

Vera Brown, 1919-2010

Vera Brown dies at 90; skin care expert with star-studded clientele

She operated two luxurious spas and sponsored beauty clinics for thousands of blind teens, delinquent girls, homeless women and cancer patients in Los Angeles.

By Elaine Woo, Los Angeles Times

October 3, 2010



Vera Brown, seen in 1977, believed that self-esteem is “the greatest healer for someone who’s been traumatized,” and wanted the women she met in skid row shelters, juvenile halls and hospitals to learn how to look in the mirror and love the person they see. (Los Angeles Times / October 2, 2010)

la-me-vera-brown-20101003 Vera Brown, a skin care specialist with a star-studded clientele who sponsored beauty clinics for thousands of blind teens, delinquent girls, homeless women and cancer patients in Los Angeles, died Sept. 24 at her Westwood home. She was 90 and had been in poor health for the last year, said her daughter, Angela.

For more than 25 years, Brown operated two luxurious spas — Vera’s Retreat in Tarzana and Vera’s Retreat in the Glen in Bel-Air — with a client list that included such celebrities as Chris Evert, Whitney Houston, Nicole Kidman and Jane Seymour. Brown was known for her own line of beauty products that emphasized aloe vera and other natural ingredients.

Her special passion was using her expertise to help women and girls struggling with abuse, cancer, physical handicaps or poverty. She gave workshops and organized salons where she and a crew of volunteers gave free facials, haircuts, makeup lessons and manicures.

Believing that self-esteem is “the greatest healer for someone who’s been traumatized,” Brown wanted the women she met in skid row shelters, juvenile halls and hospitals to learn how to look in the mirror and love the person they see.

“She would tell women how to take care of their skin and feel better about themselves as a whole. She was inspirational to our residents and clients,” said Claire Orr, founder of People Assisting the Homeless, or PATH, a Los Angeles agency where the programs include a full-service beauty salon established by and named after Brown.

Brown also created a salon at the Windsor Hills campus of Junior Blind of America (formerly the Foundation for the Junior Blind), where she donated her beauty products — specially labeled in Braille — dispensed advice and swept the floor until earlier this year, when her weakening health prevented her visits.

“She would talk to students, tell them how pretty they are. Women who hadn’t put on makeup in a year or two would end up in tears because they hadn’t felt like they could do those things,” said Shirley Manning, director of the Junior Blind’s Davidson Program for Independence. “Through her generosity in providing that training, they learned the skills to do that.”

Brown, who was born in Seattle on Dec. 16, 1919, and later graduated from Los Angeles High School, became interested in skin care as a young woman struggling with acne. After a disappointing trip to a well-regarded spa for a facial she scrimped to afford, she began experimenting with home treatments.

“She made these creams out of these natural products and gave her friends facials all the time,” said former KNBC-TV Channel 4 news anchor Kelly Lange, who knew Brown for more than 30 years. “Everybody said, ‘Why don’t you put this on the market?’ Finally, she did.”

In the early 1970s, after raising a family, Brown trained under Venner Kelson, a Hollywood skin care guru who had tended the complexions of such stars as Jack Benny and Merle Oberon. In 1976, Brown launched Vera’s Retreat on the second floor of a Tarzana mini-mall; the Bel-Air location followed in 1987.

Brown, who was a former longtime resident of Beverly Hills, was married for 46 years to real estate developer Gilbert Brown, who died in 1995. In addition to her daughter, she is survived by a stepdaughter, Jeri; and three grandsons.

She eventually sold both spas but continued her volunteer work with women and youths at such facilities as the Los Angeles Mission on skid row and the Rhonda Fleming Mann clinic at UCLA Medical Center.

One of the women she encountered at the mission was Vickie Henderson, who had lost custody of her three children and was struggling with drugs and alcohol. Henderson ran into Brown in the kitchen one day in 1993. “Vera said, ‘I’ve been watching you.’ She said, ‘What is your future when you leave here?’” Henderson recalled in an interview last week. “I was like, ‘Oh my God, no one ever asked me this.’ Never. But Vera asked me.”

Henderson was suspicious at first; she wondered if Brown’s interest was sincere. But she found her dreams tumbling out of her mouth. “Vera, I just wish I could live one day sober and clean,” Henderson told her. “I

said I wish I could get my kids back. And I wish I had my license to be a beautician. I want to do hair and make people look good.

“She made my life that day, asking me about the rest of my life.”

Through Brown, a wealthy benefactor paid for Henderson to attend cosmetology school and get her license. Brown later sent Henderson back to school to learn reflexology. The once-homeless woman became the “Foot Fairy” to massage clients at Brown’s Bel-Air spa, where she worked for seven years. She got her children back. And she was able to afford a roof over her head.

Then one day Brown took her to see the salon she was creating for People Assisting the Homeless. She asked if Henderson would like to work there.

Henderson has been the manager of the agency’s Vera Brown Personal Care Center for nine years now, helping 10 to 15 clients a day “look good, feel good.”

“I never in my life thought I would be doing that. I love it,” Henderson said. “I can’t wait to go back just to let Vera shine in me.”

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