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NEW ROOTS



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A CLIENT at the Hair Club for Men and Women in Farmington, Brian, gets a monthly haircut from stylist Becky Matias. He said he started non-surgical hair restoration 10 years ago. Clients' identities are kept confidential.

HAIR CLUB FOR ALL

By **ANNE M. HAMILTON**
Special to The Courant

For those who don't want to emulate the gleaming scalps of Bruce Willis, Telly Savalas and Michael Jordan, there is an alternative: The venerable Hair Club for Men, immortalized in a late night infomercial by "I'm not just the Hair Club president. I'm also a client," intoned by founder Sy Sperling.

Renamed the Hair Club for Men and Women in 2005 in recognition of a growing demand by women for hair loss treatment, the company now has two offices in Connecticut, where non-surgical hair restoration is its business.

"I don't think people realize what an impact hair loss has," said Lydia Cassarino, managing director of the Farmington office. "It's very hurtful."

In their offices in The Exchange building, identified only by initials, there is a separate Hair Club entrance for women or new customers seeking privacy. There are nearly 700 members, who make visits as frequently as once a month, often on yearlong memberships.

Company Recognizes More Demand From Women For Help

There are no treatment guarantees, only hope, and science.

Like Sperling, Steve Barth, the 56-year-old owner of the Farmington Hair Club location, was once a customer. He owns 14 locations in all, including one in Boston, his largest.

Inside the main waiting room, there is a flat-screen TV, coffee and, on one day recently, cupcakes. And brochures with encouraging before-and-after pictures.

After an interview that includes an evaluation of the extent of hair loss and its possible causes, Cassarino and her staff make recommendations. The sessions are often emotional.

About a third of the Hair Club's customers choose EXT therapy — a ritual of cleansing lotions and scalp treatments accompanied by an in-office application of minoxidil, a hair-growth drug that is the

main ingredient in over-the-counter Rogaine.

The other customers choose BioMatrix, a human hair replacement that is an updated version of a hair piece, but with a difference.

"We are creating the illusion that this is their hair, growing out of their scalp," Cassarino said. (At the Hair Club, the words "toupee" and "hair piece" are four letter words, and wigs made from synthetic fibers are not an option.)

Brian Axler, one of the consultants in the office, is also a customer. When he meets with clients, he challenges them to detect the Bio Matrix demarcation line in his short, dark blond hair.

In a Florida lab, the replacement hair is matched to the color of the customer's own, and attached by hand, strand-by-strand, to a gauze-thin backing. After it arrives in Farmington, the device is attached to the bare scalp with a liquid adhesive and cut and styled to match the customer's own hair.

During summer months, blond high-

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Hair Club

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lights may be added, and swimming is not a problem. At monthly appointments, the natural hair is trimmed, and the replacement hair cleaned and styled. Every three months or so, the replacement hair is replaced.

In Farmington, about 15 percent of the clients are women, who unlike men, have few bald icons to emulate. Causes of hair loss can include genetics, trauma, hormones, cancer treatments or autoimmune disorders.

When Anne Santiago, 39, of Coventry, noticed her shoulder-length hair was thinning and her scalp beginning to show, she decided not to wait. "I'm a quick-fix type of woman," she said.

Growing new hair with minoxidil would take too long, she decided. She considered hair extensions, a wig, and hair transplants, but opted instead for the Hair Club. She uses a Bio Matrix to conceal the hair loss and also EXT therapy to preserve and maintain her hair in a healthy condition.

"There's always the uncertainty, but I

decided to take my chances, and I did it and I love it," she said. For the past two years, she has had her hair trimmed, colored and styled in Farmington each month. "I'm extremely happy," she said. "It's truly almost like an addiction. You have to have it done to look good."

Santiago declined to discuss the cost, but hair-loss therapy is not cheap. The EXT treatments cost nearly \$3,000 for 12 visits; the cost of the Bio Matrix system depends on the amount of hair loss and the level of service. A yearlong contract for replacement hair and monthly treatments starts at \$3,000.

Barth, the owner, said revenues at the Farmington office are about \$4 million a year. He tells a well-rehearsed story about how thinning hair had dashed his confidence and he borrowed \$800 from his brother to pay for an earlier version of the Bio Matrix. Six months later, Sperling hired him as a sales consultant, and Barth never looked back.

Nationwide, there are 95 Hair Club locations. Barth said the Boston office — his first, which he opened in 1980 — will add hair-transplant surgery within the next two years.

Sperling has sold his interest in the company to Regis Corp. of Minnesota, which owns 9,500 hair salons.