by Julie Mahoney

spa|owner's corner

Oasis Day Spa, S. Weymouth, MA

REFLECTING ON MY 28 YEARS of practice as an esthetician, I am struck by how much the field of esthetics has evolved during those 3 decades. In 1980, I was a senior in high school with a love for art and design. When I realized attending a college to pursue my interests was not an option, I made a spontaneous decision to become a makeup artist to avoid attending a local community college. However, I did not know that all states require a license to practice cosmetology or esthetics, so if you want to work in a salon, a license in either of these areas is necessary. If you aspire to be a makeup artist in the entertainment industry, you do not need to be licensed in cosmetology/esthetics, but living in the Boston area, a career in that field was pretty farfetched.

The dream

My mother found out about The Elizabeth Grady School of Esthetics, which had just opened the previous year in 1979. This school was the only school in Massachusetts with a separate certification for makeup artistry. I had no idea what an esthetician was but I was willing to pursue an esthetics career to achieve my goal of becoming a makeup artist. To my surprise, my discovery of esthetics became my passion.

I finished at the top as a member of the third graduating class of one of the first esthetics schools in the country. Despite my academic standing, I had developed a severe case of acne from a product allergy, which resulted in a missed opportunity to work for an Elizabeth Grady Face First Salon. Our graduation party was delayed by six months, which allowed time for antibiotics and Retin-A to work on and clear up my acne. I got a phone call the day after the graduation party from Elizabeth Grady herself offering me a job at a newly opened salon south of Boston.

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Skin struggles

Although my acne was not as severe, I struggled with it until I was introduced to a newly discovered ingredient, glycolic acid, in 1987. The results were remarkable and immediate. As my skin cleared up to near perfection, the dawn of a new era in esthetics emerged with cosmeceuticals and this empowered me. My niche emerged to serve the acneic client, and I used my experiences to help men and women combat the disease. I researched everything about treating acne and stressed to my clientele the importance of diet and a healthy lifestyle. My role as an esthetician was more than just skin deep and I used the one hour sessions to learn about my clients' lifestyles, habits and diets.

It became my mission to heal each client, counseling them and providing encouragement with each facial. Through my firsthand experience, I learned how acne affects the victim's soul as it destroys self-esteem. It was important to build the client up and give them hope. As a result of my battle with acne, my passion for esthetics and treating the client became much deeper and more meaningful. What was a devastating personal experience shaped me into the woman I would become.

The leap

In 1994, there was a new buzz in the industry about day spas. Despite having never been to or seen one, it sounded like heaven and I immediately knew I wanted to work in one.

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One of our most successful ideas was the invention of "express" or "mini services," which are shorter versions of the regular services we offer at a reduced rate.

After waiting for a day spa to open in my area (it was not happening fast enough), I took a leap of faith and opened my own day spa. I had no prior business experience and was determined to start from the ground up. Excited by my visions of what a day spa should be, my creativity started to flow as I drew up designs. I had great faith in one particular seaweed-based product line I had known for the past nine years. I knew their products delivered results, their marketing was savvy and they provided terrific support, as the company owner was and still is very hands-on. I opened Oasis Day Spa in May of 1996 and from the beginning my faith was rocked. I soon discovered the majority of people in my area had no idea what a day spa was, as I was the first in the region to call my business a day spa.

Growth

The first year I was consumed in self doubt and anxiety about my decision, but soon the buzz caught on and my business grew at a steady pace. My opening staff numbered just five, including myself. There was a receptionist, massage therapist, esthetician and one nail technician—who had been the only one to answer my ad in a local paper. My husband Joe is a tremendous source of support. He drew up my business plan, did most of the construction and still keeps our books. Having no prior business experience, I ran my day spa based on old-fashioned common sense and instinct. I always ask myself two questions: "How would I like to be treated as an employee?" and "What would I like to experience as a client?"

Much of our growth has been a learning experience through trial and error. I am never afraid to take a risk. My "if it feels right I will do it" approach has proven quite successful. Five years ago my husband left his job of 17 years at a large bank to help run Oasis Day Spa full time. Over the past 14 years, our staff has grown to 35 and we have one of the most successful day spas south of Boston. Staff has a very low turnover and more often than not there is a waiting list for our services.

Conquering challenges

The effects of the recession have been a challenging time of opportunity. Our first flat year was in 2008 and it was frightening. By 2009 the shock waned as we accepted the reality of the situation. Joe and I got our brains in gear to create solutions to boost lagging sales. What evolved has been extremely successful and we realize in retrospect the tremendous opportunity that came out of the recession panic. One of our most successful ideas was the invention of "express" or "mini services," which are shorter versions of the regular services we offer at a reduced rate. We have them posted on a large sign at our front desk to target walk-ins. Clients have been able to maintain the frequency of their visits by scaling down the cost.

Joe developed a referral program that offers a discount to first-time clients and a monetary gift to regular clients. He sent out e-blasts to offer discounts to boost repeat visits. We have been very successful with SpaFinder, as we redeem several gift cards from this website every week. We have also stepped up our online advertising and found through trial and error that some websites have been more successful than others. The recession has given us the kick in the pants we may otherwise not have had to take our marketing and the way we see service in our business to a refreshing new level.

Oasis Day Spa resides in an old opera hall touting its former grandeur with interesting architectural detail. The beautiful space is the perfect backdrop for the expression of my passion for art and design. The spa has displayed works by local artists, including a beautiful painting of the sea that I commissioned from one of my estheticians.

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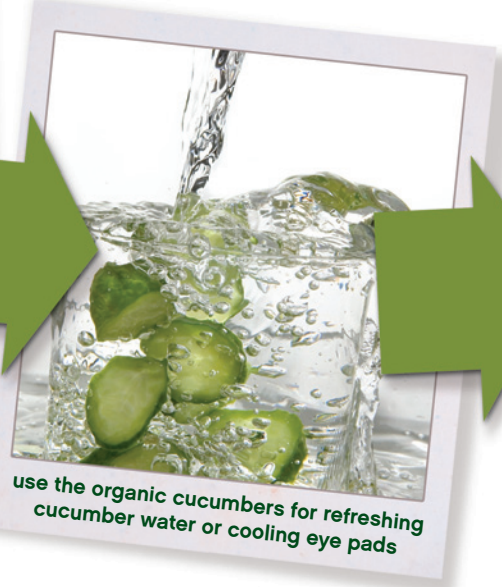

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Giving back

Service for me has always been multidimensional and I set high standards for my staff. I hired a labor lawyer to draft my policy and detailed job descriptions. Each employee at Oasis Day Spa has the total package: superb skill, commitment to service and the recognition that comes with working for an award-winning spa. Oasis Day Spa has won the Readers' Choice Awards from the South Shore community for 10 consecutive years as the best day spa and this year it received the Crystal Spa de Beauté Award from Repêchage.

My commitment to serve our community, especially those in need, takes high priority. I feel it is important to give back and I cannot say "no" to any request for a donation. I give to anyone who asks. Giving back is a vital component of conducting our business. Apart from the many fundraisers we donate to (with the Weymouth Food Pantry being our biggest beneficiary), we also host several events each year. This past year we sponsored a concert "Save Darfur" held at Nantasket Beach, which hosted many Boston-based bands to raise awareness and funding for UNICEF to aid the displaced people of Darfur. We held a "spa night" to raise funds for the Elizabeth Seton Academy, a local independently funded inner city school that provides a quality education for girls who might not otherwise be able to afford one.

We hosted a party for a local Girl Scout troop, offering them mini services and gifts while educating them about the importance of healthy skin and nail care. I also provided my makeup services in a joint effort with three other business owner friends to provide family portraits to women and their children at a local shelter.

Joe sits on the board of the Columbian Square Association as secretary. Joe was part of a core group of five business owners in the square that resurrected the CSA in 2009. The association funded and hosted a "holiday stroll" in which all the vendors located in the square participated in some way by offering services and goods to the public strollers. There were three giving trees to benefit three separate charities: the new Cancer Center at the South Shore Hospital located in the square, the Weymouth Food Pantry and a Yellow Ribbon tree to benefit our troops overseas. The mayor of Weymouth addressed the crowd and later asked the CSA to serve as a role model for setting up other business associations for the four additional squares in the town.

Oasis Day Spa has evolved tremendously since its opening 14 years ago. I cannot even imagine what the future holds, but I am excited with anticipation as we sit back and enjoy the ride along the way. ■

at left: Crystal Spa de Beauté Award from Repêchage.

***Julie Mahoney** has been a practicing esthetician for nearly 30 years. She graduated from the Elizabeth Grady First National School of Aesthetics and later continued her education with the renowned Lydia Sarfati. Mahoney opened the award winning Oasis Day Spa with her husband in 1996, and received the coveted Spa de Beauté Award from Repêchage in August of 2010. Mahoney can be reached at info@oasisday-spa.com.*

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