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Technical Career Center  
 Continuing Education

## North Montco Alumnus Kellie Ridgway

### *A Story of Hard Work, Success, and Mentorship*

Kellie Ridgway, Owner of LaMirage Hair Salon, completed North Montco Technical Career Center Cosmetology program in 1981, the same year she graduated from Souderton High School. The decision to attend and do well in the program has helped her pave a vibrant career and financially secure future. In the interview below, Kellie shares her remarkable story and how she continues to mentor recent graduates (many from North Montco) whom she employs to work at her salon.



The cosmetology sector is booming. According to the Pennsylvania Center for Workforce Information & Analysis (CWIA), the expected growth is about ten percent for hairdressers and 15 percent for operators specializing in nails (manicures and pedicures) through 2028. This trend is good news for creative young men and women willing to work hard to make a name for themselves in this industry.

Cosmetology repeatedly is the most requested program at North Montco. Currently, 140 students attend North Montco's program, saving students and their parents upwards of \$13,000 for similar programs offered through private cosmetology schools. North Montco's Cosmetology teachers are dual certified by the PA Department of Education and the State Board of Cosmetologists to instruct students in this comprehensive program. As an added advantage, the state board has approved North Montco to offer the licensing exam to students.

#### **What made you want to attend North Montco? Were your parents supportive of technical education?**

I came from a divorced family with no resources to further my education. However, I always had an interest in fashion, hair, and make-up, so I thought

North Montco's cosmetology program would be a good fit for me. During those years, they offered an afternoon program which started at 2:45 p.m. Consequently, with this schedule, I didn't get home until after 6:00 p.m.

Even though my parents didn't have resources for extra schooling, my mother did not like the idea of me attending tech school. She was of the mindset that I should graduate, get married, and have children. She was so upset when I registered that she didn't talk to me for a week (*laughs*). Soon after I enrolled and had my first chance to indulge in the world of beauty, I decided to henna my hair a shade of burgundy. The new hair color only added insult to injury with my mom, and she went another week without talking to me (*more laughs*).

Kellie loved what she was learning and earned straight A's for the first time while attending North Montco. I was a good student and did well in the program. As a



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result of my efforts, I quickly secured employment (Great Expectations at Montgomery Mall) and was able to take my exam for my license in September after graduation from high school.

**Were you contemplating any other careers or training while in high school?**

I wasn't a great student in my other classes during high school. I didn't enjoy school, and because of this, I didn't focus on attending college. I truly enjoyed what I was learning in cosmetology. This career has enabled me to support myself very, very well. I could be an independent young woman. I have owned my business for 30 years now, and through the course of time, was able to purchase other properties as well. (To our benefit, Kellie has hired many North Montco graduates!) I advocate strongly for further education. There is always a lot to learn as the business is constantly changing.

**What was your favorite coursework in Cosmetology? (ex. Mixing color, cutting, nail, all of it)**

Back in the 1980s, we were giving customers perms all day. And years ago, there was also a trend where a client would see different operators for different services. So, for example, you would go to the colorist for your color and a stylist for your cut. Personally, I like the

whole process. I have a vision of the result and want to do the entire process from start to finish. Before owning my shop, I would ask the owner if I could do the color and style.

**What was your first job in a salon?**

I was a shampoo girl. (Kellie still believes strongly in starting with basics.) There is so much to learn in this industry; entry-level training is a critical step. A cosmetology program doesn't teach you the "how's" of working in a salon. How you interact with others, make customers comfortable, how to make money, it's the littlest of things.

**Does it take a long time to build confidence in this field? Do you have a favorite service cut vs. color?**

Your first haircuts are nerve-racking. My first cut was my stepfather. Once I stepped back from cutting and took a good look, I thought it was the worst haircut ever (*laughs*). I thought, "oh no, it's awful!" You have to keep trying to improve. Practice, practice, and more practice make you an expert. So many young people suffer from anxiety. As an employer and mentor, I try to be supportive. I strongly encourage new stylists to continue work through their anxiety.

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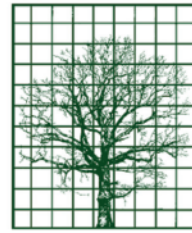


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## NORTH MONTCO ALUMNUS KELLIE RIDGWAY

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Once these stylists learn the craft well, their anxiety lessens, they become more artistic, and eventually can fix almost any hair dilemma!

Often, a young student's biggest challenge is attitude. I encourage them to smile more, as it can make a big difference. The other issue is with calling out sick. Sometimes they have their parents call for them. As young workers, they need to take responsibility for their jobs more seriously.

**When did you decide to run your shop? How did you know you were ready for this venture?**

Ownership was an unexpected opportunity, as this was not a part of my initial plan. A good client of mine who was a realtor came in with the newspaper listing of the shop I'm in now. I did have to borrow \$20,000 to open the business, but within six weeks, I was in business! What did I have to lose? It's good to take risks when you're young. I didn't know that I couldn't do it which was probably a good thing.

My mother, the person who was least happy about me attending technical

training to become a hairdresser, ironically came up with my salon name, "La Mirage." My mom eventually found her place in this business too. She took classes from Patti Sarro (Patti's Nail Salon in Ambler), to become a nail technician and then quickly became a valued member of my team. Sadly, my mother passed away at 56 from breast cancer, but I know she never had to worry about me; she knew I was doing well.

**What do you like most about this career and your clients?**

There are many things: I love that it's not repetitive; I like the changes and the flexibility in this industry; I like that I can change my hours; I like that the industry is constantly evolving. I do like change!

**What are your goals? Any advice for those starting in this field?**

I never want to get out of this business! However, my goal may be to have someone younger manage the business someday to bring their flair to it. I have had a great career and life these past 30 years thanks to the decisions I made when I was young and a lot of hard work.

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Contact Denise Collins, Continuing Education Capacity Coordinator, at (215) 368-1177 (ext. 303) or [dcollins@nmtcc.org](mailto:dcollins@nmtcc.org) to learn more about this exciting opportunity!