



Gillian Adams PHS member

HOW GILLIAN ADAMS BUILT HER PALACE OF WELLBEING ...

It's a prominent art deco building on the left, near Kissing Point corner, as you drive up the Pacific Highway.

Once upon a time it was the Turramurra branch of the Commonwealth Bank. Today it's a sprawling complex best described as Gillian's Palace of Wellbeing.

The main sign outside simply says: "Gillian Adams" and until one sees a smaller one bearing the words "salon and spa" it's hard to resist the feeling that if you live on Sydney's North Shore and don't know who she is and what she does you're probably not as cool as you'd like to be.

Inside, the 26 people who work there describe it as fabulous, wonderful and just great and talk about their work there as their journey. This is also Gillian's palace of superlatives, a place where professional skill can be accepted as a given and attitude is the value-added.

Gillian Adams, the former championship-winning hairdresser who owns it all, is a human dynamo in head-to-toe black and is reported to think up something new for her palace pretty well every week.

Ask how she finds the time to run it all and she says: "I leverage my time and experience through carefully-trained staff, many of whom have worked here for many years".

She does too. Before Gillian even appears, Kelly, her personal assistant, has been leveraged into conducting a tour of the premises with a dazzling flow of non-stop information ...

There's the Aquamedic pool with room for 15 clients splashing in different jets and swirls; eight treatment rooms for facials, massage, body rubs and waxing; a hydrotherapy bath; a vichy shower room complete with marble slab and seven-headed shower; a double massage room for couples or mothers and daughters or just two friends who want to keep talking while they have their massage.

Then there's the relaxation room with complimentary drinks, light refreshment or even lunch during their treatment; a wet room for body waxing and spray-painting.

And all that's just on the ground floor of the main building which opens out on to a lush green French garden surrounded by a wall of trees, a cafe pavilion presided over by the salon chef - Alex who is one of only four men on staff; off the garden is a new annex where the pedicure area has been relocated plus another five treatment rooms.

Stay with it because the tour is far from over. Upstairs the main area is for cutting and styling with Mark, one of that small band of men, being one of the head stylists; then there is the colouring



Lunch is complimentary

and chemical area where Andrew is one of the head colourists; Scott, last of the men, is the salon's massage therapist cum healer; an airy outdoor terrace with chairs and umbrellas is a place to pass time while waiting for colour to process; then there is the make-up room where Laura Mercier is the brand name.

Finally, next to Gillian's personal office, there is an elegant parlour for visitors where Gillian and Kelly deliver a duet description of what they call The Journey.

The Journey began, Gillian says, in 1990 when she had a hairdressing salon at St Ives and had the idea of expanding into a day spa and went looking for a suitable building.

She couldn't afford a city salon so the search took her a little farther up the North Shore line to Turramurra ... and there was the old bank just waiting for her.

"Everyone said I was crazy. They thought I wanted something like a spa in a cupboard," she says. "Little did they know that I envisaged the giant walk-through jacuzzi we have today that completely fills the old banking chamber.

"I moved my salon into the old bank in 1991. I was nervous about losing my St Ives clientele but they followed me up the highway and I put tenants into the rest of the building while I worked and went to Asia, England and America to gain insights on aqua therapy.

"Then in 1994 I began all this.

"I had foresight. Instead of opening in a shopping centre and paying huge rent I built my own centre offering every range of self care I could think of.

"When we opened here many people didn't think they were worth the cost of pampering. But we managed to persuade them that they were and the business has grown as a result.

"All our staff have focus and we spend a lot of time on training, talking to the staff. We have a very low staff turnover but new members have to get on the same journey as the rest of us or move on. Hairdressers care about people and are very giving by nature although some have to be shown how to extend themselves.

"The journey is not just doing hair, it's about learning make-up, beauty, grooming, and attending training every Tuesday night.

"We only ever have three apprentices at a time and I'm very particular about choosing them. I don't want people here with earrings hanging out of their nose.

"In England they have quite good programmes where they train intensively for a year but I have higher standards for apprentices and believe they need to serve three years and then a fourth year to finish.

"When I bought this building I knew that while it would house my business it would also have to be my super fund and that I'd need to leverage its earnings to cover my expansion plan as well as to just repay the mortgage.

"My husband is an accountant by profession and he's our chief financial officer and offers a

lot of input into our business planning.

"We put a lot of knowledge into our business pricing, no shots in the dark or blindly copying other people. We believe in giving great value and charging for it.

"A full day here costs \$826 and a half-day, our most popular, is \$450."

"And," says Kelly, "we have the most amazing gift vouchers." Gillian nods in agreement and adds: "Both packages are very popular with bridal parties; we've even had some where the groom's retinue gives themselves a treat.

"We never discount. We prefer to add some extra service or to find clients an alternative appointment when there might be more time for them to enjoy our experience. All clients get a complimentary lunch."

"I'm very creative and I see myself as very generous but I'm not stupidly generous. While we give away a lot of extras here, they have to be productive.

"Hair and beauty is a low-profit industry and very labour-intensive so we work to a business plan and monitor the cash flow. Hair went through a terrible decline and there is still a skill shortage.

"We use and sell a tremendous amount of products. We're a Redkin salon and have recently acquired the rights to sell the Laura Mercier make-





The Aquamedic pool

up range. The negotiations for that took almost four years.”

So how does she do it all, again? Kelly answers: “By setting very high standards, by being very stubborn and able to do several things at once.” Gillian nods approvingly and adds that she also works on the floor every Thursday, Friday and Saturday – “I love doing weddings.” “She’s also crazy,” says Kelly.

She might be too but it suits her. Slim and with bright alert eyes, she’s been a hairdresser for 30 years during which time she represented Australia at the International Beauty Showcase in New York and won the Australian Hair Colour Championship, the Men’s hair Colour Championship and the national Total Look Championship in her late 20s. Her first husband to whom she was married for 10 years is Ken MacRae, a distinguished member of the PHA in his own right.

So you could safely say that Gillian Adams has led a big life.

And one gets the feeling that maybe the best is yet to come because she has plans for the big house next door. Called Bonniebrae, it’s Turramurra’s second-oldest building (the oldest is the wooden pavilion that is the complex’s garden cafe) and Gillian bought it eight years ago.

A small part of Bonniebrae has already been incorporated into the salon – it’s the pedicure and spa annexe – while the rest is currently tenanted. Gillian has big plans for it all.

“At one stage I saw it as a property development but now I see it as an expansion of my business,” she says. “Perhaps offering a wellness experience to the corporate sector for corporate days, a brainstorming and relaxation space.”

What about hobbies? – “Umm, I walk the dog and meditate.” Kelly rolls her eyes; she can do that because she is also Gillian’s niece and has been around her and the salon almost all her life. “This business,” she says, “is built on Gillian’s passion for giving her clients a great experience.”

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