



Connie Riley sits in one of two antique barber chairs used for pedicures at Strawberry Mountain Salon in White Salmon.

Mount Rejuvenation

White Salmon spa, salon and gym offers quiet relaxation or high-energy workout

By Jeanie Senior

Connie Riley could write the book on growing a business.

She opened her first business, the Strawberry Mountain Hair Shed, in 1978 on property she and her husband, Matt, owned on the north edge of White Salmon.

Matt and a cousin built the Hair Shed, a 450-square-foot wooden building with space for two work stations for hair stylists.

"It looked like a shed," Connie says. "We wanted

it rustic looking. It looked pretty funky, and it was complete with a wood stove. It was a different era, 1978. Life was simple then."

Zoom through the decades to the present and consider Connie's current enterprise: Strawberry Mountain Salon, which includes a 24/7 gym and fitness center, as well as a spa and salon—some 7,000 square feet in all.

The expansion has been steady. Connie took a few years off, early on, to start her family.

After sons Izak and Alex both were in school, Connie came back to work and expanded again,

doubling the size of the first building.

That was only the second stage.

"About 1992, after we'd worked for a while with that, we decided to add a spa onto the salon, another 3,000 square feet," Connie says. "Every time I added on, I kept saying, I'm not going to do this again."

The expanded building included space for massages, pedicures, manicures, facials, a sauna and more. In 2007, the business grew again, with the addition of a full gym at the east end of the existing building.

"If I utter the word 'expansion' again," Connie has told her family, "get me into a therapist immediately."

Really?

"Believe me," Connie says. "There's always something that can be improved. The temptation to move a wall, add extra space—it never ends. It's been crazy, a lot of work, but it's been good."

Fortunately, the pace has slowed.

"For about five years, from 2002 to 2007, I was putting in about 10 to 12 hours a day," she says.

Connie, who won first place in Seattle competitions a couple of times after she graduated from barber college in Yakima, says she absolutely loves cutting hair, but has been so busy managing the business there is no way to work full time as a stylist.

Now, she cuts only the hair of a few friends and family "to keep my hand in it."

About 1½ years ago, she hired an assistant, Katie Gunkel, who, among other duties, stays on top of technology changes that affect the business.

Staff at Strawberry Mountain now includes four hair stylists, an aesthetician, a massage therapist, a gym manager and class instructors.

Izak and Alex, now grown, work with their father at the other family business, Rapid Readymix, and Alex also runs a CrossFit program in the gym.

"I have a really great crew," Connie says. "My people that work here, oh my gosh, they're the kind of people who see what needs to be done and jump in and do it."

As part of its expanded business, Strawberry Mountain offers spa packages to wedding parties that include manicures and pedicures, hair styling and makeup—time for pampering and relaxation. Spa sessions also are popular with groups of women friends and mother-daughter combos.

"The spa is in a separate part of the building," Connie says. "When you walk out of the salon into

the spa, you feel a change of the energy immediately. The music is different, the atmosphere is different. That's what we wanted. In the salon, the energy is more fast-paced, get it done, more high energy. The spa is more low energy, for relaxation. The gym is just crazy."

Gym customers have card keys that let them use the facilities at all hours.

"We have quite a few people come in at 10 and 11 p.m.," Connie says. "I think we get shift workers, and there seem to be a lot of guys who if they can't sleep, go to the gym.

There's a sign that says, 'Last one out, please turn off the lights.'"

Both Connie and Matt grew up and went to school in Goldendale.

After high school, she worked for an accountant, at the aluminum plant's production office and at a law office before going to school in Yakima to learn to be a hair stylist.

She and Matt moved from Goldendale when he relocated Riley Bros. Concrete to White Salmon.

Connie, who was required to serve an apprenticeship under a master barber, went to work for Buck Yarnell at the Sportsman Barber Shop in White Salmon.

She credits what was called a distributive education work-study class her senior year of high school with providing the solid base she needed for running a business.

"I worked for Klickitat PUD doing office work," Connie says. "It was some of the best training I ever could have had anywhere. They moved me from one department to another."

Emmet Clouse was PUD manager then. Connie worked at the PUD office from 2 p.m. until it closed for the day.

"I had other office jobs as I went along, but the foundation they created for me there was huge," she says. "I've been forever grateful for it." ■



Connie with assistant Katie Gunkel inside the Strawberry Mountain gym, which has 24-hour key card access.