

Stepping Up

Skin care professional advocates for underserved teen girls

by Rebecca Jones

Beth Bialko never doubted for a moment her life would unfold in a successful arc.

The child of middle-class professionals, she knew when she was in high school she would attend college. And after she graduated from Ohio University with a bachelor's degree in communication, she figured it was just a matter of time until she owned her own company. She's always been blessed with an ample supply of self-confidence and been surrounded by people who supported her in her pursuits.

But five years into her advertising and public relations career, the balloon burst. She fell victim to layoffs when her company downsized. For the first time, Bialko felt a pang of self-doubt. She was unsure what to do next. That's when a friend, a hair stylist, suggested to her she should consider a career in skin care.

"I knew it meant switching careers, and going into a whole new career was scary," says Bialko. "But it was exciting, too. And I'm the kind of person who if I do something, I do it 200 percent." Bialko enrolled in The Spa School in her hometown of Columbus, Ohio, in 1999. There, she began studying esthetics. That led to a job in a downtown Columbus salon.

"When I was in the salon, I saved my tips," Bialko says. "That's how I paid for my classes."

As the tips added up, so did the classes Bialko took. She enrolled in postgraduate classes through the International Dermal Institute (IDI), always with an eye to making herself more marketable. She studied everything from advanced skin analysis to pigmentation disorders to advanced facial massage techniques.

By 2004, she'd become so proficient in a range of esthetic specialties she was hired to teach for IDI at its Chicago campus.

Empowerment and Passion

It was through her work with the school that she became involved with another organization—one that would become the defining passion in her life.

Step Up Women's Network is a national nonprofit group dedicated to empowering women and girls—especially girls living in underserved communities, girls who don't grow up with supportive parents.

One evening, IDI hosted an event for Step Up at its Los Angeles campus, and that's where Bialko met Step Up director Gina Marotta. "I was instantly taken with the philanthropy," Bialko says. "Helping teenage girls is a passion of mine."

Initially, she joined Step Up as a member. She thought with her teaching background, she might be able to mentor a teenager, maybe help a girl explore different career options—maybe even encourage one to consider a career in skin care. "I saw that I could take my passion for skin care and impact a young teenager in a positive manner," Bialko says.

The Wellness Dimension

Then in 2007, Bialko made another career jump. She finally opened her own salon, Pelle Sana Salon, in Chicago. "It's a one-room treatment studio. A boutique, really, so when a customer comes in, it's for her and her only," Bialko says.

The first year of business brought Bialko so much success, she knew she needed to share her good fortune. She shared with Step Up. "When I opened the salon, I decided since I can't do anything just halfway, I better do more than just be a member of Step Up," she says. "I better become involved with its board of directors."



Skin care therapist Beth Bialko found her passion in helping teenage girls.



Girls in the Teen Empowerment program, sponsored by the Step Up Women's Network in Chicago, know they have a listening ear in esthetician, mentor, and board member Beth Bialko.



Photos by Elizabeth Lynch

As a board member, Bialko is not only continuing to do serious one-on-one work with at-risk teenage girls, she's involved in developing wide-reaching programs that will impact girls across Chicago and potentially across the country.

"Beth has given to our programs in myriad ways," says Rachel Clayton, program manager for the Chicago office of Step Up. "She really has been an advocate on our board of directors. She's the most active board member. And she really takes these girls under her wing. She's always looking for ways to get them involved in Step Up events."

Bialko volunteers every other Tuesday in the Step Up wellness programs at Chicago high schools. "We're helping girls to learn how to be healthy through exercise and eating right," she says. "And we're going to start a program called 'Be healthy through healthy skin.' We're going to do a clean skin care clinic."

A Listening Ear

"I'm impressed by how much time she gives the girls," Clayton says of Bialko. "She's got a salon to run, yet that she finds time to volunteer on her day off is something amazing to me. And she's always advocating for the teen programs, keeping the teen programs in the forefront of her mind. That's an immense help to me.

"I adore working with her," Clayton says, "and I know the girls love her. She's not at all condescending. She treats them with the respect they deserve."

Bialko—who in addition to her career is married and is rearing a 12-year-old stepson—says she's committed to giving the girls as much of her time as possible.

"It's important to be as visible as possible," she says. "When they see any of the board members, they need to know they've got our support and there's someone there for them who really wants to listen."

Mutual Inspiration

Bialko says her time spent working with at-risk teen girls has transformed her own life. "It's completely fulfilling," she says. "Not only am I able to get satisfaction out of interacting with the girls, I see how very lucky and blessed I am. They inspire me every time I'm with them. When they share their stories, they get so excited about the future. And for me, as a woman, it's good to know that I can have an effect on a young life and get her going in a positive direction."

Bialko says working with those who are growing up less advantaged than she was when growing up helps her feel she's evening the score somewhat.

"I feel I'm finally giving back to my community," she says. "I've always wanted to find specific ways to give back, and now I'm helping young females fulfill their dreams the way I fulfilled mine. This has helped me to grow as a person and as a business owner. I really want these girls to feel they have the same kind of support I had as a teenager. I want to give them everything that I had," she says. "If I can affect at least one girl, keep one girl strong and staying true to herself, that's a reward for me." SD

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