

# The Bold Footprints of Michele Rispoli

By Tony Battista with Mariella (Rispoli) Di Bello

This is a typical story of a young Italian man who came to Canada to follow his dream for a better life. Michele Rispoli, son of Luca Rispoli (1889-1951) and Maria Vitullo (1891-1990), was born on February 11, 1934. He lived in the small town of San Martino in Pensilis, in the province of Campobasso and the region of Molise, just a few kilometres from the Adriatic Sea. The youngest of six siblings – one sister and five brothers – he enjoyed working on a 10-hectare orchard his parents were cultivating on behalf of a local doctor who owned the property. While Michele found great satisfaction working the land with his family, he and his oldest brother, Giovanni, were missing their second oldest brother, Antonio (Tony), who had emigrated to Montreal, Canada, in 1951 with a group of 10 other young men from San Martino, as part of a program securing

foreign workers to work on local fruit and vegetable farms. In 1952, Tony moved to Hull, Quebec, across the river from the city of Ottawa, to continue working on local farms. Tony kept writing to Michele to come join him in Canada.

Having lost their father to illness just two years earlier and with a longing to join brother Tony in Canada, on July 25, 1953 19-year-old Michele Rispoli and his oldest brother Giovanni left their small native town on a local bus that brought them to Naples where they embarked on the transatlantic vessel *Saturnia*, and sailed to New York City. Upon arrival in New York on August 6, 1953, along with many other immigrants, Michele and Giovanni were immediately transferred onto a train bound for Montreal. This transfer was done under close supervision by US authorities to ensure the immigrants did not deviate from their Canadian destination and become illegal immigrants in the USA. The following day, Michele and Giovanni were met by their brother Tony at the Montreal central train station and together they drove to Hull, where they stayed in Tony's apartment for the next three months. While Giovanni found his own work in the Hull area, Michele started finding temporary work in various bakeries in Ottawa. He soon moved to Ottawa and lived in a small apartment on Booth Street (at the corner of Gladstone Street), near the Italian Church of Saint Anthony.

Shortly after moving to Ottawa, Michele and his two brothers welcomed their mother to Canada, leaving their sister Concetta and brother Leo back in San Martino (the other brother having died very young). Michele found temporary work at a bakery in Richmond which was located some 15 kilometres from where he lived. The owner of the *Richmond Bakery* was very impressed with Michele's skills and attitude, and continued to employ him as often as possible, but always on a part-time basis. Eventually, Michele bought



**Figure 1:** Luca Rispoli with son Michele (centre front) and two of Michele's friends in the orchard, in 1949.  
Courtesy of the Rispoli family.

himself a used car and would drive through the area now known as Fallowfield Road to the bakery in Richmond. At the time the roads were only partially paved. As he drove back and forth, he would notice a row of lights and a very small community along the way and think to himself what a nice area this would be to live, raise his family, and have his own small business one day.

Meanwhile, Michele had stayed in contact with his sister Concetta and brother Leo, who were back in San Martino in Pensilis. Leo, who eventually also immigrated to Ottawa in 1957, had connected Michele with a girl from San Martino via letter writing. Her name was Giuseppina Bacile (April 21, 1938 – September 8, 2010). Michele and Giuseppina fell in love ‘by correspondence’. He asked her to join him in Ottawa in October of 1960, and they were married shortly thereafter, on January 7, 1961. Their only child, a daughter named Mariella, was born on October 12, 1961.



**Figure 2:** Michele Rispoli and Giuseppina Bacile at their wedding reception in 1961. Courtesy of the Rispoli family.

After a few years, driving back and forth to the *Richmond Bakery*, Michele decided it was time to change his trade. He went to the *Marvel*

*Beauty School* on Rideau Street, Ottawa, to train as a hairstylist. By then, married to his hometown sweetheart and with baby Mariella, it was not an easy time. In fact, his wife, Giuseppina, had to support Michele and their daughter with any temporary work she could find here and there – mostly as a seamstress – while he attended school. This of course only made Michele more determined to complete his course and to work harder to look after his young family.

Upon completing the hairstylist program, he obtained his licence and, for a short time, worked in the town of Kanata, west of Ottawa. But Michele’s dream of being a self-employed businessman kept getting stronger and stronger! He often envisioned the beauty of the vast open area with only a small community along his drive to the *Richmond Bakery*, and thought that he should start his own business there.

One day, he made his way back to the corner of Fallowfield Road and Barren Street, in the community of Barrhaven, walked into the office of a construction company, and spoke with Mr. Johansen, who was the only builder in the area at the time. Michele informed Mr. Johansen that he was a hairstylist and wanted to build and open his own hair salon and a convenience store for his wife in the small residential community of Barrhaven.

The builder was struggling to get families to move into this area because it was so small and far away from the city of Ottawa. So, when Michele told Mr. Johansen about his plan to open a salon and convenience store, the builder rolled out the red carpet because he knew this is what Barrhaven needed for the area to grow. Mr. Johansen took care of everything. He contacted Mr. Mel Barr (bearing the family name after whom the town was named) for the piece of land to build Michele’s business and between the two of them they obtained the permits and services needed to build Michele’s dream!

Michele sold his small house in the Alta Vista area of Ottawa and invested all his savings in this new venture. His brothers thought he was crazy to bring his wife and daughter out to the middle

of nowhere! But Michele was continuing his journey to become a businessman and to follow his dream, eventually opening a 2-chair salon and a convenience store for his wife on March 1, 1969. At the time, Michele was 35 years old.



**Figure 3:** Michele in his Barrhaven hair salon, circa 1970. Courtesy of the Rispoli family.

The two businesses were on the first floor of the building Johansen had built for him. The hair salon and store had their own individual entrances. Each space was approximately 600 square feet (56 m<sup>2</sup>). Michele and his family lived upstairs in a 3-bedroom apartment. After a few years, they closed the store to expand the salon. Michele's brother Tony purchased the lot beside them and opened a convenience store. The little town of Barrhaven had begun its expansion!

The community continued to expand with a small strip mall on Fallowfield, which included a pizzeria, a Chinese take-out, and a Kentucky Fried Chicken. With new businesses opening, Mr. Barr decided to build a beautiful stand-alone building at 808 Greenbank Road, a stone throw away from Michele's salon. This new building was the home of a nice florist shop, but unfortunately, the shop did not do well. So, Michele saw an even better opportunity to expand his salon. He purchased the building from Mr. Barr in 1974. The space was large, and Michele's salon grew from the tiny 2-chair shop to a 15-chair salon with 8 employees! He sold the original building to a doctor and moved his family to an area called Hearts Desire, which is now part of Barrhaven/Stonebridge.



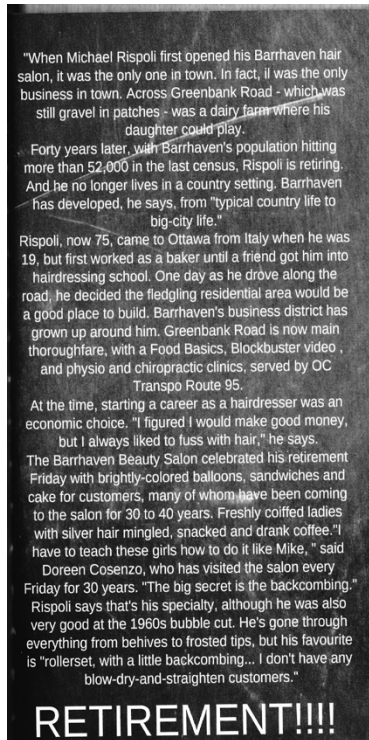
**Figure 4:** Michele and Giuseppina celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary with their daughter Mariella, in 1986. Courtesy of the Rispoli family.

Through long hours of hard work, and quality service, the salon was a big success and it attracted customers from many kilometres away. Ironically, instead of Michele driving around to find work (like he did back in the late 1950s), the work was now coming to his salon! The years flew quickly by as Michele remained focused on his work and family. He greatly enjoyed spending time with his three grandsons Michael (born in 1996), Nicola (1997) and Paolo (1998).



**Figure 5:** Grandsons (bottom to top) Michael, Paolo and Nicola Di Bello, in 2003. Courtesy of the Rispoli family.





proudly look back to his accomplishment of starting the very first successful business in what was then the remote and tiny community of Barrhaven, Ontario. Today, Barrhaven is a sprawling suburb of the city of Ottawa!

As a fellow immigrant from Molise, and friend of the family, I proudly say, "Bravo Michele Rispoli!"

**Figure 6:** A clip from *The Ottawa Citizen* reporting on the retirement of Michele Rispoli in 2009. Courtesy of the Rispoli family and *The Ottawa Citizen*.

By 2009, at the age of 75, Michele was ready for retirement. He had watched Barrhaven's business district grow up around him. He had seen the population mushroom from a small handful in 1956 to more than 52,000 in the 2006 census. The *Barrhaven Beauty Salon* marked his retirement with a special celebration with colourful balloons, sandwiches, cake and coffee for loyal customers, many of whom had been coming to the salon regularly for over 30 years.

Today, at the age of 87, Michele Rispoli sits in his home in Barrhaven, together with his daughter Mariella and his three grandsons, and looks out his window to what was vacant land not too long ago. This same land is now filled with services, houses, schools, and businesses. He marvels at the thought that he was the first businessman in Barrhaven 52 years ago! This modest young man of 19, who had left his war-impooverished town to settle in Ottawa and follow his dream of becoming an entrepreneur, can now



**Figure 7:** Michele Rispoli at Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia in 2019. This was part of a family pilgrimage to the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 to visit his late wife Guiseppina's port of entry into Canada, back in 1960. Courtesy of the Rispoli family.