



Peter Hvizdak / Hearst Connecticut Media

Elena and Joe Iamunno, married for 40 years, the matriarch and patriarch of J & E Auto Group of Branford, are not bashful about sharing their affection during a busy day in the repair bays of their business. J & E Auto Group, celebrating its 35th anniversary this spring, is a classic mom-and-pop family operation with the mother, father and two sons as owners of the auto body collision and auto repair business.

A real mom & pop operation

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Branford's J & E Auto Group celebrates anniversary

By Lisa Reisman

BRANFORD — One day in September 1971, Giuseppe “Joe” Iamunno and his friends ditched junior high.

They were walking along the Quinnipiac River in New Haven and spotted a body shop. The owner emerged. What are you doing? he called out. The 14-year-old Iamunno responded in language not appropriate for a family newspaper.

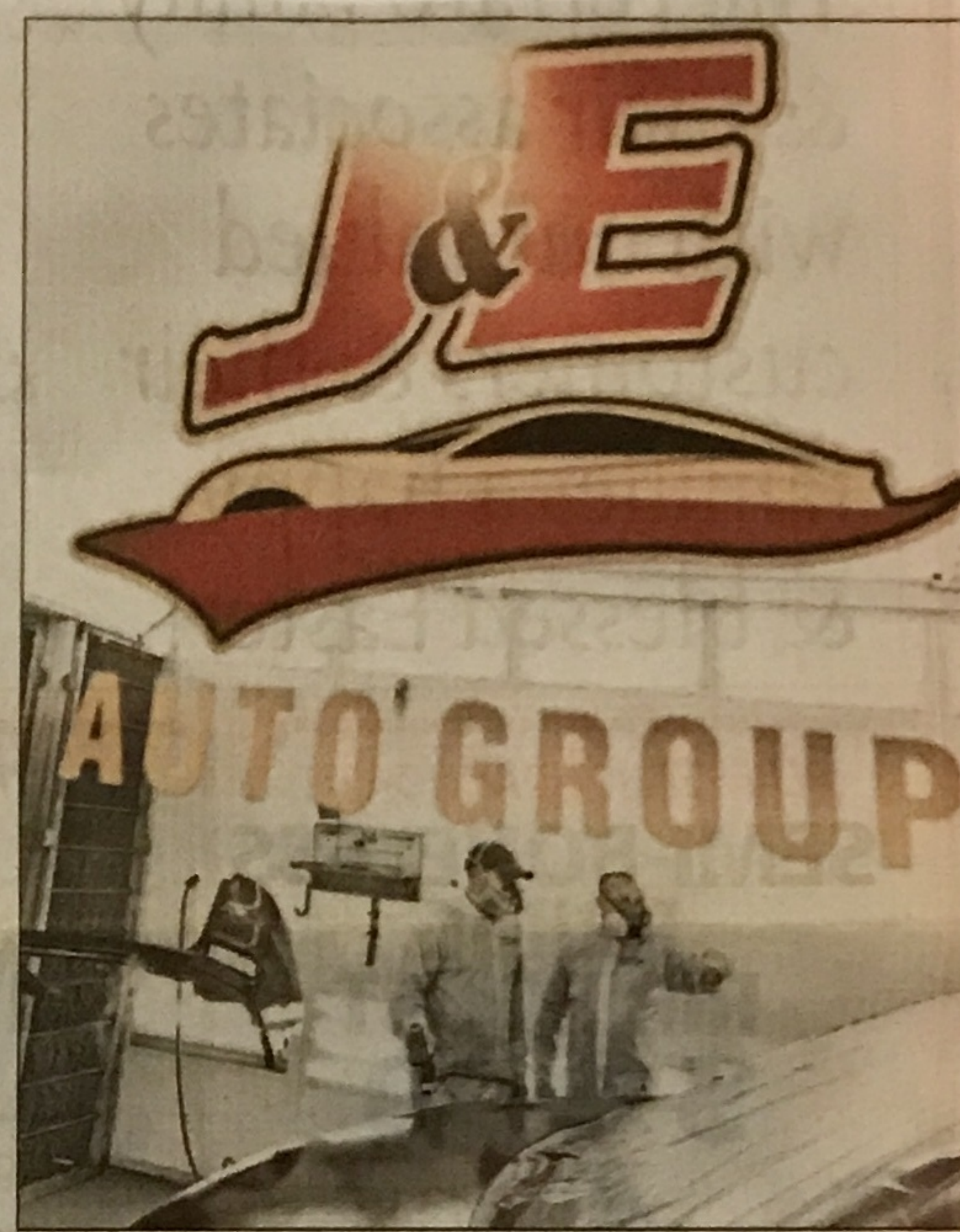
That those words were in Italian is most likely the reason that this spring J & E

Auto Group on North Main Street is marking its 35th year in business.

Joe, the “J” of J & E, had come to the U.S. from Naples, Italy, that summer, settling on East Pearl Street in New Haven with his parents and 12 brothers and sisters.

The Salerno-born owner of Bruno's Auto Body, Bruno Accettullo, “saw I was Italian and he wanted me to stay out of trouble,” said Iamunno, 62, who was between repair jobs and taking a peek at the European

See J & E on A6



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Above left, Gennaro Iamunno, of J & E Auto Group of Branford, sits in its private upstairs office that sports racing-style bucket seats as office chairs. Iamunno, at right, talks with employee, painter Russell Morales in the custom-made spray booth made for painting cars during the collision repair refinishing process. J & E Auto Group, which is celebrating its 35th anniversary this spring, is a classic mom-and-pop family operation with the mother, father and two sons as owners of the auto body collision and auto repair business.

J & E

From page A1

football match airing in the tidy waiting area that, with its aroma of espresso, might come out of a small Neapolitan village.

Accettullo put young Iamunno to work. "Back then, I would go get coffee, sand the cars for painting, clean up the place," Iamunno said. For his labor, he was paid \$5 a week.

Over the next 10 years, Accettullo taught his young disciple the trade. His income steadily rose. By 1979, he was earning \$500 a week. He'd also married Elena Varriale, the "E" of J & E.

The two met at The Dial Tone, a discotheque in North Haven. "He called my number," recalled the spirited Elena, 61, who arrived

in New Haven from Italy at age 10 and grew up on Warren Street near Wooster Square with her parents and seven brothers and sisters. Unknown to the two, their fathers, both from the same area of Naples, regularly had coffee together.

"His father used to tell my father I want our kids to get together," Elena said with a smile, 45 years and seven grandchildren later.

By the time she and Joe had relocated to North Branford in 1984, they had three sons, Gennaro, Joseph Jr., and Daniel. Iamunno had also opened his own auto body shop on Alps Road in Branford, with Elena as officer manager. There, he exercised his passion for "putting things back together and making them like new, to original

factory specifications," as he put it in his softly-accented English.

Three and a half decades later, that hasn't changed. Something else hasn't changed, even with the move to the current location on North Main Street eight years ago, and might explain why J & E has stood the test of time.

"This is a place where Joe and Elena and [their sons] Gerry and Dan recognize their customers are their lifeblood so they go above and beyond for them," said longtime customer Leighton Davis.

That means — unusual for a mom-and-pop auto body shop — Saturday hours and the longstanding "always open by appointment" J & E policy.

"If we have to work on Sunday or on the Fourth of

July, we come in, we do it," Elena said. "Our customers are like family to us."

That means not just a pick-up and delivery service, but driving a customer to Bradley Airport as a show of appreciation for her business, as Gennaro did last fall. Or making it clear that J & E works for the customer, not the insurance company.

"Your insurance company might direct you to their preferred body shops because they've negotiated with them for rates and contracts," said Daniel, the operations manager who personally guides each customer from start to finish in collision repair, service, and sales.

"You don't have to. Our only deal is with our customers. And that's to do whatever is necessary to

make them happy."

Perhaps that's why almost all of their customers, hundreds in number, have come to them by word-of-mouth, according to Gennaro, the manager of office operations, marketing, and bookkeeping.

Many of those customers, after having their cars repaired, have become regulars, Daniel said, with J & E's addition of sales and expansion of service, including oil changes, light tune-ups, and brake jobs, following their move to the North Main Street space.

Then there's the unhurried atmosphere that has regulars like Dr. Roger Lowlicht stopping in for an espresso and a chat with Joe about his beloved Napoli, the Italian football club which he's followed all his life.

"It's an Old World kind of

place with a new world level of sophistication in equipment, technology, and just the sheer skill of the crew," Lowlicht said. "They did such a fantastic job on a restoration for me that the dealership didn't know the car had been repaired."

That, it seems, all goes back to Joe Iamunno who, after almost five decades at it, "still works harder than anyone," Daniel said.

By then, with a final glance at the football match, his father had gone on to the next car repair.

His old boss, Bruno Accettullo, now retired in his native Salerno, would be proud.

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