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Old Town Merchants/Circe Aveda A vision of healing & well-being impelled by a heart the size of Texas

The energy around Sheila McGurk's head has got to be equal to that found in Texas' oil wells. The mystic zone around the head, this native of El Paso reports, is key to the healing and wellbeing found in her "lifestyle salon & spa," named for the Greek goddess Circe, a powerful woman in her own right. But more about Circe later. First McGurk's story.

By **MARY CLAIRE KENDALL**
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On a gloriously beautiful day, this sophisticated woman with down-to-earth, quiet determination, calmly related how, as a young mother with an infant son, she traded her hometown on the Texas/Mexico border for the banks of the Potomac – and, after settling in for a spot, opened up, in 1982, her first Old Town shop, Salon Salon, where, by age 30, she had achieved much success.

But, then, she hit a Texas-sized bump in the road – becoming ill with a stress- related heart challenge.



Courtesy photo
Sheila McGurk of Circe Aveda talks with
President George W. Bush at the
White House Correspondents Dinner, May 2001

Succumb? Accept a scaled-down version of her success? Try this: learn, reflect, act – bigger, bolder, better. For after learning American illness-driven medical treatments weren't up to the task of healing her, she reflected on alternative therapies and soon enough acted – selling her business and heading for Indonesia, where she soaked up India's 2000 year-old Ayurvedic traditions that work to restore the

harmonious interaction of mind, body, spirit by emphasizing preventative and healing therapies plus purification and rejuvenation methods.

While in Asia, she learned the human constitution is composed of ether, air, fire, water and earth, from which the three humors or doshas (Middle Ages choleric, sanguine and phlegmatic) are derived – vata: ether and air; pita: fire and water; and kapha: water and earth; and that each person has a natural tri-dosha balance, which, when out-of-whack, causes disease, and that a huge culprit in this downward spiral is stress.

To restore her own healthy balance, McGurk utilized Ayurvedic massage and aroma therapy, which scientific studies show release immune system-boosting endorphins – neurotransmitters, discovered in 1975, that relieve pain – and deep massage and steam therapies, which release toxins.

Eventually getting well after this "real awakening," she said, I "made a promise to myself and God that if I survived this illness I would come back and spend the rest of my life helping others."

"Slowly" – as she did hair out of her home to try and stay afloat financially while getting well – she worked at "developing the concept of spa" as a place of healing, nurturing and wellbeing – reflecting "what does it look like, taste like, feel like?" Soon enough she provided an answer when, in 1992, she opened Circe Salon and Spa in a small Commerce Street townhouse.



She had started a revolution.

Whereas today one-stop-shopping day spas are found on every other corner; in 1992, hers was the area's first. The huge void she filled was evident by the \$800,000 in business she was doing annually – a fact that did not escape her good friend and Aveda founder Horst Rechelbacher who soon approached her to open a flagship Mid-Atlantic Aveda Salon & Spa – the present day location of Circe Aveda – where she saw a tripling of business overnight.

And, all she did was to take Ayurveda and "sort of mix it up" with Western philosophy to make it simple to understand.

The day I was given the Circe works, there was nothing difficult about the soothing environment where, to the accompaniment of Enye-like music, aesthetician Meka gave me a foot bath – a Circe trademark – then oilation massage and exfoliating, steaming facial, followed by Gudleif's deep massage, then brilliant salon treatments courtesy Sheila, Angie, Mary – all interlaced with aroma and/or heat therapy. Afterward, I was so relaxed, the endorphins being released were, it seemed, bumping into the toxins that couldn't get out of my system fast enough. To help that process along Simone counseled me to drink lots of water - but, where to find that marvelous cucumber-flavored Circe water?

And, men love the services too, as long-time client Travis Mazza expressed, telling me he feels energized after receiving Circe's "cutting edge" treatments, praising their professionalism and ability to "think outside the box" – in which regard the plan now is to expand the spa upstairs and dedicate the downstairs exclusively to salon services and product lines including Rechelbacher's new intelligent nutrients collection emphasizing beauty from within.

Circe, no doubt, with torrential energy swirling around her head, to her lover Ulysses' delight, must be smiling down from that Mount Olympus in the sky at her namesake enterprise feeling that ripple of healing energy wafting across the world.

Aveda: the art and science of pure flower and plant essences

Aveda makes only pure, plant-based products – for face, hair and body. Since some dark synthetic hair colors are known carcinogens, Aveda's Color Shine Enhancer, which is 93 percent naturally derived, as well as its red henna and blue/black malva dyes, which are 97 percent naturally derived, are both very popular. In honor of October's Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Circe Aveda is offering a natural color shine enhancer coupled with a Circe designer haircut, reasonably priced at \$87.

Himalayan Rejuvenation Treatment – An original Aveda service based on Ayurveda

In her own words: "Horst Rechelbacher, founder of Aveda, took Ayurveda and turned it into Western terminology so people could help heal themselves in a simplistic way... the Himalayan Rejuvenation Treatment is an original Aveda service that is very detoxifying – (helps) clean your body... you clean your liver, you clean your body... what's happening right now (vis-à-vis) the skin, which is called the second kidney, (is that) because of all the clothes we wear that are not made from natural fibers, the soaps we use that have chemicals in them, to the air, the environment... (is) we have a residue on our skin and if we don't get the residue off and really clean the skin through exfoliation then (it) can't sweat and if the skin can't sweat, then the arma (which in Ayurveda means toxins) can't get out of the body; and sweating is a very, very important part of cleaning the body and cleaning the liver... In Himalayan Rejuvenation Treatment, we steam the body with aroma therapy... it's a great service... you really look and feel rejuvenated and you feel calm and peaceful after that service, which is part of a very strong (Ayurvedic) detoxification program called Panchakarma." - Sheila McGurk

Beautifying Afghanistan – one woman at a time

In May 2001, Sheila McGurk met the President and First Lady at the White House Correspondents Dinner and had a great Texas rapport, coming away feeling very positive about the next four years... But, four months later 9/11 hit, changing our world.

That November, McGurk's friends at Beauty without Borders asked if she would help them open a beauty school in Kabul, Afghanistan. "Sign me up," said McGurk – soon joining her fellow DC salon/spa owners for a kickoff fundraiser. With Vogue as the sponsor, six months later they opened the school in Afghanistan, where, with the help of translators, McGurk and others taught a three month Pivot Point-written course. By summer's end they had graduated 20 new Afghani aestheticians and hairdressers and, in the process, had broken many boundaries: so many of these women for years under Taliban rule were not even allowed out of their homes to socialize let alone to get an education, leading lives of misery characterized by no running water, no sewage, and rancid food. But, they quickly responded to this oasis, where they were given three square meals – after two weeks removing their burkas and embracing the dignity of uplifting/beautifying their fellow Afghans one at a time, while uplifting/supporting themselves.

Some of these young girls, aged 17, 18, only knew war, the horrific scenes of which they described in tears. Even then, rampant landmines sternly forbade any wandering off the beaten path – a security situation, which made the school's continued operation untenable, forcing it to close. But, "the good news," relates McGurk "is we graduated 20 women now making more money than their husbands doing hair out of their homes."

Afghanistan, McGurk told me, was "life-changing" because she realized as "one person" she had "influenced 20 women in Afghanistan" who "are going to turn around and change and have changed the way that city looks at women." Bottom line: "Don't ever underestimate the power of your voice or your action – everyday, every moment really matters." That says McGurk, is the essence of her "day maker" philosophy – the immense ripple effect of helping just one person.

Helping victims of Hurricane Katrina

McGurk's friend Deborah Neal of the Neal Corporation, the South's largest distributor of Aveda, owns nine New Orleans salons – and three of their biggest stories were completely submerged in water by Hurricane Katrina. With no electricity and no phone, McGurk communicated by Internet her desire to help recruit and relocate these displaced hairdressers, massage therapists, aestheticians. So, working with other area day spas, the plan, she told me, is to "bring them up here, give them a place to stay, give them room and board free of charge, give them a job and let them get back on their feet."