

The Bright Side of Business: Centretown salon owner Gamal Rahman combines hairstyling with love for art



One of Gamal Rahman's paintings.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Star Motors of Ottawa

The Bright Side of Business bimonthly column is presented by [Star Motors](#).

The Connoisseur Art and Hair Studio has cut and styled the locks of athletes, ambassadors and politicians – including former prime minister Pierre Trudeau – for more than 50 years near the corner of Elgin and Cooper streets.

For nearly half its history, the business has belonged to Gamal Rahman: a third-generation hair stylist, artist, photographer, architect and interior designer who combined his passion for art with his entrepreneurial drive by adding an art gallery to the location, displaying his work and hosting events with local artists.

In his early days of owning the business, which Rahman purchased in 1999, selling art provided a valuable alternative revenue stream. More recently, art has been a way for Rahman to stay connected with the wider community and give back.



Gamal Rahman's painting of a ship at night.

Throughout the pandemic, Rahman has been offering free art classes to help support mental health.

“When you finish a piece of art, you feel very good, you’re creating something,” he says. “That is going to help people to get better.”

From architecture to hairstyling

Before becoming a hairstylist, Rahman worked as an architect and interior designer in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, eventually moving to Canada in the mid-1990s.

Upon arriving in Ottawa, Rahman faced challenges finding work in his field, but quickly found work drawing on the hairstyling skills he developed as a teenager.



Gamal Rahman

“I prayed to God and asked him for help,” he says. “In no time, I got my first job as a hairstylist (at a salon in the Rideau Centre).”

Rahman’s father and grandfather had both been barbers in Egypt.

“I’d go to my father’s salon to have fun,” Rahman says. By the age of 15, he was one of his fathers’ hair stylists, and by 16, he was the salon manager.

“I have my fun now by playing with people’s hair,” he says.

After three years of working in Canada, Rahman was ready to strike out on his own. In 1999, he purchased what would become The Connoisseur Art and Hair Studio.

“It was a little bit difficult for me to fund it all at once,” Rahman says. But within three years, he had paid for the salon in full, as well as completing a renovation.

Clients began to flood in.

“I tripled the income of the business in five years,” Rahman says, helped out in part by the sale of his paintings on-site. In the early days, he says, “the wall of my art made (the same amount of) income as what we were (earning) in the (salon).”



Gamal Rahman's painting of a heron.

Ever the entrepreneur, Rahman occasionally took on construction projects for his clients, helping to design everything from homes to hotels and restaurants.

A double whammy

Ever since buying his salon 22 years ago, Rahman's goal has been to scale up, and hire enough people to give himself more time for his art and architecture.

However, that's been a challenge in recent years.

The reconstruction of Elgin Street that started in 2018 temporarily made the neighbourhood less inviting for visitors, forcing Rahman to draw upon his emergency savings – and his landlord's flexibility – to stay afloat.

“Whatever I know, I love to teach it.”

Gamal Rahman

While construction has since wrapped up, COVID-19 has delivered another blow to the business.

Before the pandemic, Rahman had six people on his team. Now, he's mostly working solo.

“A lot of people who work in the government are not here,” he says of his client base. “Nobody is around.”

While he’s eagerly awaiting the day in which customers will once again be streaming through his doors, he’s using this period to do what he can to support others in the community.

In addition to his art classes, he’s offering lessons in hairstyling and architecture – all for free.

“Whatever I know, I love to teach it,” he says. “I’m willing to do that all the time ... to (support the community) in this tough time.”

The Bright Side of Business is an editorial feature focused on sharing positive stories of business success.

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