

Ottawa Pianos: 50th anniversary

The second-generation Canadian store staged an open house, a concert and a special promotion to mark a half-century in business.

The Business: Diego (“Dick”) Papalia immigrated to Ottawa, Ontario, from Italy in 1952. He started out doing odd jobs and then left the area to study music in New York City. After he returned to Ottawa, he performed professionally on the accordion and taught accordion lessons. In 1966, as the accordion declined in popularity, he got a job selling pianos for the Heintzman Piano Company.



Left: Diego Papalia at 17. *Below:* Diego (“Dick”) Papalia, center, with his four children the evening of the 50th anniversary concert. From left: Carmen Papalia, Domenic Papalia, Serafina Trudel and Giuseppe Papalia.

In 1968, Dick was awarded a Baldwin Piano and Organ Company franchise. He opened a piano showroom and music school, originally called Baldwin Piano and Organ Studio, in a rented facility on Feb. 17, 1968. In 1989, when the store moved into the building it currently occupies, it adopted the name Ottawa Pianos and Organs, later shortened to Ottawa Pianos.

Since 1991, Ottawa Pianos has been a dealer of Yamaha pianos and organs. The store today has eight employees. About 15 teachers work in its Yamaha Music School, where nearly 400 students are enrolled.

“The community has done so much for us,” says Dick’s daughter Carmen Papalia, 55. “Schools have bought pianos from us. Festivals use our pianos.”

Over the years, the Papalia family has had the opportunity to meet renowned musicians. Ottawa Pianos provided a warm-up instrument for Liberace to play in his hotel before his concert at the National Arts Centre, Ottawa’s largest venue. Backstage at the National Arts Centre one evening, Dick Papalia had the honor of introducing Dave Brubeck, another Baldwin artist, to former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

Ottawa Pianos has a celebrity of its own. “Felix,” a Yamaha concert grand piano valued at around C\$200,000, arrived in the store in the summer of 2017 after its predecessor was sold. The music school held a contest to name the new concert grand.

Felix holds court in a special





Top: Ottawa Pianos and Yamaha Canada sponsored “A Grand Occasion,” a concert featuring the Ottawa Chamber Orchestra, pianist David Jalbert and Felix the Concert Grand. Above: Guests at the open house enjoyed custom-made 50th anniversary sugar cookies.

room at Ottawa Pianos’ headquarters that has about 40 seats. The piano also has “his” own Instagram account.

“It’s gotten now to the point where people say, ‘Can we come in and play Felix?’ ‘Can we have a recital with Felix?’ They don’t even say ‘the concert grand piano,’ ” Carmen says.

Felix has hosted a wide variety of performances. Musicians have recorded their albums on the concert grand piano, and music students (including children as young as 4) have used Felix for their recitals. The celebrity piano also travels to festivals and performances. Recently, for example, Felix visited the Embassy of the Philippines in Ottawa.

In keeping with its longstanding commitment to community service, Ottawa Pianos does not charge a rental fee for quality time with Felix. “We just ask, ‘Please give us a donation that will go towards the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario,’ ” Carmen says. “It’s important that we give back to the community. It’s not all about sales and the bottom line. It’s more than that.”

The Family: Dick Papalia, 81, still comes into the store most days, driving in from his home an hour outside of Ottawa. He often tunes a customer’s piano before opening the store at 10 a.m.

Through decades of selling instruments, tuning concert pianos, teaching and performing, Dick has made many friends in the region. “The years fall off of him as soon as he comes in and starts to speak to people,” Carmen says.

“We’ve touched a lot of people’s lives. And a lot of people have touched our lives,” she says.

Carmen today is the only family member working full-time in the store. Her three younger siblings

helped out part-time in the past but then left to pursue their own careers. Carmen also thought she would work outside the business, either in law or foreign affairs. "I did not want to follow in my father's footsteps," she says. But in 1985, as she graduated from university, her father was planning to buy land and build his own store rather than rent, and he asked her to take a year off to help him. She's been there ever since.

Carmen says her working relationship with her father has evolved over the years. "When we're young, we all want to break new ground and try new things, and he's always been extremely open to new ideas," she says. "But now I realize just how much I value the experience that my father has. The longer I'm in this business with my father, I value every word that he says, more and more."

Working for decades with a parent "becomes very sentimental," Carmen says. When she was a young girl, her father would play "Edelweiss," a favorite song of hers, when he practiced the accordion to prepare for gigs. These days, he will sit at one of the store's pianos and play the song to calm her if something goes awry at work, she says.

Carmen's younger daughter, Lianna Grace, 18, worked part-time in the store before starting Western University in London, Ontario, where she studies piano performance and business. Carmen credits Lianna with teaching her how to post photos on Instagram and use social media hashtags. Lianna's older sister, Alicea Grace, 20, attends the University of Guelph, where she studies animal biology.

Carmen says when her daughters were young, she realized how much time they were spending in the store when she caught them picking up their toy telephones and saying, "Ottawa Pianos" instead of "Hello."

The Celebration: Ottawa Pianos staged a grand celebration on the 50th anniversary date, Feb. 17, 2018. The store hosted an open house from noon to 5 p.m. The theme was the joining of three cultures: Canadian, Italian (a nod to the Papalia family's heritage) and Japanese (in honor of Yamaha's home base). Kimihiro Ishikane, Japanese ambassador to Canada, and Claudio Taffuri, Italian ambassador to Canada, attended, as did



The 50th anniversary cake was shaped like a piano.



Ottawa Pianos founder Dick Papalia with his granddaughters Lianna Grace (left) and Alicea Grace.

Altavista City Councillor Jean Clouthier, Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson, Member of Provincial Parliament John Fraser and Member of Parliament David McGuinty.

Other attendees included former students and teachers, former salespeople and customers from long ago, as well as family members, friends and executives from Yamaha Music Canada.

"In true Italian fashion, we had a food theme," Carmen says. The catered event featured delicacies from the three cultures: mini beef sliders and potatoes stuffed with Canadian bacon; sushi and green tea cakes; caprese skewers, meatball "lollipops" with marinara sauce, and cannoli. Also on offer were a cake



shaped like a grand piano and custom-made commemorative 50th anniversary sugar cookies.

Naturally, the piano store presented performances during its open house. The afternoon began with a recital by 4- and 5-year-old students from Ottawa Pianos' Yamaha Music School. The pianists who followed included teachers from the school as well as noted artists from Canada. Trio Antico, featuring Lianna Grace on piano, Juliana Hentosz on violin and Matej Hentosz on cello, also performed.

That evening, Ottawa Pianos and Yamaha Canada sponsored "A Grand Occasion," a concert by the Ottawa Chamber Orchestra, a community orchestra that coincidentally is celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2018. Ottawa Pianos' sales manager, Mitchell Wright, serves as president of the orchestra board.

Former National Arts Centre violinist Donnie Deacon was the conductor for the concert, which featured award-winning classical pianist David Jalbert, an associate professor of piano at the University of Ottawa and a Yamaha artist. (Of course, Jalbert played Felix.) By Carmen's estimate, nearly 700 people attended.

"So many high-profile people in our city came out to support us musically," Carmen says. "It was spectacular."

Yamaha Music Canada donated a digital stage piano for Ottawa Pianos to raffle off in conjunction with its anniversary. The proceeds were donated to the audiology department of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario. The raffle raised more than C\$1,000.

The store also offered a special anniversary sale, "50 Days of Savings," promoted through a countdown clock on its website. With assistance from Yamaha, Ottawa Pianos offered special financing during the sale.

"Finding the right instrument is a journey," Carmen

says. "This process can take a few minutes to years — especially with institutions such as schools, embassies, performance venues and houses of worship. We will continue to be there when [customers] need their pianos serviced, when they decide to take lessons or when they are upgrading or downsizing."

"We hope to continue being there for our customers for many years to come."

The Planning: Carmen says planning for the celebration took nearly two years. The idea for the three-cultures theme was developed when Carmen

and Wright began brainstorming during a drive from Ottawa to Yamaha Canada in Toronto.

In the summer of 2017, Carmen hired a public relations firm that specializes in event planning. "We thought we could do it all ourselves, which we couldn't," Carmen says. "This was way more than we could handle. It was bigger than a wedding." The combination of the open house and the concert raised multiple logistical issues, she notes. "It just became too much," she says.

The professional event planners' assistance was invaluable, Carmen says. "Without them, it could never have gone as smoothly as it did."

The Response: Dick, who had left the planning details to his daughter, was surprised by the turnout.

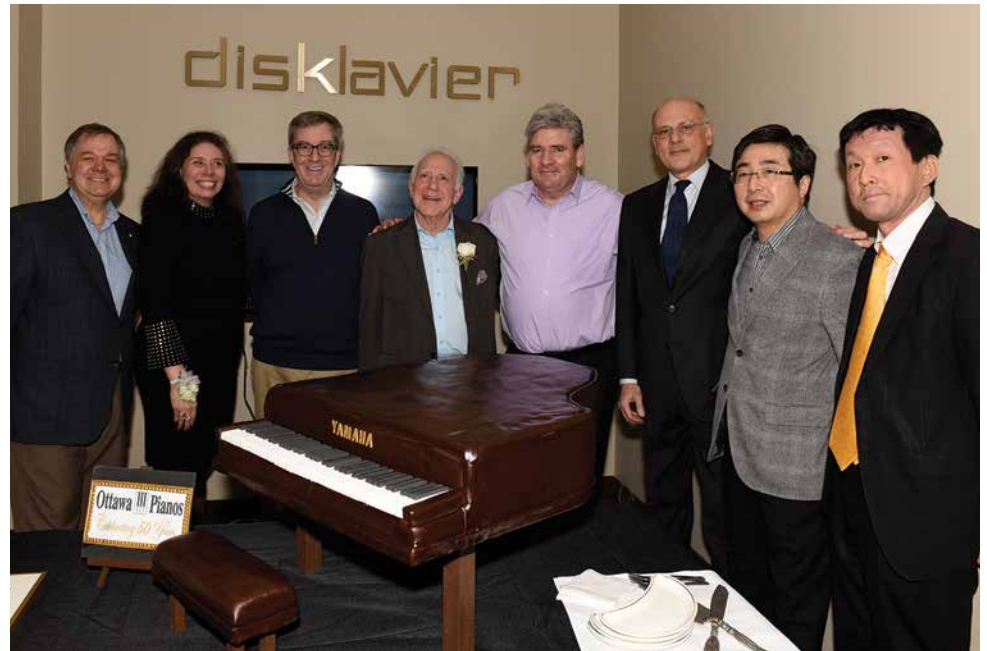
"It was a very emotional time for my father," Carmen says. "He was so overwhelmed with the amount of people that he'd touched throughout the years who came to give him congratulations. It was just wonderful."

Family members were among the surprise guests. Dick's four children were all in attendance. One son flew in from California and another came from Toronto to join their two sisters, who live in Ottawa. Several of Dick's grandchildren were there, as well.

"For my father, it's always been about family," Carmen says.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation covered the 50th anniversary festivities with a radio broadcast and an article on the station's website. The coverage resulted from a chat Carmen had with a CBC reporter who served as master of ceremonies for a cabaret event at the store shortly before the milestone celebration.

Attending the 50th anniversary open house (from left) were Councillor Jean Clouthier, Carmen Papalia, Mayor Jim Watson, Dick Papalia, Member of Provincial Parliament John Fraser, Italian Ambassador Claudio Taffuri, Japanese Ambassador Kimihiro Ishikane and Kenichi Matsushiro, president of Yamaha Music Canada.



“I just happened to say, ‘You know, we’re celebrating our 50th,’ ” Carmen recalls. The reporter was unaware of the anniversary. “She [said], ‘I’d love to interview you.’ ”

The Advice: Ottawa Pianos’ experience with CBC demonstrates how important it is for business owners to promote their organizations, Carmen says.

“You always need to be talking about yourself and telling people what you do,” she says. “Find what is so special about what you do, and always advertise. Always speak about it.”

For family firms preparing to celebrate a big anniversary, Carmen recommends an early start on the planning. One of the first things on the to-do list should be writing down names of people to invite, she says. “Even though we started [planning] two years ago, in the last few months, I thought, ‘Oh, I should have told So-and-So.’ ”

Carmen advocates hiring experienced professionals to help with the planning and also enlisting talented people from your staff. “Put a circle around you of the people that do things best,” she says. She drew on the organizational skills of music school director Gabriela Sztejn in planning Ottawa Pianos’ open house and concert.

“Surround yourself with the best people that you can — because you’re going to need them,” Carmen says.

She also advises thinking creatively about the theme of the milestone celebration. “You need to do something a little different,” she says. “Don’t do the same thing as everyone else.”

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