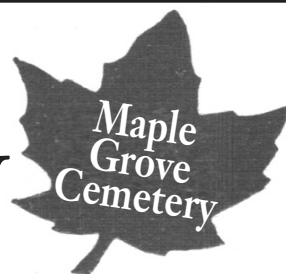


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LIVING HER AMERICAN DREAM

She gives back to her community and teaches too



THE QUEENS COURIER/Photo by Mitko Grigorov

Millie Santos Pezzino came to the U.S. 13 years ago from the Dominican Republic. Today she is the owner of Millie's Salon and Spa in College Point.

BY MIKOS GRIGOROV
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Dreaming of a better life for herself and her family back in the Dominican Republic, Millie Santos Pezzino came to the United States by herself 13 years ago.

Today she is the owner of Millie's Salon and Spa in College Point, offering, as her customers acknowledge, Manhattan quality to a Queens neighborhood, at an affordable price.

Yet 13 years ago, the future did not look so bright for the then 22-year-old Millie Santos. Not having any family members by her side, she was struggling to get a job as a waitress because she did not speak any English.

Oddly, Pezzino didn't want to work at a hairstyling salon at first because as she puts it half-jokingly, "Everybody in the Dominican

Republic is a hairdresser." Finally, she compromised and settled for a job as a shampooer but made an unconditional promise to herself that she would be successful in two years.

Significantly improving her English, Pezzino became a hairdresser at a salon in College Point. Two years later with the help of her then boyfriend, Vinny Pezzino, she opened her own place.

In 1999, she bought a house in Whitestone and finally managed to move out of her tiny studio apartment in College Point. She married Vinny Pezzino and three years later gave birth to her now five-year-old son Pietro.

At about the same time, her sister came from the Dominican Republic to join her, filling another gap in Millie Pezzino's life.

This past November, expanding her business, she moved to a brand new salon, just a

block down the street from her previous place, at 15-21 College Point Boulevard.

The new place is much bigger, much larger and nicer. "Every immigrant coming to the United States is following a dream," Pezzino said. "My dream was to open the best salon in town."

For the last three years, Pezzino has been working with contestants from the Miss USA and Miss Universe beauty pageants. "We do their hair, their make-up. We work with them the whole month," she said. Her work on the pageants has taken her to Hollywood, CA, Texas and Maryland, among many other places. Pezzino also teaches future hairstylists.

Being on the board of College Point Board of Trade, Pezzino is dedicated to helping the neighborhood improve. She is also helping local schools. "During all those years, I was

seeing College Point change and not always in the right direction," she said. "I wanted to help in some way."

The Dominican Republic native feels that she is a part of College Point as much as College Point is part of her life. "They said that [the salon] should have been on Fifth Avenue, but I know I belong here," she said.

Although Pezzino was hesitant to start working at a salon at first, she found her calling in the hairdressing profession and now confesses with a smile that she loves her job.

"Hairstyling is not only about haircutting," Pezzino said. "I feel proud doing it because I do it right. You can take any job to any level if you are proud of what you do —no matter if you are a doctor, a lawyer, or a hairdresser."

EVERY IMMIGRANT COMING TO THE UNITED STATES IS FOLLOWING A DREAM . . . MY DREAM WAS TO OPEN THE BEST SALON IN TOWN

MILLIE SANTOS PEZZINO