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Nurses' Products Reign over Pores **Lisette Hilton**

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Nan Brown, RN (left), and Lil Bogdan, RN, found a niche with their pure, natural L'Athene skincare products.

Nan Brown, RN, was a middle-aged nurse caring for burn, severe wound, and other patients at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore when she noticed her skin taking a turn for the worst.

“I didn’t know what was happening at the time. I started getting lots of red bumps on my face, and then I got white patches and severe dehydration and flakiness,” Brown says.

Nothing she found on store shelves seemed to help; rather, the problem was getting worse. So she and Lil Bogdan, RN, who also worked at Hopkins, started looking into the ingredients in skincare products and say they discovered that it was pure nutrients for skin that keep the body’s largest organ healthy.

The nurses’ curiosity led them to full-time careers as entrepreneurs. In 1997, they founded L’Athene, a Mount Pleasant, S.C.-based company that specializes in pure, natural skincare treatments. Brown, who is the CEO of L’Athene, and Bogdan, who is president, say their nursing background was the ideal stepping stone to their careers as skincare executives.

Brown, 50, was an Army nurse stationed in Honolulu in the 1980s treating shock trauma and a lot of burns. She later moved on to work as a pain treatment nurse at Johns Hopkins Hospital and Johns Hopkins Bayview Medical Center, and later she did per diem nursing in critical care units in New York while interning at a holistic health center.

Bogdan, 44, worked at Johns Hopkins Hospital after graduating from the University of Maryland School of Nursing in head and neck oncology — a department that evolved into plastics and reconstructive surgery, she says.

Their skincare research, wound care experience, and, later, interest in aromatherapy helped shape the products they would end up making. They tout the fact they’re nurses in their company literature. One statement is, “We’re women, we’re nurses, and we understand.”

“One of the things we learned is that skin needs the proper environment for healing,” Bogdan says. “I think that’s it in a nutshell, and if you give it the proper environment, your skin will always move toward healing.”

Skincare don’ts

Bogdan and Brown say store-bought skincare alternatives

consist predominantly of petroleum-based chemicals. According to them, skin becomes more reactive to chemicals as it ages. And many of the chemicals that give products a longer shelf life and make them feel smoother and smell better are actually skin irritants.

“Secondly, petroleum-based chemicals, which make up the bulk of what you buy, have a similar effect to Vaseline,” Brown explains. “The skin, being a large organ, needs to breathe and detoxify, and when you put something on it that’s occlusive, every day, it doesn’t allow the skin to function in a maximal state. What happens is that as women get into their 30s — especially 35-plus — they find themselves in a state of dehydration from using these occlusive products.”

Another skin challenge common among the 35-and-older set is that many women start to get oil in their T-zone while the rest of their face remains dry.

“They’re putting products on that do not allow the skin to [respire], and [those products] clog pores and cause further skin imbalance,” Brown says.

The making of a skincare brand

Bogdan and Brown put together a team of experts, including nutritionists, aromatherapists, cosmetic chemists, and herbalists, who helped them formulate the line for two years; then they took their products through a year of test marketing.

L’Athene’s products include proteins, fatty acids, vitamins, minerals, natural fruit acids, antioxidants, and phytonutrients (micronutrients from herbs and essential oils). Some specific ingredients include cinnamon oil, clary sage oil, clove oil, eucalyptus, horsetail herb, jasmine oil, kaolin clay, and lavender. L’Athene sells cleansers, moisturizers, a facial exfoliating scrub, and a specialty mask. A package that comes with enough cleanser, moisturizer, and mask for three months costs \$120.

“These are cosmeceutical treatments,” Brown says, explaining that L’Athene products include medicinelike ingredients and are more than 99% pure. “We do have less than 1% chemicals in the products so they have a shelf life

of two years.”

Even the water used is boiled down from six gallons to one for purity. And Bogdan and Brown say the products are made in an FDA-approved laboratory.

L’Athene is sold through retailers, including Nordstrom’s department store, physicians’ offices, day spas, and hospitals that offer medispa services. The products are also for sale at www.lathene.com.

“We also have thousands of nurses who use our products personally,” Brown says. “It’s very important for us ... nurses get very quickly what we’re doing because they understand how skin functions.”

A healthy future

L’Athene is a fast-growing company, with business doubling since last year. Brown says the company employs 12 people in its warehouse.

The products are fragrant, drawing on the nurses’ aromatherapy training; however, because no synthetic fragrances are used, the products qualify as fragrance-free and can be used in hospitals that offer skincare spas.

“Our line very much coincides with what we did as nurses,” Brown says. “Nurses are all about mind, body, and spirit.”

L’Athene staff ring an office bell to celebrate each positive comment from users.

Feedback that prompted a recent ring was a note from a nurse who uses the skincare line. She wrote, “I now look forward to my skincare every day like a good piece of chocolate.”

Brown and Bogdan based the L’Athene name on Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, health, purity, and reason. They later found the name in Sanskrit means “nurse.”

“We had no idea,” Bogdan says. “It was a synchronicity, that’s all I can say.”
