

## FACE TO FACE By Abby Penning

With all the passion and enthusiasm L. Saphonia Gee has for esthetics, it may be hard to believe she started her career with other goals in mind. Initially a makeup artist for large consumer labels, she soon saw her interests changing focus. "I got started in skin with the idea that I wanted to become a dermatologist," says Gee, now co-owner of the In Your Own Skin Skin Therapy Center, and president and CEO of the Virginia Institute of Esthetics, both in Virginia Beach, Virginia. "But when I had my first experience with esthetics, I knew I'd found my calling."

After studying skin abroad for seven years in countries ranging from Spain to Turkey, Gee moved back to the United States and received her esthetic license in South Carolina in 2000. However, it was when she moved to Virginia in 2002 and discovered that the state didn't license estheticians that she really began to discover what she could do for the industry.

"It was upsetting to learn that Virginia didn't license estheticians," says Gee. When she opened Saponaria Skin Therapy in conjunction with three plastic surgeons in 2002, she further saw the need for a greater knowledge base in the state. This led her to establish a school, the Virginia Institute of Esthetics, which also opened in 2002. With small class sizes and by offering relevant education, the school quickly gained popularity, allowing Gee to get an even better perspective on the state of esthetics in Virginia. And she felt she had more work to do.

"The industry and the science behind it are advancing so fast that facials are no longer services where clients have lotions and serums rubbed on their faces and get off the table feeling nice and relaxed," Gee explains. "The successful practice of esthetics requires a baseline knowledge

of skin physiology, chemistry, cranial anatomy and dermatological conditions, and the industry must be regulated for both practitioners and clients."

With those determinations in mind, she founded the Society of Virginia Skincare Specialists in 2003 and began working toward the passage of esthetics licensure regulation in Virginia in 2004, zeroing in on a two-tier system.

"Though sometimes meeting with resistance, Gee and the others working toward the two-tier legislation fought for what they knew was right. "Change can be scary, but it's the only way to move forward," she says. "I'm proud of what I helped create in Virginia. Sure I've lost some support, but that's OK because you have to stand up for what you believe."

Still working on passing the legislation and teaching classes at the institute, Gee found demand continuing to grow at Saponaria, leading her to open a new skin care practice, In Your Own Skin Skin Therapy Center, with co-founder Kim Thumel in 2005. There, she was able to blend all her skin care passions. "I love the incredible variety esthetics offers," Gee says. "There are so many different areas in which you can perfect your technical skills—ranging from medical to holistic to alternative treatments, from the basic facial to customized facial programs, plus makeup artistry and hair removal. It's never boring, that's for sure."

Focusing on and providing corrective skin care treatments herself, she has also found inspiration in the people she's worked with along the way. "Lydia Sarfati has mentored me throughout my esthetic career. She's helped me see what's possible, helped me clarify my mission for my business, and helped inspire my desire to



HELLO  
my name is

L. Saphonia Gee

In Your Own Skin Skin Therapy Center  
Virginia Beach, Virginia

aid the industry in growing as much as possible," Gee explains.

Such associations also have led her to get involved on a more national level. With the Virginia esthetic legislation passing in March 2005, Gee has found herself named to the Virginia State Board of Barbers and Cosmetologists by the state's governor, working with the National Interstate Board of Cosmetology (NIC) on creating a national exam with expert subject matter, and becoming a CIDESCO diplomate.

And Gee couldn't be prouder of her involvements. "It's an honor to be in this industry and work with such a prestigious group of people," she says. "Where else could I have the unbelievable experience of representing the United States at the CIDESCO Congress in Malaysia? Things like that help me appreciate why I got into esthetics."

The industry has certainly benefited from her involvement, as well. However, it is her true passion and dedication to bringing out the best in others and in the industry that keeps her working for more. "I truly love esthetics," Gee says. "It is about improving others' lives and helping clients feel better about themselves—it's a very powerful and motivating experience." }