# Armend’s Story—Transcript

Armend: My name's Armend Burton. I'm of Italian descent. Both my parents were from Italy. And I lived in London, England for 16 years. Then I came to Canada, been here ever since. Spent all my working life here. And about in 2005, so that would be what, seven years? From 25 then-

Interviewer: 17 years ago?

Armend: 17 years ago, I decided to go back to Italy to the village where my parents were born.

Interviewer: Oh, wow.

Armend: Primarily because we discovered, my brother and I, that we owned a piece of land over there and were totally unaware of it.

Interviewer: No way.

Armend: So that was the main reason why we went over and find out something about this piece of land that we had over there. We finally decided it was cheaper just to donate it to our relatives over in Italy.

Interviewer: Oh wow.

Armend: Just forget about, it wasn't worth doing anything more about it. My life in Canada, I did grade 16 when I came over, I failed the exam, and decided to go into the construction industry as a laborer at that time. Primarily for two companies in the construction field. I became a tile setter, master tile setter, and worked for pretty well 10 years in each one of the two companies. Like 10 years in Conway Marble and 10 years for DeSpirt. They were both two strong companies.

When I was 18, I went down to a dance hall that was down on Queen Street that was known as the Mizurik Town Dance Hall at that time. I met my wife there, married her when I was, well, almost 21, not quite. And quite frankly, lived with her ever since until three, well, not quite three years, but two and a half years ago when she died.

My work life, the first 20 years I spent in construction. And I tiled just about anything that could be tiled. The Breweries, I did a lot of tile work in breweries. I did a lot of tile work in the buildings downtown Toronto, like the Shell Building, Conestoga Life Building, Continental Building.

Interviewer: Wow.

Armend: You name it. I was in a couple of the banks too, doing repairs there mostly. And probably, my greatest joy in tile work, believe it or not, was I had spent one year doing the wing, the Gerard Street wing of the Sitkins Hospital.

Interviewer: No way.

Armend: Yeah. So very interesting for me because it was at that time and I decided I didn't like being a tile setter anymore. So I went back to school. Probably after achieving my, I guess the certificate in electronics. I got hired by Electrohome in Toronto. And I was serving, doing service calls for an Electrohome product for about four years, I guess.

During that time I became shop foreman at the Toronto branch. So I retired from Electrohome, and six months later anyway, I was hired by a company called Opticon, and Opticon specialized in high speed photography. And the other thing that they specialized in was, God, how do you describe it? Laser and fiber optic-

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

Armend: Equipment. Okay. And we acted as a sales division for companies over in Europe.

Interviewer: Wow.

Armend: They would supply us with the products, we would sell the products here in [inaudible 00:05:25]. And we did very well. I was with the company for nine years. And on the ninth year I decided, well, I reached my 67th year of age. So this is, I guess it's time to quit working. So I quit working. I retired.

Interviewer: Officially.

Armend: Two years after I retired, we decided to build a church here. And Catholic Church had originally a small church over in that part of Elmira, and it was too small for the number of people that were attending. So we decided to build a bigger church.

So when we were building the church, we decided to have the windows done in stained glass windows. So at that time, my daughter was breeding German Shepherds at the time.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Armend: And there was this one dog that didn't like it when she used the vacuum cleaner. And she would be vacuuming and the dog would keep backing up from the vacuum cleaner. He backed right into it and broke the glass door. It was on this piece of furniture. So when I went down to see if I could get the thing fixed, it turned out that the person I went to, was actually bidding on doing the glasswork in the church.

So while I was down there talking to him about my piece of glass that I needed, what had happened was that glass that they drilled the holes in and you put the hinges in, well we needed the glass drilled, put the hinges back in it. And his drilling machine didn't work at the time.

And I talked to him, I says, "Look, I know quite a bit about motors and equipment and that thing. Maybe you could show me your equipment. I might be able to fix it. And we'll get it running." So he says, "Well yeah, okay." And as we were walking towards the equipment. He says, "By the way ..." Because I asked him, "Do you have a manual?" He says, "yeah, I've got a manual." I says, "Oh, that's fantastic. You've got a manual, makes it that much easier."

And then as we were walking down, he goes, "There's only one problem with the manual." I says, "And what's that?" He says, "The manual was in Italian." I says, "Oh, thank the Lord. I not only can read Italian, I can also write Italian, so we shouldn't have a problem."

Anyway, I got his equipment going for him. And then when he got the contract to do the glasswork on the church. So he invited me to go down and see how he put together the glass that he was going to be using in the church. And I guess from that day forward, I spent almost 12 months with him doing glass work.

Interviewer: No way.

Armend: So up until about a few years ago, I've been occupied in some shape or form as well.

Interviewer: Well-

Armend: No, it was. See one of the things that happened was there was a war, 1937.

Interviewer: Oh yeah, for sure.

Armend: Right. In 1945.

Interviewer: Oh wow.

Armend: And my father, the minute that Italy declared war on England, he was interned three weeks, maybe four weeks, he was interned. They put him on a boat and they were shipping him with many other of the Italian population that was in London at that time over here to Canada.

And they were scheduled to go to the island in Montreal there. What is that? I forget the name of it now. Anyway, all I remember about this particular island is that they had the expo exhibition there and that's what they were scheduled for. Unfortunately, the boat got torpedo and many of the Italian men that were on this boat, they drown, my father among them. So at the age of nine, I became kind of half orphaned.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Armend: Two years after my dad died, they decided that my mother was a dangerous family objector. So they decided that they interned her at the Isle of Man. So I spent four years with her at the Isle of Man. And education wise, it was very beneficial in some aspects and very poor in others.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Armend: And the aspect that it was very good at, from my perspective anyway, was that it was in the fields of mathematics and physics. Because the professors, the Jewish professors that had been interned also, because they had a German designation, they taught me mathematics and physics.

Interviewer: Oh, wow.

Armend: And I had an excellent education in those two subjects. My English was atrocious. From an educational point of view, I didn't have a good education. By the time I came out of the camp, I was 14 years old. Because of my age and the situation with the way the education system was during the war, I didn't fit into where I should.

And because of that, I never really got a good education except in the shop area where I could use some of my physics and mathematical talent to do things there. So from that point of view, I really suffered. And when I came over here, they were having a lot of difficulty deciding, should I do grade 12 or should I do 13? And the decision came down that I should do 13.

After I failed, I said, "See, I should have done 12 or repeat it." And I probably would've been able to straighten out my whole education system, but it didn't happen. And getting into construction, you really didn't need an education.

I definitely think they need education. But you can't get, not in today's world anyway, very far without having at least a university education. That's the stage that it starts in. So you see back in my day, a grade 10 education, high school level education, you could have got any kind of job you wanted.

I could have gone into the insurance business. I know I could have gone into the accounting business just based on my mathematics ability. You didn't have to have any specific thing, like a degree or anything of that nature back in those days. That's changed dramatically now. Like secretaries need degrees.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Armend: It's kind of mind-boggling when you think about it.

Well my wife and I, we decided that we wanted to stay in this house as long as possible. So I built the house, had it built the way I thought it should be, so that we could retire in the house basically. And it served us very well because I've been in this house now for 35 years almost.

And it's very practical for me right now. Everything's on one level. I don't have to go down. There's no reason for me to go downstairs at all if I don't want to go. If I want go, well there is a downstairs and I did have it finished. Otherwise, the whole idea was that we would live in the house as long as possible, even if one of us or the other became single. And it's almost three years now that my wife has died.

And I haven't found being single too bad until I broke my arm. When I broke my arm, I needed a lot of help because the arm was absolutely useless. And because of that, I have these wonderful women that come in here taking care of me. And the biggest realization I've come to is I don't like being alone. They spoiled me something terrible. And I am kind of half dreading the day when they will not be available to me anymore.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Armend: So if there's one thing I've learned about retired life, you do really need some kind of personal ...

Interviewer: Connection.

Armend: Connection of some kind so that you have somebody to talk to. Prior to breaking my arm, I spent days in here listening to the radio playing. I don't like TV, I get fed up with it pretty fast. And as I said, doing cross stitching and that just to keep my hands occupied. Up until about two years ago, I was still doing glasswork. But it was just ...

I think the biggest thing about aging that people somehow lose sight of, is that while we do get old, as long as we have our mental facilities, we should not be treated as somebody that is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Which seems to be a tendency, people think that you become incompetent.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Armend: You are not able to care for yourself. You need somebody to make decisions for you. And that's not the reality.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Armend: I would say, as far as I'm concerned, try not to be idle. Right? Keep yourself occupied in some fashion.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Armend: And there's all kinds of things you know that you could do. You got to keep occupied. I think the worst thing you can do is let yourself go down that hill of sitting in a chair and doing nothing because it doesn't quite fit in with your previous norm or something.