

Beautician leaves a permanent mark with tattooed eyebrows

IN HER work as a wig cutter, Karen Betts met a lot of cancer patients who had lost their hair because of chemotherapy. She decided to go a step further for a friend with breast cancer.

"She had lost her eyebrows too, so I borrowed a machine from the tattoo artist above my salon and inked them on," said Betts, who is also a make-up artist. "It wasn't my best work but it gave her life-changing confidence."

Inspired by the boost she had given her friend, Betts flew to America in 1996 to study at the Society of Permanent Cosmetic Professionals. She brought the treatments home to her beauty salon in Pontefract, West Yorkshire.

"I started talking to magazines about the treatments," said Betts. "The publicity built a demand for permanent make-up."

In 2001 she founded Nouveau Contour, which trains and supplies permanent make-up artists for salons across Britain. It became Nouveau Beauty Group in 2004 with the addition of an eyelash extension and replacement service, called Nouveau Lashes. They reported total sales of £4.7m and profits in excess of £630,000 in the year to June 2014.

In 2008, Betts added High Definition Brows to her portfolio. It was co-founded by make-up artist Nilam Holmes Patel, who is the chief executive. "Nilam is the eyebrow queen," said Betts. HD Brows posted sales of £2.8m and profits of £384,000 for the year to last January. It expects revenues to hit £4m this year.

Betts is managing director of all three companies, which have spawned other brands, such as Let's Go Lashes, a 20-minute, semi-permanent lash extension treatment, and LVL, said to add length, volume and lift to lashes. Others include A-Lift, a non-surgical facelift, and Contour Roller, a skin-rejuvenating tool.

"We added different treatments to our training programme, which have filtered out to hundreds of beauty salons," said Betts. "We've been very successful with our brands but I am always looking for another gap in the market."

Nouveau Beauty has supplied permanent make-up training and equipment to more than 5,000 beauty salons across Britain. About 150 trainees a month pass through its academies in Pontefract, Milton Keynes and Purley, south London. The head office and a 10,000sqft warehouse are also in Yorkshire.

"Of the people we train, 99% will go out and build their own career," said Betts, who still performs treatments herself from a clinic on London's Harley Street. "The rest will stay on and be educators for us."

She grew up in Pontefract, an only child, and was fascinated by make-up from a



Revenues from Karen Betts' training academies and treatments topped £7m last year.

HOW I MADE IT

Karen Betts Founder of Nouveau Beauty Group

young age. "I used to watch mum putting on make-up, thinking how beautiful she looked." Her parents ran a sweet shop and also performed in clubs. "They were a mime act. At 10 I was on stage with mum."

Betts attended Minsthorpe High School in South Elmsall. At 16 she began studying hair and beauty at Whitwood College, Castleford, while also working in a supermarket to help her grandfather buy his council house.

When she left college two years later, in 1986, she went full-time at the supermarket but in the evenings made home visits to cut hair and fit wigs. "Eventually my client base was large enough for me to start my own business," she said. Her salon in Pontefract, called Chaplins, opened in 1994.

Seven years on, she started Nouveau Contour with an £80,000 bank loan and £40,000 of savings — the first and last time she made a personal investment. "I was sending trainees out to salons that drained all the money," she said. "I carried out the

treatments myself for six months to make it up."

In 2003 she took over the nightclub next door to house a permanent make-up clinic and the sales team for Nouveau Beauty Group, which she had been running from the salon.

Her partner, Dave Hemingway, was a self-employed civil engineer but joined the business that year to help with expansion. "I was getting very busy training people, so I said to Dave that if he led operations and brought in four clients a week I could afford to pay his wages," said Betts.

They each own 50% of Nouveau Beauty Group. Hemingway, 47, also holds an equal stake in Nouveau Lashes with Betts and Bridgette Softley, another make-up artist. Betts still owns her first salon, renamed Nouveau Hair and Beauty. She and Hemingway live in Pontefract.

She has teamed up with a marketing agency to plot the expansion of Nouveau Lashes and HD Brows, which she hopes will be worth £75m one day. "We also plan to go global with the academies, and add a skincare range to HD Brows." Nouveau Beauty Group has 17 overseas distributors.

Betts, 46, continues to teach the art of permanent make-up and regularly returns to the Society of Permanent Cosmetic Professionals to extend her training. Last year she won the NatWest Everywoman Award for top female entrepreneurs.

Her advice to aspiring bosses is: "Don't go through life wishing you'd ever done anything. Believe in yourself and don't be afraid."

Hattie Williams

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