

WITC grads turn dream of owning a salon into a reality

Story and photo by Jena Vogtman

A Cut Above

Sometimes people you met years ago pop back into your life later in a big way, and in this case, become your close friend and successful business partner.

Amanda Nelson and Amber McGregor met at Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College-Superior in the cosmetology program, graduating together in 2000. It wasn't until they both were working at a Duluth, Minn., salon several years later that they really got to know each other. Over quiet workplace discussions, they recognized they both had a common vision for owning their own salon.

"I guess I didn't think it was that big of a deal," Nelson explained. "It was risky. We were more scared to tell our boss."

"At that point, we had to work a lot of Saturdays and really wanted the freedom and flexibility," says McGregor. "We had the clientele to move on. We started looking for a location, and I think we didn't realize how much work it would be."

It took a village to raise their business from a mere idea to the modern, chic salon that they and their clients are now proud to visit. Friends recommended locations, and they eventually landed in Hermantown, Minn., just off U.S. Highway 53.

"We don't accept walk-ins, so we didn't need to be front and center," Nelson explained. "We take appointments by referrals."

From there it became a family affair. McGregor's husband painted, her mom wallpapered and her dad worked on sinks. Nelson's sister helped with the decorating and her brother installed new floors and remodeled the bathroom. Even with all the help, one particular person was missing for

Nelson – her father, who died shortly before the women embarked on their new endeavor.

"It was hard not having him here for advice, because he owned a small business," Nelson says.

When opening day came around, the new business owners could hardly have picked a worse day to start, but they got lucky.

"The night before we opened, the snow came in a winter that wasn't snowy," Nelson says. "We weren't plowed out, we had no internet or phone, our sign was not up yet and we still had every client show-up on time. Our clients were so supportive. It's always scary not knowing if they are going to come."

Parlour 53 has now been open for two years. The women have had more than 650 clients, adding up to 4,311 appointments. That's not to say the business hasn't come without some growing pains. While the duo say the first couple of months were hectic trying to balance the workload with new business responsibilities, their similar foundation of a WITC education, made it easier to work together.

"We both learned the same way, and I feel like WITC really stressed professionalism," McGregor says. "We knew what to expect from each other."

"Our instructor always told us to stay healthy and exercise," says Nelson. "We did so much as a team in the classroom, learning to be a team player. We had so many hours we had to be there, getting up and going to school. We could not miss and had to be on time and always looking professional."

Between the two of them, they cover all the roles of owning the business – they are the receptionist, hair dresser, cleaner and the managers. One of their future goals is to hire someone to help take calls and keep everything organized, plus perhaps bring in another stylist to rent chair space in the building.

"We are artists. We have to be focused," Nelson says. "When all the messages and cleaning and stuff is in the back of your mind, you don't have as much time to focus. I don't want to be much



Business owners, Amber McGregor and Amanda Nelson

bigger than this, and this size is perfect to have a family and kids one day. It's not my goal to have a full-service salon."

Having worked at salons in Superior and Duluth, Nelson and McGregor both say they quickly realized how their education at WITC stood out after graduation and made it easier for them to progress in their careers.

"We just got to do a lot more hands-on work. It was a very professional atmosphere, and there was a good variety of people to work on," says McGregor. "Other stylists were sloppier and their skills not as honed as WITC graduates. Plus, it's a lot easier to get licensed in other states once you have the Wisconsin license."

Besides learning the usual cutting, perming, styling, manicures, facials and coloring, McGregor says she also took away soft skills

too, like how to handle clients, customer service and salon politics.

They have some advice for those who would like to also follow their lead and venture out on their own.

"Be ready and have your own clientele built-up," Nelson advised, saying that aspect takes a lot of hard work and time. "Usually people just getting started feel entitled and don't want to work weekends or nights. Up until I worked here, I worked every Saturday. Also, don't turn down clients, be consistent, and don't change your schedule. Keep educated, go to classes, be a good team player and help out your fellow stylists."

"Meet with someone about the business aspect," McGregor added, saying that was the toughest part. "Don't let the business run you. You run the business," says Nelson.