

# Andrea Benitez

Kissimmee, Florida



Lakeside Massage & Spa

## *Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Andrea Benitez:*

Born in the Dominican Republic, but raised in New York City, Andrea Benitez, Owner of Lakeside Massage and Spa, started her entrepreneurial journey while still living in the Northeast. Andrea owned a modeling school in New York City and a daycare facility in Boston, MA. Despite operating businesses in several different industries, her secret sauce has always been a focus on compassion and a genuine desire to help others.

“When we moved from New York to Boston, I opened a small perfume and clothing store,” Andrea said. “I also got involved with the Mentors Network, where I fostered kids and gave them a loving home before adoption. With love and lots of guidance, I was able to change their behavior that sometimes comes with all the trauma from their biological parents and life situation.”

Andrea continued, "After my daughter was born, she developed a serious heart condition that made it difficult for me to continue operating the boutique. Instead, I opened a daycare as a way to make money and to still be with her throughout the day. I did that for four years before her doctor recommended me move to a warmer climate to improve her health. In 2005, we moved to Florida."

Shortly after moving to Osceola County, Andrea became a certified cosmetologist. She saw an opportunity to combine her entrepreneurial skills with her passion for making people look and feel good. Over the next three years, she developed her practice, expanded her clientele base and focused on the holistic side of skin care. She also took a very important step towards advancing her career.

"I graduated from Massage Therapy School in 2008," she said. "I was already a licensed skin care professional, but I loved how massage and other holistic treatments made people feel. A lot of people out there don't even get hugs. When you touch them, it's like medicine to the soul."

Even though Andrea was as licensed massage therapist by 2008, she spent the next seven years working for various dermatologists and plastic surgeons in the field of health and beauty. By April 2015, however, she was ready for her next entrepreneurial endeavor.

"I decided to open Lakeside Massage and Spa because I felt there was a need in this area," she said. "I wanted a place that focused on physical and mental health using holistic approaches and treatments. So many

people are dealing with different problems in their life. My spa represents a retreat for them – a way to restore their sense of peace.”

Andrea shared that her friends and family thought she was crazy. However, as you might expect from a serial entrepreneur, she’s not the type of person to listen to the naysayers. She believes in taking chances and in the power of following your heart.

After just three months of opening her spa, business was good enough to warrant a move to a much larger space. Since then, growth has been steady and Andrea’s reputation as a compassionate healer has spread throughout the community.

Andrea shared the challenges she faced along the way and how she ultimately grew the business. “Going from just a practitioner to also having to own and run this type of a business was a challenge,” she said. “However, from the beginning, I educated myself and took advantage of courses and training through the Small Business Development Center and the chamber of commerce. My daughter, Audrey Rodriguez, who I refer to as the ‘brain’ of the business, has also been there with me every step of the way.”

Andrea continued, “For the first four years in business, I worked seven days a week. It was hard work, but the community responded to us.

They love the way we treat them and they tell others about their experience. We also do volunteering with the sheriff’s department and try to be present at different events going on around town. Once a month, I host a group of women going through cancer treatment. I teach them how to do their makeup and how to deal with hair loss because of chemotherapy. I love to give back.”

Andrea also shared that massage therapy and aromatherapy have been “life changing” for her seven year old son, Dylan, who was diagnosed with Autism three years ago.

“He’s a straight A student at Neptune Elementary and since starting therapy with him, his whole behavior changed,” she said. “He is happier, more attentive and can function and live a normal life. I believe that massage therapy and having great and loving support from his teacher, Mrs. Boudreaux at Neptune, has been life changing for him. I think it’s good for parents dealing with autistic children to follow their doctor’s advice, but also to educate themselves on holistic alternative therapies. It’s about finding ways to naturally calm themselves and their children without having to take so many medicines.”

For Andrea, the joy of owning a business comes from the feeling of independence and being able to make her own decisions. She’s able to help others, while taking chances and learning on-the-go. Looking ahead, Andrea shared her future goals and offered some great advice for aspiring entrepreneurs.

“Eventually I do want to open other locations,” she said. “I also want to train massage therapists to show them the value of offering more than just a regular massage. I can show them how to give their whole heart to what they’re doing. I believe that massage is not a luxury – it’s something that everyone needs. People come to you and tell you their whole life story and what they’re going through. A lot of people will even email me and tell me how therapy changed their lives. It’s very rewarding.”

She continued, “Other things in the works include an all-natural skin care brand and an opportunity to co-host a radio and TV broadcast with Danny Ramos. The broadcast is geared towards the Hispanic community and focuses on health, business, community issues and politics.”

What advice does Andrea have for aspiring entrepreneurs? “When you have something in your heart, God put it there for a reason,” she said. “Do your research, educate yourself, and be prepared to work very hard the first few years. Also, when you want to do something and you know you’ll be good at it, don’t listen to others. People will bring their own insecurities onto you. Don’t listen to them. Follow your own heart. Lastly, education is so important. Read as much as you can and seek out free courses and training. There are a lot of free resources out there. Take advantage of them.”

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