

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

ACCENT

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

SUNDAY, APRIL 20, 2003



She's driven to fill Latinas' makeup need

By Yvette Cabrera - Register Columnist

You might wonder what drives Maria Cristina McShea to drive so long and so far, but she doesn't question it. Not for one second.

She pushes her gas pedal every weekend. Seven hours up and seven hours back.

From Orange to San Jose, then San Jose to Orange County, complete with the sore muscles, the traffic jams, and the wheel-clutching stress of navigating the Grapevine.

"I'm pretty much on a mission," Maria tells me via cell phone at a highway rest stop.

Her destination every weekend is the Nordstrom makeup counter in San Jose's Valley Fair mall, where she tends to every detail of the counter that's dedicated to her brain child: *Pára Me* Cosmetics, a custom-blended makeup line she created two years ago exclusively tailored for Latinas.

The name is a twist on the Spanish phrase "para mi" ("for me"), using the English spelling of "me" and adding an accent to the word "para" to emphasize the cross-cultural origin of her line.

As CEO and founder of *Pára Me*, Maria has spent every weekend in San Jose since her line was launched at that Nordstrom a month ago. She talks to customers, does makeovers, and meets with the makeup counter manager who is overseeing *Pára Me*

to find out what needs to be fine-tuned.

All this, after working her regular work schedule from her home office in Cowan Heights pushing the local launch of *Pára Me* as well as her Maria Cristina Cosmetic line, which is sold at about 50 Sav-On drug stores in California and a few in Nevada.

Her mission is clear-cut, as she sees it: To persuade the Nordstrom at Main Place/Santa Ana that *Pára Me* is worth carrying in its store, too.

She approached this Nordstrom first, hoping that the store, in a city that's 76 percent Latino, would support the idea, but she was rejected. San Jose's Latino population is about 30 percent.

Nordstrom spokeswoman Amy Jones says the decisions to carry products are made by individual Nordstrom store buyers through a regional buying system.

"If one store doesn't feel (a product) might be right, another store says, 'Yes, let's give it a try,'" Jones says. "Once we try (the product) it may be that the other buyers change their minds based on what they're hearing in other markets."

So Maria, 54, an aesthetician and professional makeup artist, has set out to change some minds.

After all, this task is no different from many other challenges she's faced growing up.

Born in Argentina, Maria Cristina



CUSTOM COLORS: Maria Cristina McShea demonstrates makeup on a customer from her company, Para Me, that's designed for Latinas.

Perez immigrated with her parents to the United States in 1961 at age 12. In Argentina, her mother, a seamstress, and her father, a handyman and janitor, could provide their only daughter a frugal life. Luxuries like television and movies were out of the question.

When the Perez family immigrated to Philadelphia, her mother took a job as a factory seamstress, her father became a hotel dishwasher, and Maria worked after school at a neighborhood beauty salon. She contributed the 25 cents she earned per hair wash to the household income.

In Philadelphia, landlords refused to rent to the Perezes, mislabeling them as Puerto Rican.

During a road trip through the South, staff at one restaurant refused to serve them, calling them racial slurs.

And as a student, Maria says she was put in a special-education class simply because her name was Perez.

It was her job at the hair salon, owned by a Puerto Rican woman and frequented by Latina customers, that taught Maria how key a woman's appearance is. She'd hear the home recipes for shampoo that low-income Latinas would concoct: "put oil, put salt, do this, do that, add an egg."

"(Beauty) was so out of reach where I came from, and women tried so hard washing their hair with home remedies, trying to do the best they could with their limited to nonexistent income," Maria says. "I knew in my mind that I was going to do something special ... and I knew that it had to do with making women more beautiful."

As a child Maria had always been fascinated by colors, and without a television, she'd spend her time outdoors, fascinated by nature's palette.

By the time she was 17, after having worked a string of after-school jobs, she landed work as a sales clerk at a Philadelphia department store. She was told they'd make an excep-

tion to their rule that no "Spanish" employees were allowed to work on the first floor. The other Latino employees worked on the shipping dock and in the basement stocking.

So she worked hard to prove herself and was quickly promoted to assistant fashion buyer and then fashion buyer.

"I had many, many experiences like this, unfortunately, and fortunately because I think it made me stronger," Maria says.

That experience, in particular, left an imprint on Maria, which is why today she's especially driven to land her cosmetic line on the main floor at Nordstrom in MainPlace.

"It would be a dream come true for me," says Maria, married to Charles McShea, a Boeing manager, and mother of two grown children.

She worked in retail for years, eventually presenting fashion collections for upscale department stores like Neiman Marcus in California, but Maria lost her job in the early '90s when the economy soured. She took this as an opportunity to reinvent herself.

She decided cosmetics were her calling, earned her aesthetician's certificate, and befriended the beauty advisers at the makeup counters at Nordstrom until she landed an interview and a job as a makeup artist at Fashion Island's Broadway department store.

She was promoted to Lancôme's regional makeup artist, where her Latina clients told her she was the only one who understood their skin type.

"We didn't have a cosmetics line dedicated to us, and it seemed to me such an underservice to such a large population," says Maria, an honoree at last weekend's Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Estrella Awards.

Sonya Jimencz, who attended a recent unveiling ceremony for Pdra

Mc in a Tustin clubhouse, became an instant fan.

"Finally," says Sonya, 35, an account manager at Kaiser Permanente in Orange. "Finally, something that is really for me. The colors were just so there, they matched completely. I don't think there was any color that they offered that didn't go with my skin type."

From sexy pink lipstick shades like Bêsame (Kiss Me) to shimmery taupe lip glosses like Bêsame Mucho (Kiss Me a Lot), Maria's line has names with a Latino twist, and colors meant to match the varying skin tones of Latinas – from every shade of olive to caramel to coffee. Working with a chemist and manufacturer, she tailors her products by mixing colors to create shades that complement these skin tones.

Though Nordstrom does not release sales figures, San Jose Nordstrom's Anita Stewart says Pára Me sales exceeded her expectations.

"We're quite pleased with the business, and the customers are very excited," says Anita, cosmetics merchandise manager for Northern California.

Seeing San Jose customers return to buy products makes her trips to San Jose more than worthwhile, Maria says. Here in Orange County, she's also been supported by fellow Latinas, who bought nearly \$2,700 in cosmetics at her Tustin unveiling.

"It gives me the courage to go on," Maria says, "and lets me know that that I'm doing the right thing."

For more information, see www.paramc.com or call the toll-free (888) 728-8500.

CONTACT THE WRITER: Yvette Cabrera, The Orange County Register, P.O. Box 11626, Santa Ana, CA 92711 (714) 796-3649 ycabrera@ocregister.com • Fax: (714) 796-5052