

Innovative stylist finds niche in Lee's Summit community

BY ANNE KNIGGENDORF *SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL*
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Gemy Chiarizio, left, consults with Sierra Walz, right, about Taylen Hernandez's styling needs.
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Gemy Chiarizio comes from a long line of entrepreneurs, though the stylist and salon owner is the lone member of that group in the beauty industry. The others were all in construction.

"I told my dad I was going to take a year off from college and go to hair school. It was not well received," Chiarizio said.

But her instinct was right that the industry suited her. Chiarizio opened Studio 39 in Kansas City in 2001 when she was 24 years old. She scaled the business until she was able to open a second location in Lee's Summit in April.

Her father recently conceded that his investment in cosmetology school was one of the best he's ever made.

But cosmetology school is only the beginning of making a career as a stylist, particularly to run a successful business, Chiarizio said.

“It doesn’t really matter where you start out at school; it matters what salon you start at,” she said.

In the 1990s, she found a position at Mario Tricoci on the Plaza, which closed in 2007. That valuable training at the high-end salon happened during what she referred to as the glory days of the “mega salon and day spa” and led to huge opportunities, like styling Barbara Bush’s hair a couple of times ahead of local appearances.

“It was intimidating,” she said of meeting the late first lady. “It was such a cool, surreal experience; it was a very positive experience. I styled it like a little white football helmet.”

Her longtime employee and shop manager, Megan Jenner, said Chiarizio can pull off about any cut or color.

“I don’t know a whole lot of people who can do that. I’ve been doing hair for almost 10 years, and I can’t do that.”

Chiarizio has made it a point to continually update her training and match that training to what, in her experience, are unmet needs in Kansas City.

“When you stand behind that mirror for 20 years and you see little girls’, every woman’s, insecurity, you can see where there’s need in this industry,” she said.

Right now, Chiarizio said she sees a hole in the Midwest for styling and caring for multicultural hair. She says years ago, she was one of the first to introduce balayage, the art of free-painting highlights onto hair.

As much as her ability to innovate and fill the community’s needs, Chiarizio embraces mentoring her employees, which number more than 20. She uses a tiered system of stylists who work at varying price points as they learn techniques from her. This model allows Studio 39 to serve an economically diverse clientele, and ensures that her stylists are well trained.

“Gemy herself built a name for the salon, but she always says the salon is nothing without the staff that works for her and works for the salon,” Jenner said. “She does a really great job at helping her staff out and wanting to make them successful.”

Chiarizio also keeps the business family friendly in order to nurture employees and keep down turnover.

“She paid for eight weeks of maternity leave for me,” Jenner said. “That is pretty unheard of in the hair world.”

Chiarizio adds that she’s passionate about making it an adaptive place for mothers.

Lee’s Summit looked like a good fit as she thought of opening a second location, as she and Jenner live there and could bring their unique talents to the community.

The new location is in a strip of shops, nestled in with a health and wellness spa, a specialty pet store and a jeweler.

But that growth isn’t where Chiarizio will stop. She said her next step is to open a school for the continuing education of stylists, because that’s another unmet need she sees in the metro.