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New cosmetology school to open in Williston

WILLISTON, N.D. – Opening its doors in 2021, the Hair Society Institute of Cosmetology (HSI) will be the first cosmetology school in western North Dakota and eastern Montana.

Located at 11 East Broadway, HSI will be co-owned and operated by Leticia Ortiz and Cynthia Gonzalez. Hair Safari salon, opened in 2010, will still operate in the building.

What started as an answer to the question, “What would we do if we won \$50,000?”, the idea for HSI blossomed into a 2-year team effort to make it a reality.

Between the two single moms, Ortiz and Gonzalez have 37 years of industry experience. While both love their careers, they are also aware of, and have felt, the physical demands of their profession.

“We have so much knowledge and passion,” emphasized Ortiz. “We are excited to share it as there is so much to this career; it can change people’s lives.”

Ortiz and Gonzalez first approached Shawn Wenko of Williston Economic Development (WED) and Keith Olson of the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) in 2018 with the initial idea of starting a cosmetology school.

“We were excited when Leticia and Cynthia approached us with the idea,” explained Shawn Wenko, WED Director. “We push to diversify academia, manufacturing, and technology in this community and their idea fell into one of these three sectors. And as one of the only cosmetology schools in the region, this school will be a regional draw and address a significant workforce gap.”

As owner of Hair Safari, Ortiz admits that while successful, a significant hindrance to future growth has been a lack of professionals.

“There is a need for trained cosmetologists that understand the industry,” explained Ortiz. “This includes how to be an owner or an employee, basic business ethics. If we can change the industry in this area, even on a small scale, and have these professionals stay and grow their own communities, that will be worth it.”

Over the course of two years, Ortiz and Gonzalez encountered several roadblocks in turning this idea into reality.

“They worked extremely hard and it took several trips to the drawing board and back to try and find the right approach to make this work,” emphasized Wenko. “This project required a unique approach as it doesn’t fit in with traditional interest buy downs or mini-match programs.”

As a result of a combined effort between WED and the SBDC and in conjunction with Tri-County Regional Development, a request was presented to the City of Williston Commission for approval.

“We are forever grateful to the solid dedication of Keith and Shawn,” emphasized Ortiz. “We had a lot of doors slammed in our face, but Keith and Shawn never failed to trust and believe, and we would not be where we are without them.”

The City Commission approved the STAR Fund recommendation at the Tuesday, August 25 meeting.

With funding approved, Ortiz and her team will commence a two-and-a-half-month remodel of the first and second floors.

The top level will house administrative offices and classroom spaces while most of the base floor will be for clinicals. A smaller version of Hair Safari will move toward the back corner of the building.

Gonzalez and Ortiz are both licensed to teach cosmetology within the State of North Dakota and will be joined by two additional, licensed instructors.

“We hope for at least 10 students,” stated Gonzalez. “We will offer a full cosmetology program which is 13 months, 1800 hours, and serves as an introduction to all areas including hair, skin, and nails.”

In addition, curriculum will include accounting and business ethics basics to prepare students to become employees and future owners. HSI will also offer nail and skin care-specific programs for more in-depth training and, ultimately, night classes.

Despite the difficulties faced, Ortiz and Gonzalez are optimistic for the future.

“We are excited to contribute to this community and to teach stylists and show them they have an option to teach as well,” explained Gonzalez.

“The benefit of this is not just ours,” added Ortiz. “By producing professionals, we can have an impact on those small communities around us who can then employ others and stay in their communities.

“And perhaps someone else with an idea in another profession will get inspiration and fuel from our story and make it a reality.”

For more information on this story, please contact Williston Economic Development at 701.577.8110 or visit the Center for Development at 113 4th Street East.

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PHOTO: Leticia Ortiz (left) and Cynthia Gonzalez (right) outside Hair Safari.

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