned out by the drone of the electric razor. Clumps of hair litter the floor. The biting smell of Barbicide fills the air as he sprays a freshly shaved area of a client's neck. An excited discussion in thick patois comes from the other side of his shop, where people often drop in just to chat.

Crooks hasn't been notified by his landlord about the poll, and he doesn't mind. He's just happy that the short fade has come back into fashion for the third time since he's been cutting hair.

His neighbourhood goes in cycles too, he says. "When I came here (in 1962), it was a lot of Jewish people and Italians. Then, it became a mix of all peoples coming in. Now, recently, you have a lot of West Indians," he says, whipping the smock off his client's shoulders and leading him to the cash register. "In 15 years it will be someone else."