

“Men do like pink, but not pink hair!”

By Lynn Wasnak

Would you rather get married or start a new business? Debbie Celek did both, almost simultaneously. At twenty-five, she opened the doors of her hairstyling salon, called Paragon, with the help of a \$40,000 loan from her father. She married Steve Celek three weeks later.

Today, Celek operates a very successful salon—while acting as Supermom to three children under four. How does she do it all? “Steve really helps out,” she says. “I cut hair only three days a week now and return phone calls when the kids are napping. I work a lot of evenings too.”

The original Paragon occupied rental space behind a retail center, but it grew so fast that Celek recently built an opulent freestanding salon. (The cost: \$300,000; her “wonderful” father is a contractor.) She now employs sixteen stylists at the new Paragon and racks up gross sales that top \$9,000 each week. Paragon means “model of perfection” or “height of excellence,” and, says Celek, “that’s exactly what I want to achieve in business.”

She has always enjoyed hairstyling. In her teens, she coaxed her brother to sit still while she followed a magazine’s step-by-step instructions on “how to cut your boyfriend’s hair.” (Cautious by nature, she preferred not to use her scissors on a boyfriend.) A stylist who saw her brother a month later praised the haircut and told Celek, “I’ll hire you!”

“That’s when I thought, I’m gonna do this!” says Celek. She planned her salon while working for others, jotting down in a notebook what she did and didn’t like about the way they ran their businesses. Her own ideas have obviously made a hit with her clients, who range in age from twenty-five to forty-five and seem perfectly content with the salon’s color scheme: a mélange of pinks and mauves, with teal accents.

Though her husband thought bright pink would stop men from coming in, they actually like it, Celek says. Forty percent of her customers are men. Perhaps part of the reason is that her stylists look and dress like models. “We’re not necessarily stunning beauties, but we make the most of our appearance,” Celek says. Her dress code bans denims, corduroy and very revealing fashions. “But I don’t say they can’t dress funky or trendy.”

Celek tries to pamper both customers and employees. “I schedule forty-five minutes for just a cut and blow-dry,” she says. “To me, that’s important for quality.” Her hair designers have good benefits, liberal vacations and are entitled to a bonus if they exceed their sales targets.

Paragon's decor enhances intimacy and reduces clutter. Stylists work at custom-designed stations near half-walls. "I could have put stations all in a row and jammed twice as many people into the space," she says." But I wanted the clients to have some privacy. It's nice for the stylists too. They're not bumping elbows."

As a color specialist, Celek has seen and corrected plenty of amateur mistakes: green, pink and even purple hair. "Color is a scary field, but the money is good. And there's really no risk as long as you do test strands," she says. Celek's less fond of bookkeeping and inventory; she trained her sister to handle these jobs. "I'd rather pay someone to do it and concentrate on the fun stuff myself."

Justly proud of her usually smooth-running business, Celek can laugh now about Paragon's infamous moving day. Her father's entire construction crew arrived unexpectedly one Saturday afternoon to help dismantle the old shop. "The girls were stunned. They said, 'Who are all these men?'"

The following Monday, her sewer backed up. "Kids had thrown pebbles down the pipes during construction, and we didn't know it. So that first afternoon, we rinsed perms while my sister held buckets under the shampoo bowls!"

People are the best part of the beauty business, Celek concludes. "And if you're smart, you can make a lot of money."