

A Lesson Plan for Success

The unstoppable **Elaine Sterling** sets a new standard in beauty education



What can you accomplish with a hope, a prayer, a credit card and six students? Well, if you're Elaine Sterling, quite a lot actually. This was how the South African native started The Elaine Sterling Institute School of Esthetics (ESI) in Sandy Springs, a school that houses both a learning facility and a spa. As I wait to speak with the visionary behind ESI, I notice a lone Betta fish, staring aggressively at me from his bowl in the middle of the table. These fish are known for their fighting temperament and I idly wonder if he was chosen on purpose as a warning? Or maybe he is a mascot? I don't have time to ponder this further as Sterling comes striding purposely through the doors, an easy smile on her face and her hand outstretched in greeting. It's hard to imagine this confident woman was ever anything but successful.

Rocky start

The road that got Sterling from being an out-of-work esthetician to running her own school was definitely paved with challenges. A short time after arriving in Atlanta, her marriage fell apart and Sterling found herself in a strange country, divorced and raising two children. But she had a skill in her arsenal – her esthetician degree. She knew she could do something in the beauty field, so after getting the accreditations for working in the U.S., she began her career. In the beginning, she worked three jobs to make ends meet. After working as an esthetician, she became a sought-after trainer for Spa Sydell and began teaching others. Then, at the age of 35, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. “The cancer was really a gift,” Sterling recalls. “It changed me. It made me stronger and bolder. When I finished my radiation, I made a decision to change my life. I was not going to be afraid. I didn't know that my school would be successful, and everyone thought I was crazy when I opened it. I didn't listen to anybody, because I knew I had a vision and a dream.”

Path full of promise

Today that dream is a reality and has paved the way for others to achieve their goals of working in the beauty field. “The beauty industry – and education – is really about empowering women,” Sterling says. “It's giving them a hand up, not a hand out.” The students that fill the rooms at ESI are diverse in

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age, background and culture, but they have one thing in common: the desire to fulfill their dreams. Many students come to the school because they want to change careers, reinvent themselves or simply start over in a field that has always called to them. Sterling explains that the majority of the students are on their second or third career, and only five percent are just coming from high school. “Women can really design a career for themselves (here),” says Sterling. “They can add it to their existing career; they can still be a mom if they want to be and work part time, or they can do it full time.” As an entrepreneur and trained esthetician, Sterling creates a unique learning environment for her students. She knows first-hand both sides of the business and is able to pass that knowledge on.

Graduates of ESI get hands-on training experience and can earn a variety of accreditations and certifications including the ITEC (International Therapy Examination Council) from London and the CIDESCO (Comité International d’Esthétique et de Cosmétologie) from Switzerland. These certifications make it possible for students to work at spas outside the U.S., which opens up a world of possibilities. Beyond the education students get at ESI, they also receive job placement assistance. “I always tell my students, if you’re not as good as or better than me when you graduate, then I have failed you,” says Sterling. “So that is my goal is for them: to be brilliant.”

Success achieved

Even with the ever-changing economy and its ups and downs, Sterling believes we are slowly coming out of the recession. She comments that there is always a need to help people learn



Photo courtesy of Dara Dyer

new skills. “We’re changing women’s lives by educating them, giving them the skills, and empowering them to really create their own destiny. Whether it is direct sales, or spa, or doctor’s office, equipment sales, education, whatever it is, they can really create their niche.” She notes that no one is retiring at 65 anymore and she hopes to still be working into her 80s. “I think working keeps us young, keeps us connected, and keeps us inspired,” she says.

Sterling believes that part of achieving success is to never stop learning. “Fifteen years ago, there wasn’t much on the Internet, and I had to teach myself and find somebody to train me,” she notes. “Now the students have access to so much information that I didn’t have. So, grab onto that information and never stop learning.” Sterling admits that even after so many years in the business, she is still educating herself. “I’m still going to class, I’m still learning and that is what made me better, faster, stronger than everybody else, the fact that I kept going to class, I kept pouring (knowledge) into myself, so I was able to give back to the industry.”

Maybe it’s her bravery in the face of the odds she’s overcome or her unapologetic way of discussing her successes, but like that Betta fish, I can see that nothing has dulled Sterling’s fighting spirit. She believes in what she is doing and sees her school having a positive effect on the people that walk through its doors. “I want the students to have the opportunities that I had, I want them to get the top jobs, and to never give up on their dreams.” ●