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Flying High

In The Canadian Rockies

**This Calgary therapist has built a prosperous business
in one of North America's most beautiful spots.**

By Grace C. Visconti

Few massage therapists enjoy the breathtaking scenery that greets Shannon Galichowski on her 20-minute morning commute from downtown Calgary, Alberta, to her office in suburban Cochrane, some 23 miles northwest of the city. Just a few miles outside her clinic, Cochrane Massage Therapy, rise the spectacular, snowcapped Canadian Rockies, one of the most beautiful mountain ranges in the world.

The awesome view is quickly forgotten, though, once the hard-working Galichowski enters her clinic. In a few short years, she has developed one of the most successful massage therapy businesses in the Calgary, Alberta, area.



When she wants to get away from it all, Shannon Galichowski likes to visit Cochrane Hill, which offers panoramic vistas of the nearby mountains.

Building A Practice

The 29-year-old Galichowski has been a massage therapist since 1994, and she started her own business quite unexpectedly about two years ago. At the encouragement of Jennifer Kroeker, a friend who sold her the business, Galichowski agreed that it was perfect timing, and a great opportunity to achieve her goals and aspirations. Cochrane was the perfect place since a lot of working professionals live there.

"I had many clients from my days working in Calgary, and about 150 of them followed me to my new practice. It was a great way to start," she says.

Her physical education background has helped her in many ways, from assessing to treating her patients. She trained for 2,200 hours in both Edmonton, Alberta, as well as Calgary, and now has about seven years of working experience as a massage therapist.

Her reason for going into this field was simple. She wanted to be in the health-care profession since nothing else interested her. "My goal, when I got into massage, was to have my own practice. This was a great opportunity, since Cochrane is growing rapidly and I was tired of driving in the city and the rat race. Even though people in Cochrane work in the city, they are more relaxed and laid back."

Galichowski has two other therapists working with her. Sheila MacDonald

graduated from Rocky Mountain Academy (Calgary) in 1997 with 1,000 hours of training, and has been practicing ever since. Karen Flynn graduated from Edmonton College of Massage in June 2000, with 1,500 hours of credits.

Though Galichowski was enthusiastic about the acquisition of the business, she did have some reservations. "At first, I was extremely scared because I know how hard it is to start from scratch."



The office contains four treatment rooms. Each one measures 11x12 feet, and is painted dark green. Pine furniture completes the décor.

Her clientele ranges from pregnant women to infants and children, migraine sufferers, the elderly, athletes, and stress management cases. Business professionals from all walks of life, from truck drivers, chefs, accountants, lawyers, chiropractors and the occasional doctor, get treated. (In fact, a large number of doctors refer their patients to her for massage therapy, as do chiropractors and physiotherapists.)

The ratio of men to women who get massages has changed since Galichowski first started. Initially, more women came to the clinic, but in the seven years she has been in this profession, the ratio of men to women has increased drastically. "On average, if I see 10 patients in a day, I will see six women and four men. I think the change is wonderful," she says.

The transition from working for someone else to owning her own business was facilitated by Galichowski's former classmate and massage therapist, who sold her the business. "Jennifer, who I went to school with, was selling her clinic. That took care of the location. I got a line of credit to buy the business. Initially, I wrote a letter to all existing patients of Cochrane Massage Therapy, and told them of the change, and offered a \$10-off coupon. Jennifer and a previous employee stayed for the year to finish it up, which was a great help. So I only just had to hire. I placed an ad in the *Calgary Herald*, which resulted in many inquiries, and I put postings up at the two colleges."

Though she was required to take business classes in school, Galichowski firmly believes her business experience was learned mostly by trial and error. She advises new graduates to read, and be aware of what you like and don't like in your work experience. "When I first

graduated, I worked out in Kananaskis in the spa atmosphere. Then I did locums for various therapists at a number of clinics; I worked on physiotherapists and chiropractors, and worked at a health club. Then I spent three years at one clinic. I think it's very important to have a variety of work experiences, so you can bring it to the table and offer more to your patients."

Galichowski also advises new graduates that the more experience obtained, the better idea they will have if they want to work in a more holistic or clinical setting. The first year in any practice is very difficult, especially in massage, in which it sometimes is necessary to sit and wait for walk-ins or for the phone to ring to give an extra massage.

And as far as making mistakes along the way, they are part of growing and learning. "Life is bound to bring challenges, and mistakes are part of that. However, if I did not have the challenge of owning my own business, I would not have had the chance to make mistakes and improve on a daily basis. I would not avoid any mistakes that I've made, because they have made me a better person, employer and therapist to my patients and staff," reflects Galichowski.

Currently, her clinic encompasses 980 square feet, and has four treatment rooms, one bathroom, a laun-

dry/staff room, and the office and waiting area.

The customer base is comprised mostly of auto accident victims, pregnant women, infants and children. All employees are registered and licensed, and do a lot of insurance work. They assess and treat to the best of their knowledge.

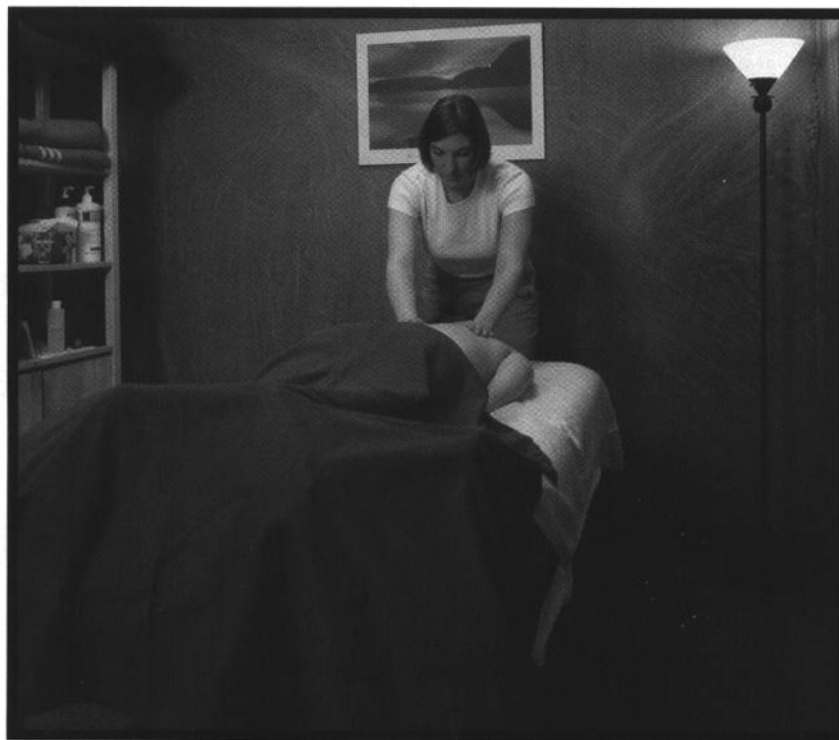
"Success of massage therapy on a number of conditions is extremely high," says Galichowski.

instance, and had a shoulder problem, I would incorporate all that into it, and you probably wouldn't know what I would be using other than the ice and the heat. You would definitely know if we do active release. That would be me actually holding on and moving your arm or your knee into a certain position until the muscle released," Galichowski explains.

Ice and heat techniques are applied depending if your condition was

chronic or acute. "If you have tendonitis, let's say, we'll do frictioning, and that requires icing before and after the frictions," she adds.

With auto accident victims, massage must be applied very gently at first, because accident victims are in a lot of pain. If you just graze the skin, even that hurts them. However, because the healing process is gradual, and a lot slower with clients in this category, Galichowski takes



Galichowski works on Amy McKenzie, one of her regular customers. Approximately 70 customers a week visit her business.

Massage therapy techniques applied vary with the condition of each patient. Galichowski and her therapists do mainly therapeutic, sports massage and Swedish relaxation massage. Shiatsu or reiki are not offered. There used to be a reflexologist working at the clinic, but she is no longer there. Though Galichowski took 10 hours of reiki and 10 hours of reflexology, she mainly uses therapeutic and sports massage. "We do trigger-point therapy, we do hydrotherapy, we do ice massage, and we do frictioning. If you came in, for

the time to get the desired result to reduce the pain of the patient. She is having great results with car accident victims, but unfortunately, there are some challenging issues regarding insurance coverage that will seriously curtail her ability to give them treatment.

Galichowski admits that massage therapy is often the last priority with respect to treatment, especially when massage therapists are competing for the same health-care dollars. "It's really tough, actually, because mas-

sage can do a great deal. It's very successful," she says.

Galichowski's goal as a therapist is one that reflects the integrity she extends to her patients. "I recommend everything. If a chiropractor is more needed than me, then I will recommend that. If physio, if acupuncture, if shiatsu, or if craniosacral is needed, that's what I will suggest. Why not? My goal as a therapist is to get that person better in the quickest amount of time," she concludes.

Financial Success And Future Goals

Her dedicated staff, comprised of MacDonald and Flynn, make a big difference, she acknowledges. "My staff is very important to me. Keeping them happy and content is an extremely high priority," she says. "Most customers are regulars, and request the same therapist, if possible."

She offers incentives to these loyal clients. A sliding scale is incorporated into her package specials. She offers the following:

- 3 half-hour sessions—\$80;
- 3 45-minute sessions—\$110;
- 3 one-hour sessions—\$130;
- 4 one-hour sessions—\$170; and
- 5 one-hour sessions—\$215.

All therapists working at the clinic are self-employed. The clinic takes in all the money, and then they get paid every two weeks. For the therapists, they receive 60

percent for them, and 40 percent goes for the clinic. Most equipment is supplied, except for the table, music, oil and business cards. These items are the responsibility of the therapist.

"For myself, I have to make sure my bills are paid, pay the clinic and then I take what is left," Galichowski says. "Some months I may only take home 40 percent of my wage, and other months it may be 80 percent. It just

Her employees make on average \$2,500 to \$3,000 per month. In 2000, the Cochrane Massage Therapy clinic grossed approximately \$110,000 (Canadian).

According to Galichowski, it would not be a business if there were not some problems, but overall, the patients who frequent the clinic are excellent. "In any business you may not be able to satisfy all of your customers, even though you may try really

hard. It is the same in massage. That is one reason why there are hundreds of successful practices out there."

Her patients are loyal because they know that every time they come for a treatment, she gives them 100 percent of her attention. No tips are taken, since massage therapy is part of the health-care field. Last year, she sent out a coupon at Christmas, but she is uncertain if she will do the same this year. "In massage, I believe sending out too many discounts really demotes massage

therapy. We want patients to come in because they know they need treatments, not because they have a coupon. Coupons or specials really help around slow times, though. It's a Catch-22. Glass half empty or half full," she says.

Last year, she spent about \$1,000 on advertising. However, since the business was already established, there was a patient base, but it is always changing and growing, just as Cochrane is no longer a small town. Word of mouth and referrals are still the best way of obtaining clients.



Most of her customers are regulars, mainly because Galichowski works hard at keeping these clients, as well as her staff, happy.

depends on how much traffic comes through the clinic."

Expenses are about \$2,000 per month, with rent being \$850. The monthly loan payment for the business is \$750, and other miscellaneous costs like phone, office supplies, sheets, insurance and photocopying add up to approximately \$400 per month. There are no operational costs in her present building. Galichowski brings home on average about \$49,000 (Canadian) per year. The average paycheck per month for Galichowski is \$3,400 to \$4,000.

There are no secrets to Galichowski's success, except a good dose of common sense, integrity, hard work and dedication to her customers. "Having consistent hours, competitive pricing and packages, being appreciative, having a clean office and offering little extras all help," she says. "For example, saying hello to the patients by name, recognizing the patients on the phone, being open evenings and weekends, doing our banking, eating and shopping in the community all enable us keep a loyal clientele."

"My level of success is very personal. I think in some aspects, I have not succeeded enough, but in my overall life, I am very content. I live a good, comfortable life," Galichowski adds.

Since Cochrane is changing with respect to health care, Galichowski and the Cochrane Massage Therapy clinic will be right there to reflect these changes, or else they will not be at the forefront of change. There are more chiropractors in town who incorporate massage therapy into their practices, but Cochrane Massage Therapy only focuses on massage therapy. Galichowski claims her patients, in most cases, prefer this.

At present, she and her therapists work on about 70 patients total per week. She hopes to eventually reach 100.

Coping As A Therapist

With the physical and emotional demands of the job, Galichowski admits that she must keep herself balanced in order to continue at her present pace. Leading a well-balanced life in other respects is very important not only to her, but to her

practice. She works out with another massage therapist five days a week. They are at the gym four of those days doing weight-lifting and cardiovascular activities. On the fifth day, they swim. In total, they exercise nine hours a week together. Her husband, their dog Parker, and Galichowski go hiking every Sunday as a family outing, but sometimes she takes Parker for a walk by herself to relax. She also is following the "Eat Right 4 Your Blood Type" diet,

working as a massage therapist. In the future, she intends to slow the pace down by eventually working five days per week instead of six.

Clients Get Results

After interviewing a few of her clients, they all raved about Galichowski's massage abilities. The people I chatted with lead demanding professional lives, but claim that without massage therapy, they would be living in pain or discomfort.

Dennis Hoffman, a chartered accountant and partner in the firm PricewaterhouseCoopers in Calgary, was referred to Galichowski by his doctor. Currently, he is getting treated for a sport injury from running, and says he is having great results.

Teri Gottselig, a dental hygienist, is a car-accident victim. If it weren't for regular massage treatments, she could not continue doing her demanding job because of the acute pain from her car accident.

Also, chiropractor Leona Sembrat not only sees Galichowski for a condition that is due to repetitive use from her job, but they also refer clients to each other since their practices

are in the same building. Some of Sembrat's patients need work done, not necessarily prior to, but in conjunction with, chiropractic care. "A lot of problems that I see, if you don't treat the muscle, then the problems are not going to get better," Sembrat says. In Sembrat's opinion, although chiropractic care and massage therapy are two different disciplines, they are very complementary. "I think that you need to be open. You need to have an open mind about a lot of things, and if there are so many different disciplines that

FACTS AND FIGURES

Square Feet: 980

Hours: 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. (Mon.-Thurs.)

10 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Fri.)

9 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Sat.)

Rates: 3 half-hour sessions—\$80

3 45-minute sessions—\$110

3 one-hour sessions—\$130

4 one-hour sessions—\$170

5 one-hour sessions—\$215

Customers Per Week: 70

Financials:

Expenses: \$2,000 per month. Includes \$850 for rent; \$750 for bank loan payment; and \$400 for miscellaneous supplies.

2000 Gross Income (entire business): \$110,000 (Canadian)

Owner's Income: \$49,000 (Canadian)

Other Staff Pay Scale: \$2,500 to \$3,000 per month (Canadian)

Advertising: \$1,000 per year

E-Mail Address: srgali@telusplanet.net

which she started in January 2000, and has lost 10 pounds. Due to these healthy choices, she has more energy to be a massage therapist. Though she is experiencing a mild case of repetitive strain injury due to her demanding schedule, self-massage, maintenance and exercise has really helped. Galichowski also practices what she preaches, and gets a massage every two weeks.

At her present pace, she figures she has three to five more years left, which will total 10 years for her

work well together, you need to find out what works well for you."

Lifestyle Changes

Galichowski's decision to have her own massage therapy business has definitely changed her life. "Being self-employed is an excellent avenue to take. I am always thinking of different business ventures, but since my clinic is still quite new, I feel I need to put in 150 percent. I still want to be busier than we currently are. Having this business has contributed and given me more of a drive to achieve new goals, dreams and aspirations."

Massage therapy has changed her life in a couple of ways. Being a self-employed massage therapist has strengthened her ability to make decisions, fine-tuned her communication skills and enhanced her business knowledge. "It's changed my life and made me a stronger person emotionally, mentally and physically," Galichowski reflected. Though it has made her balanced in some ways, in another way it has taken something away because she works 55 to 60 hours a week. "But as a per-

son, I am more balanced. I know my center. I know my being. I know what I'm good at and what I am not good at, and I don't have a problem admitting it," she says.



Certain spa-oriented services, such as mud wraps, are also offered.

If she had the choice to work for herself or be an employee for someone again, the decision would be simple. She admits reverting to being

"just a number on the wall" would be very difficult. Most of all, she wouldn't have the freedom to think of new ideas and implement them, or to dream bigger dreams and know that because she has already challenged her fear of the unknown, it will be easier to give herself permission to be the independent, efficient and creative thinker she chooses to be. "I will not do massage therapy full-time forever. It is extremely hard on my body," she says. "However, I would always like to keep my license current. I have invested a lot of my time and money to just drop it altogether. I really, truly love massage. It is my passion."

In the final words of patient Teri Gottselig, who is deeply appreciative of Galichowski's work, "It keeps me human. When I am not in pain, I am easier to get along with. There are a lot of things I couldn't do because of the pain, but I can do now because of the application of massage therapy." ■

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