

Orlando Luciano 1934 — 2020

By Ron Harper

Orlando Luciano, one of Melbourne Market's great identities, passed away on Tuesday 28 April. He was 86. Orlando last visited Melbourne Market in February this year and was greeted by many people young and old showing their love and respect for the man once known as the 'father of the market'. He had taught many of them about the fruit and vegetable business.

Orlando spent 65 years in the market. He arrived in Melbourne from Italy in 1953 as a 19-year-old and on his first day was taken to the Queen Victoria Market by his brother and helped one of the stalls sell its bananas. Markets were not new to him; he was using skills that he had developed as a street urchin in Naples during the Second World War. By the time he left Italy he had already established an agency business, collecting plums from villagers' backyards and packaging them to sell to the local Chiero jam company.

Once in Melbourne he quickly rented some land in Ferntree Gully and began growing brussels sprouts and learning how the system worked in Australia. Orlando was a very hard worker and astute businessman. By the early 1960s, he was taking his produce and that of other growers in the area to sell at the Queen Vic market. It was a place that he remembered as still having some customers using horse and dray to cart their produce. All business was in cash and Orlando prided himself on never needing to keep accounts. Everything was in his head and if ever he did have to note anything, he would write it on his arm.

As the market in those days was both a wholesale and retail market, Orlando soon developed a successful business model. He became known for the phrase, "I'll take the lot!" When the wholesale market had finished in the early morning, he would buy up what had not sold, selling it later in the retail market or taking it to the depot he had built in Ferntree Gully to bring back and sell the following day. As he always paid cash, people were keen to deal with him.

The market authority at the time wasn't quite sure what to do with this quick-witted, entrepreneurial character and in the 1970s the market authority thought to exclude him from the market because he was assuming too many roles—grower, agent and retailer. In the end no less than the Victorian Premier intervened to save him, saying, 'Orlando, if you can put your head into three hats, just do it!'

Orlando had a great sense of humour and would laugh readily at himself. He had not been in Australia long when the 1956 Olympics were held in Melbourne. He volunteered as a translator for the Italian team, but on his first assignment found that some of the team members understood English better than he did. Some of the words being used were unfamiliar and too big. Still the team had warmed to his cheerful character and never sacked him but named him their 'Translator of Small Words'.

The Melbourne Market was close to Orlando's heart and even in recent times he was coming up with ideas about how the market could secure its future. As he told one of his teachers, years after leaving Italy, he was not meant to be a scholar, he was meant to be a fruit and vegetable man.

Orlando never really retired from the fruit and vegetable industry and his legacy continues. His son Anthony and his grandson Justin work in the fruit and vegetable industry, while he and his wife of 29 years, Lorraine, have continued to run various fruit and vegetable businesses in both the wholesale and retail areas.