

A phresh start

Thwarted at Grand Place, couple find more fitting locale for their spa-salon

BY KEVIN DRISCOLL

Nine months after their plans to open a 1,600-square-foot spa and salon at Grand Avenue and Victoria Street fell through, Rick and Tracy Fiebiger will be celebrating the grand opening of their 3,500-square-foot phresh spa and salon a block and a half to the west at 917 Grand Ave.

Phresh has been operating since January in a converted Victorian home formerly occupied by Maximiliano Hair Galleria. The Fiebigers have spent the past six months remodeling, redecorating and fully equipping its two floors for their full-service spa and salon.

The grand opening will be celebrated beginning at 7:00 p.m. Friday, July 18. Among the highlights will be a fashion show featuring clothing from five Grand Avenue retailers. "It's a great way to start forming a sort of cooperative business family along the avenue," Tracy said. "Phresh is doing the models' hair and our staff will be conducting tours and demonstrating the various services we offer."

Having been thwarted last year in purchasing and reusing about half of the space formerly occupied by eq-life, the Fiebigers have rebounded nicely. "We're so grateful for the support the community has shown us," Tracy said.

Rick and Tracy both worked for eq-life. When that corporation decided to move its retail stores out of shopping districts into hospital settings, the Fiebiger entered into several months of negotiations to buy the salon and spa portion of eq-life and continue operating in the Grand Place mall. However, that plan ran up against a 2005 agreement among the Summit Hill Association, eq-life and the city of St. Paul that forbid reusing the basement as anything other than storage space under any new ownership.

"We had at least four alternatives pop up along Grand and decided not to push any further for the eq-life space," Rick said. "This great old Victorian house turned out to be perfect for what we had in mind."

Rick had worked for 20 years for Best Buy Corporation, and Tracy has 17 years of experience in the beauty industry. The couple were able to purchase much of eq-life's equipment, including furniture,

lighting fixtures, hairstyling chairs, foot baths and massage tables.

Hairstyling at phresh is done at five stations in three rooms on the first floor. Pedicures, manicures, massages and spa treatments are provided in private rooms on the second floor where customers may also avail themselves of body and skin care treatments and makeup, tinting, waxing and tanning services.



Rick and Tracy Fiebiger in the nail room of their phresh spa and salon. PHOTOS BY BRAD STUAFFER

Unlike most spas and salons, phresh is staffed by 20 mostly full-time employees. "Usually, spa and salon staff either rent a chair from the shop owner or are considered subcontractors who are basically out to market their own services in competition with their co-workers," Rick said. "But that can fragment the customer's experience. Using the model established by Best Buy to remove commission-based salaries, we take away the normally competitive pressures and allow the staff to work together as a team."

Phresh's hair designers, aestheticians, makeup artists, nail technicians and massage therapists are paid a base wage plus bonuses depending on how well the overall business does. "That way, the staff is encouraged to promote each other's skills and services to customers, who hopefully stay loyal to us,"

Rick said.

To encourage that loyalty, phresh awards points for services rendered that can be used to purchase future services. "We want to establish the customers' trust that we'll provide high-quality services that meet their personal needs," he said.

The Fiebigers have hired their daughter Christine, a recent graduate of Gustavus Adolphus College, as general manager. "We were also going to hire our son Derick to provide valet parking services exclusively for us," Tracy said. "But given the number of city permits and licenses needed for that, he decided to just start his own valet parking business."

Derick's first valet assignment will be his parents' grand opening on July 18. "He'll be seeking other business as well while he attends the University of St. Thomas," Tracy said.

