

REGENERATING MARKET AVENUE

by Jamie Saari-Alvarez



There was no mistaking that Peter Nygård had arrived. The flashy, renowned fashion mogul made his entrance in the style one would expect of him.

Pulling up in a bright orange hummer, the self-made multi-millionaire arrived with a two-person entourage – a driver and public relations consultant. Nygård appeared vibrant, enthusiastic and to be fully enjoying the fruits of his labour.

Impeccably groomed, the 62-year-old donned a golden tan and smile showcasing the most glimmering, white teeth imaginable. And somehow he was able to make a pair of blue jeans, a T-shirt and a big furry parka appear refined and in vogue. (Nygård's interview with Cobblestones Magazine took place on a crisp, chilly spring afternoon in April of 2004.)

Stepping out of the vehicle, Nygård took a moment to examine and look inside the buildings he had recently purchased. He was quick to describe his emotions.

"I'm having déjà vu. My roots are right here. I actually started in this area. This was the garment district way back 35 years ago," he explained. "This area is so full of culture and character. It's a wonderful opportunity to contribute to what's going on over here (revitalizing downtown). It is something so exciting for me to get in and fix this up."

Nygård has purchased two buildings along Market Avenue in the Exchange District to refurbish and become a storefront for his fashion empire, Nygård International. Construction is currently underway to bring the historical buildings back to their original state.

"The vision is to be the other end of (what is considered) the Forks area. We would like to be the anchor on this side of the river. We'll call it the Nygård Market Place where we'll have quaint shops and a marketplace with fresh fruits, meats, bakeries and a barber shop," he said. "Bring it back to the good old days in the 50s and 60s. We want to give it a country culture and bring it back to the way life was back then. It's a beautiful walk along the river from the Forks to here. There are all kinds of nice buildings, discotheques and restaurants here."

Nygård Market Square will also feature a fashion museum showcasing different clothing from the past five decades, the evolution of sewing equipment and other fashion-related memorabilia. When asked how much he planned to invest downtown, Nygård politely said he preferred not to reveal exact dollar amounts.

"It's more than one would think. We never do anything second rate. We're going to go a little above and beyond what people might think," he said.

Although he resides in the Bahamas, Nygård said his

company will always remain in Winnipeg.

"Winnipeg has been very good to me. My roots are here. I'm fundamentally a country boy and never forgot where I come from. I was welcomed here as an immigrant with open arms. It's a great city," he beamed.

"We are very successful with the people we employ. They're a good work force. They're loyal. They're hardworking. We've had a major advantage in Canada by being here as opposed to Montreal or Toronto."

Peter Nygård and his family immigrated to Canada from Finland in 1952. As new immigrants, his parents struggled to support their two children and even lived for a period of time without running water or a sewer system. Nygård's "rags to riches" story can rival any fairytale.

In fact, Nygård now lives a life that most people only dream of. With an estimated net worth of \$150 million, his breathtaking 150,000 square foot mansion in the Bahamas is nearly double the size of the home Bill Gates lives in. Known for being a demanding and "hands on" boss, Nygård attributes his success to two simple mottos:

"You don't get something for nothing and you have to earn what you get."

"You don't know how far you can go until you push the limits."

In 1967 Nygård gathered his entire life savings and borrowed \$8,000 to purchase 20 percent of a ladies garment manufacturing company. After a few years of working 14-16 hour days and being meticulous with every business decision he made, Nygård owned the company outright. To this day Nygård International continues to be run with great precision and detail.

The company even has an annual internal training budget of more than \$6 million and Nygård associates do not start working in their hired positions until they have undergone an intensive four-week training period. Currently Nygård International boasts more than 200 retail stores throughout North America alone.

Nygård's loyalty to his roots in Manitoba and Winnipeg were a major factor in his decision to build Nygård Market Place. If his track record is any indication of what is to come, this promises to be one of the most exciting developments downtown Winnipeg has ever seen.

"People are returning downtown. The revitalization of old parts of the city adds a whole new charm to it. We're very excited about this development," he said. "We're designing and conceptualizing it all now. We are hoping to be able to have something up and running by next summer." ♦



Peter Nygård in April during his exclusive interview with Cobblestones Magazine.