

ALBANY BUSINESS REVIEW

No sick days, plenty of weddings

CURTISS DIDN'T PLAN TO OPEN A SALON, BUT NOW ADDING SECOND LOCATION

Alayne Curtiss never takes a sick day. It's something she learned from her grandmother, who started working at 14 years old in General Electric's porcelain factories and eventually opened Mangino's restaurant in Saratoga.

That tenacity has helped Curtiss grow her hair and makeup business – *Make Me Fabulous*. Between a salon in Ballston Spa, a thriving wedding service and commercial work, Curtiss has built a successful business in an industry where few turn a profit.

Curtiss has done hair and makeup for governors George Pataki and Andrew Cuomo, worked with magazines from *Her Life* to *Martha Stewart* and is the consulting makeup artist for WNYT Channel 13. Her team of eight stylists work on more than 150 weddings a year.

After almost 20 years in business, Curtiss is expanding her salon to a second spot in downtown Saratoga this year, with a location to be announced.

How did you start your career in hair and makeup?

I worked for Clinique on a special events team that would go from store to store. In July and August they did not have much work for us, so we started doing weddings. Three became six became 14 became 28.

Why start a salon, *Make Me Fabulous*? I wanted a place close to home to do my trials. I had no intention of building a salon. The first location was in Malta Commons. Six months later, I moved to a 600-square-foot store next to Coffee Planet. I hired my first employee, Sue, who is still with me today. She wanted a bigger place. This space [at 32 Front St. in Ballston Spa] became available five years ago. We've since tripled our space here and are negotiating to take over space in Saratoga in the next month or two.

How did you fund the business? We had a small house next to my husband's parents' dairy farm and I had two mortgages on that house. I had paid off one to do the first store and when that was paid off, I got another one to get this store. Now my bank lets me get a loan without using my house as collateral.

Who are your clients? I've done the makeup for several governors and presidential hopefuls. I've been WNYT's makeup artist for years. With budgets so tight, I consult now with anchors and reporters and teach them how to do their makeup. We work with *Her Life* and *Saratoga Living*. We have



Alayne Curtiss is opening a second salon in Saratoga Springs.

DONNA ABBOTT-VLAHOS

a huge local client base in Ballston Spa, and have people who come from all over for bridal makeup. Referrals come from former brides, their sisters, photographers that refer us, venues that refer us. We travel for bridal makeup, so there are inns in Aurora and Lake Placid that refer us.

How have wedding blogs helped your business?

My best advice is go to the photographers who blog. I would hear for years, "How did you hear about us?" "I saw you on a blog." I just started getting into SEO; up to now it's been word of mouth.

Few salons become profitable. How has *Make Me Fabulous* turned a profit?

We were doing hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of business and made 3 percent at the end of the year. A lot of people that get into the salon business are passionate about beauty and hair – they don't look at the numbers side. I had an employee leave me once because she said, "All you care about is the numbers." If you don't watch your numbers, your payroll percentages, your product costs, the profit margin is very low. Making 10 percent is a lot in this business. Fifteen to 20 percent is rare. Most make less than 5 percent. We always fell around 3 percent at the end of the year. The last three years, we're at 9 percent.

Has hiring a business coach helped? In this industry, walkouts are common – where groups of people will come and work for you and leave together and open a salon close by. It takes me two years to get a stylist bridal ready. I hired Strategies,

ALAYNE CURTISS

Title: Owner of *Make Me Fabulous*, a salon, makeup and wedding business

Age: 52

Grew up: 5th Street on Saratoga Lake; Family owns Mangino's restaurant

Resides: Malta

Education: Bachelor's degree in marketing from Southern New Hampshire University

Family: Husband, David, three children, two dogs and two cats

a salon business coach, and started working on the kind of place I wanted to have. We do not work on a commission. We pay our stylists the same amount whether they are busy or not. We have a 401(k) plan. We have sick days. We have vacation pay, and we're working on health benefits. It's rare in this industry. I watch the numbers of what we spend and coach them on productivity rate, client retention, new client retention.

How many weddings do you do in a year? There was a point when we did 300. With our new philosophy of charging fairly, and not killing my staff, we do about 150. That was a good number. Everyone still had a day off and no one quit at the end of wedding season.

What do you charge for weddings? I used to do two or three weddings in a day. Times have changed. There are bigger bridal parties, so we do a day rate. Our stylists are yours for seven hours. That's how we work now, rather than per service. For a senior artist, it's \$700 for the day. For myself, it's \$1,050 because I'm skilled in both hair and makeup.

What are the biggest challenges about this business?

You have to book your life a year in advance, you'll never have a weekend off and there is no such thing as sick days. There was a wedding once where I had a stomach bug. Everyone was booked, and I was the only one on this wedding in Lake Placid. I got up at 5 a.m., my husband put me in the car with a bucket and a roll of paper towels and said, "Good luck." As soon as I was done, I booked a room and went to bed. It was the most expensive sleep of my life. The bride ended up getting sick. I told her, "It was either I don't show up, or I give it to you."

–Chelsea Diana, @AlbBizChelsea