

CARE



Lititia and Michael Thomas

OWNERS
Ho'ala Salon and Spa

SPA AWAKENING

• Lititia and Michael Thomas •

Behind the glass doors of Ho'ala Salon and Spa

is more than a lavish, newly renovated interior permeating with a fresh aroma of Aveda products; there's also living proof of what ambition and hard work really look like.

Tucked in Ala Moana Center, this luxurious 4,800-square-foot salon and spa provides its clientele with everything from haircuts, waxing, mani-pedis to more elaborate services like the Chakra reflexology massage and a Himalayan Rejuvenation "mind-body" treatment.

Operating a successful, high-end hair salon and spa in arguably Honolulu's most prestigious retail location is a feat that owners Lititia and Michael Thomas, a husband-wife team, are accomplishing without corporate backing, but rather with a dedication to hard work, customer service and growth—values deeply rooted in their upbringing.

Lititia, 40, who grew up in Riverside, Calif., credits her family for her approach to business. "I didn't appreciate it at the time, but I can remember my mother always telling me, 'If you're going to do something, do it right,'" says Lititia, who kept that mentality throughout her 24-year salon and spa career.

Her first job during high school was at a friend's salon in Riverside, where she started as a receptionist and eventually became general manager. When the salon acquired an O'ahu location in 1994, she moved to paradise.

"I was young and single and said, 'Why not?'" Lititia says, although her single days didn't last much longer. In 1996, she met Michael, a Florida native who had been in Hawai'i for six years. The couple, now married for 13 years, have two sons, Brock, 5, and 3-month-old Duke.

While Lititia progressed through her career, working in the beauty industry, Michael worked his way up the ranks as a business analyst at Kamehameha Schools. With Lititia's salon experience complementing Michael's project management background, their business partnership was inevitable.

Despite the daunting challenge of launching their first business in the islands' largest mall, the Thomases in 2009 purchased the

business from Aveda, which had been operating a spa, salon and retail store. In January 2010, they opened Ho'ala, which means, "to awaken" or "rise up" in Hawaiian, continuing to carry a full line of Aveda products.

Since then, they've kept the spa fully awake with a steadfast motto to fully satisfy the needs of their affluent, and often demanding, customer base. "We recognize that our guests have high expectations of us, and we want to make sure we don't disappoint them," Lititia says. "We think about our guests as people who are coming into our home, and we want to make sure they have a great experience."

As a result, last year, the couple invested more than a half million in remodeling and reconfigurations—including extending the nail room and replacing a hydrotherapy area with a treatment table—to make the space more efficient for guests and employees.

"How we reconfigured it is pretty much keeping everyone in mind and trying to make the best experience for everybody," says Michael, 41, adding that with some 60 employees, Ho'ala has more employees per square foot than any other Ala Moana business.

It's the staff, Michael says, that has proven to be the spa's greatest asset. "The whole business model is about service, and in order to have service, you need to have

people—good people."

Still, the Thomases are always evaluating how they can improve. "You have to constantly work at keeping your standards high," Lititia says. "You can't ever say, 'Okay, we did our renovations, we did our training, we have a great staff,' and then step back and not do anything."

The Thomases are now considering expanding to new locations on O'ahu's West and Windward sides. "We do have people visit us from all over the island that may not come as frequently as they like because it's a drive," Lititia says.

Satisfying customers, however, will remain their top priority.

"My philosophy is taking anybody from anywhere in the world and making them feel as comfortable as possible, wherever they're from, whatever walk of life they're from," Michael says. ▀

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