

## Fairport's Hawk Frame & Axle: A meant-to-be story for owner Matt Cutaita (access required)

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Having spent pretty much his entire working life at Gates Automotive, Matt Cutaita was excited about a pending opportunity to take over the business.

He had started with the company as tow truck driver before he had turned 20, and soon worked his way up to administrative roles, eventually settling in as vice president of operations at the Henrietta location for owner and founder Jim Fonzi.

As Fonzi neared retirement a few years back, Cutaita said there were internal discussions about ownership. But then along came a corporate entity, scooping up Gates Automotive before that succession plan could be put into motion. Service King, a national brand headquartered in Richardson, Texas, bought the business in 2017.

"When that happened, I kind of lost out on my dream of owning my own shop," Cutaita said. "But life happens. Sometimes things don't work." And sometimes they do.

From lost opportunity came new endeavors, for which Cutaita is thankful.

Soon after Service King took over ownership of Gates Automotive, he stepped away from the corporate collision and repair business to revive his father's former company, Cutaita Trucking. He bought one heavy dump truck and, in four years, built up a fleet of 10 to provide hauling and paving subcontracting services across the area.

Then, after bringing a damaged truck into the service bays at Hawk Frame & Axle last spring, Cutaita realized he was standing smack dab in the middle of a business he wanted to own — even though it wasn't for sale.

A year later, he was signing the papers on May 31, taking control of a longtime staple of the Fairport business community.

"I still have the trucking company; we had to go down to seven trucks to make this happen, but I was able to come back to the field where I started," he said. "What's pretty cool is I was a tow truck driver that loved big trucks and now I have a business that fixes them."

Hawk Frame & Axle was founded by Jerry Relyea in 1962 in a fairly small shop at 77 O'Connor Rd. Over the years, as business increased, the physical footprint grew through four different expansions along O'Connor Road. Today, the firm's 30 service bays, paint shop, fabrication shop, parts operation and executive offices occupy 56,000 square feet of real estate.

Cutaita, 44, ended up as owner purely by happenstance. Relyea passed away in 2011 and his family had been running the business for the past decade. When Cutaita showed up to inquire about the repairs necessary for his truck, he looked around the operations at Hawk and sensed there might be opportunity.

So, he planted the seed, telling management that if they ever decided to sell, he would be interested.

"They called me back three days later," Cutaita said.

He worked with lenders at ESL Federal Credit Union to make the deal happen, and now three months into ownership, he sees opportunity for growth. The business is well-known in the region, so he's not lacking to reinvent the wheel at Hawk Frame & Axle. But he does have ideas that he believes will enhance operations.

"I don't want to come in and change the world too fast," Cutaita said. "But the one thing I focused on at Gates Automotive was process implementation, being as efficient as we could be."

That meant starting with a deep dive into every collision repair at diagnosis, he said. "We didn't want to be halfway into the job and realize we needed a part."



Matt Cutaita, owner of Hawk Frame & Axle in Fairport NY. (Photo by Kevin Oklobzija)



Such mid-repair speed bumps simply delayed the work and meant there would be an unnecessary delay for clients. That's not a good look from a customer relations standpoint.

But just as important as the process is the person, Cutaita said. He wants his employees to feel appreciated.

"If we can provide a good work environment, then we'll be around for another 60 years," he said. "I want to focus on growth and culture. I feel a lot of these technicians (at other businesses) are not being taken care of properly and are not being treated well."

"Your employees are your best advertising to bringing in new employees."

Since taking over, Cutaita has hired six technicians, and the staff at Hawk is up to 17. He intends to do more collision and repair services for cars and has cosmetic changes planned for the building, including new glass doors for the front of the massive service area.

But the focus will always be on heavy trucks and other large vehicles and trailers. Hawk Frame & Axle has the equipment and space to complete the most difficult repairs on dump trucks, buses, RVs, delivery vehicles and ambulances.

Hawk is one of the few shops in the region or even the northeast, Cutaita said, that can do frame correction and axle repairs on the largest of vehicles. Collisions and accidents often damage brackets and other parts that manufacturers don't sell, but Hawk's technicians can make those parts in the fabrication shop.

"There's nowhere else that can do the repairs we can do," he said. "And we're a local brand with local guys fixing it."