



The Pennache women - Maria Savo, Nysten, Saldamarco, Proto, Francheska Charbonier, and manicurist Jessica Spiers - at the end of another long day. Photos by Mike Michaels.

# Shampoo dreams

## Laid off stylists get fresh start

By Lisa Reisman  
Special to the Times

If you happen to pass by the imposing sandstone building that now stands vacant on the Montowese Street side of the Branford Green just off Main Street, you may well think that the hair salon it once housed is another victim of the recession.

It was, until a group of resourceful women, led by stylist Gina Proto, decided to re-invent their workplace just 1-and-1/2 miles down Montowese with the resilience and spirit of teamwork that is a classic model of Yankee ingenuity.

The story goes like this. Early last year, word had filtered down that the owner of the building was selling, but all indications were that business would continue as usual. The transaction would be in-house. Everyone's job would be safe.

Then, on a cold February morning, Proto learned that the deal had fallen through. All at once, the place where she had styled hair for the past nine years was going out of business. In three weeks, she, along with seven co-workers, many of whom had been together for upwards of a decade, would be out of work. (Mind you, this was months before people even talked about recession; though economists have pin-pointed its official start in early 08.)

Luckily, over her roughly 20 years as a stylist, Proto had built up a considerable following. She loved what she did.

"What could be better than being paid to make people look and feel beautiful?" asks the slender, fashionably dressed Proto. And it was simple. "I came in, I had

my clients, I left. There was no need to manage anything but my own clientele."

When she got home that February day, she told her husband Rob that she might have to open her own salon.

"It came out as a joke," she recalls, "but I knew I needed to do something." As the night wore on, she and Rob began hashing out a plan. Rob, an installer at AT&T, would use funds from his 401(k) to buy a space. Once they found one, they'd do the work on it themselves. Just like that, Pennache, though it had yet to have a name, was conceived.

The wild card was asking her co-workers to take what she knew would be a risky gamble.

"In my mind, it would be a win-win situation," she says. "They needed a place to work. If they were coming with me, it would be a whole lot easier for me to go through with it. Looking back now, I'm not sure I could have done it without them."

Never mind that Proto had no background in business. She possesses what Jean Saldamarco, one of the stylists who subsequently joined up with Proto, calls a "steely determination."

As Proto puts it,

"I have a lot of my father in me, which is basically 'I gotta do what I gotta do.' Once I have an idea in my head, I'll do whatever it takes to get it done."

By the end of April 2008, Proto closed on a space near the popular seafood restaurant Lenny's on South Montowese. The month before the new salon opened was a struggle, Saldamarco allows.

"It was terrifying in the beginning, I think, for everyone. On your own, unsettled, displaced, not sure if we'd get the operation off the ground," Saldamarco had set up temporary shop in Clinton,

where a friend of hers had a salon. The other stylists also came up with situations where their clients could find them.

On their down time, it was like an old-fashioned barn raising.

"All the girls that came to work here (Saldamarco, Maria Savo, Tracey Nysten, and Francheska Charbonier) 'showed up pretty much every day and helped me get the place up and running,'" Proto recalls. It took three women an entire day to put together a waxing bed. Another day-and-a-half went toward assembling the front desk. They washed windows, knocked down walls, painted others. Without an architect or interior decorator, the women settled on a modern, minimalist setting and came up with the salon's name, pronounced Peh-nah-SHAY. Once Proto's husband Rob was done with his regular job, he put down the floors and built the stations, often working into the wee hours.

Meanwhile, "there was a lot of winging it," Proto says of the time she spent obtaining permits, getting insurance, ordering chairs and supplies from the Internet, joining the Chamber of Commerce, and working with her accountant to make sure the books were balanced. Fortunately, she had a wealth of family knowledge and experience to draw from. Her brother and sister-in-law own Grand Apizza in New Haven.

"So if I had a question, I'd pick up the phone and they'd steer me in the right direction."

Opening day was June 1, 2008, and most clients have followed their stylists to Pennache. "I wouldn't go anywhere else," says Rosemary Howell of Orange, who's been with Proto for 18 years. "She's immensely talented, of course, but she's also straightforward, which is what sets her apart. She'll tell me what'll work and what won't."



Owner Gina Proto at work, with stylist Jean Saldamarco in background.

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So far Pennache is holding its own. Unlike other personal care services, hairdressing is, in general, a safe bet in grim economic times. Women, in particular, deem getting their hair done a worthwhile expenditure because it lasts beyond a week or two. "And we'll always find ways to work within our clients' budgets," says Proto.

They'll also fix "those eight-dollar haircuts and do-it-yourself coloring jobs that don't look like what Mother Nature intended," according to Saldamarco, who attends at least one international trade show a year, adding cutting-edge color-application techniques to her arsenal of expertise and teaching them to her co-workers. "That's

why people come here and come back — we set high standards for ourselves and we're only satisfied when our clients are."

What's different, obviously, is that now it's Proto's own business. So when she sees clients smiling as they leave Pennache, "it makes everything we went through worth it." As for the way she and her

cohorts have adapted to trying circumstances in an already rough economic climate, "I did what I had to do," she says, surveying her busy salon. "We all did. And along the way we found out just how valuable we were to each other."

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