

How Heritage College Prepares Graduates for Life Changing Careers Denver Woman Quits Corporate Job, Opens a Spa

By Eric Shepard, Heritage College, Denver, CO

DENVER—A decade ago, Mari Montgomery was a 34-year-old single mother raising three teen-age children and working in a job she hated. As a corporate trust officer at a large bank in Denver, she had a lot of responsibility, a big office and earned a good salary and benefits for her family. But her stomach ached every morning when she drove to the office.

“I’m such a free spirit, and being chained to a desk every day was hard for me,” Montgomery recently admitted. “I had a humungous desk, but that was just to handle all of the paperwork I always had on it. I knew that it was not what I was meant to do.”

Montgomery had earned an associate’s degree in banking and finance from a community college when she was younger. That field was never her passion, however, and her desire to change careers intensified as the years wore on. Montgomery often thought about becoming a massage therapist, but she wondered if the idea was crazy. It was so different than what she was doing.

“I used to get acupuncture treatments, and my acupuncturist was always asking me when I was going to follow my dream and become a massage therapist,” Montgomery said. “She was always encouraging me.”

In 1999, an inspired Montgomery took the first step in achieving her goal when she visited Heritage College in Denver. The career college had just recently opened and offered a program in Massage Therapy. Montgomery wanted to enroll that day, but she said she was worried about quitting her job and supporting her family. So, reluctantly, she went back to the bank.

A year later, Montgomery suffered a back injury and required surgery to repair a ruptured disc. During her painful rehabilitation, she said her physical therapist encouraged her not to return to her desk job. The therapist said sitting all day would hinder her rehabilitation. So, once again, Montgomery came back to the idea of massage therapy. And in 2001, she paid a second visit to Heritage College. This time, she enrolled.

“When I went back to the bank to give my two-week notice, I was smiling so much,” Montgomery said. “Everyone wanted to know why I was so happy to leave. I had quit my job without having another one, but I had finally made that huge leap of faith. And it felt so good. After all this time, I was finally pursuing what I wanted to do.”

Montgomery attended class five mornings a week. She got a part-time job as a limousine chauffeur to help keep her family financially afloat. She immersed herself in school. The first part of the program, which covered medical massage, was particularly difficult since she wasn't familiar with medical terminology. But she loved the challenge. When the program later shifted to cover business aspects, Montgomery was particularly excited. She had already dreamed about one day opening her own spa, and she gave an oral presentation about how she'd go about it.

"I had worked for a big company for years, so when I came to Heritage it was with the idea that I'd be my own boss when I finished the program," Montgomery said. "I had never told anyone at school about this dream, so I think my classmates and instructors were both surprised and impressed when I presented my idea about opening my own business. I definitely had a vision."

Montgomery stayed true to her word. After completing the 14-month program in August 2002, she immediately began setting up her own business. She converted one of the upstairs bedrooms in her north Denver home into a therapy room. There was a separate side entrance, private bathroom and outside patio area. To help build up her clientele, Montgomery did chair massages at local tanning salons, schools and other businesses. She gave her card to everyone she met. Within a year, she had a bustling business.

Initially, Montgomery thought it would take her five to 10 years to be in a position to open up her own spa. But less than two years after graduating from Heritage, she began looking for buildings in her neighborhood. After a lengthy search, she stumbled across an old, vacant auto body store a mile from her house. It was rundown, but Montgomery saw potential and leased it. She hired an architect and a contractor and began renovating it.

"It was a very big risk," Montgomery said. "I really didn't have the money, but I was able to secure a personal loan. It took us 10 months, there were a lot of permits to pull, and, of course, it went way over budget. It was scary, but at the same time very exciting."

In April 2004, Montgomery opened La Muraglia's Day Spa and Body Shop in one of Denver's oldest and most historic neighborhoods. Muraglia was Montgomery's maiden name, and she chose it to honor her father, who had always worked so hard when she was growing up. She had the building painted a teal green, and a local artist painted on the name and some purple grapes to honor her Italian heritage.

Inside the 3,000-square foot spa there are five massage bays, a hydrotherapy room, an esthetician room, a nail room, a 10 person hot tub, a steam room and sauna and even a gift shop. There is also space to conduct classes, which Montgomery has done on occasion. She has employed as many as 10 people at a time and has sponsored many massage and esthetician interns from Heritage over the years. She has also been a frequent guest lecturer at the school and hosted many student tours of her spa.

Montgomery's three children, who she said never wavered in their support of her major career change, are grown now. But 23-year-old daughter, Rachel, is her office manager.

The difficult current economic environment has slowed business some, but La Muraglia's is still open and Montgomery said she's excited about the future. She's considering adding an acupuncturist, chiropractor and nutritionist and more alternative therapy treatments.

Massage therapy remains her core business, though, and she credits Heritage for giving her the skills to thrive.

"I absolutely love what I do," Montgomery said. "You feel great after you give a massage. It makes people feel better, and I feel so much better after I give one, too. It's therapy for me."