

## BUSINESS

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## In Methuen, a place to retreat and indulge Tony spa pampers clients head to foot

By Davis Bushnell, Globe Correspondent | November 29, 2007

The Moksha Spa & Wellness Center is an oasis off Methuen's busy Merrimack Street for clients "who want to relax between treatments" that will enhance their appearance through skin care and other remedies, said its owner, Jodi Chatterjee.

"My spa is different from others because it is eclectic, sophisticated, and offers a multitude of services," Chatterjee said last week as she spoke with a visitor in an alcove of the expensively furnished, 5,000-square-foot center, which opened last February.

In Hindu mythology, "moksha" denotes "a total liberation from being," she explained. The center, which occupies what was once an elementary school building, has an Indian decor, befitting the backgrounds of her and her husband, Dr. Sudarshan Chatterjee, 50, an internist and cardiologist who has an office in the building and is an adviser to the center. She came to the United States in 1979; he immigrated four years later.

The building was purchased for about \$500,000 and renovated at a cost of \$300,000, which included adding a second floor, said Chatterjee, who says she is in her 40s. She and her husband live in North Andover.

"I wanted a place where I could use my imagination," she said of the center's rooms, which feature different shades of colors and assorted furniture.

"It's like walking into a palace," Addie Kania, 60, of Haverhill, said of the center, which she has visited several times for facials.

Most of the 150 regular customers are women "who are into antiaging" regimens, Chatterjee said.

Services, she said, include basic manicures and pedicures, waxing and tanning procedures, different types of massages, laser hair removal, and treatments for spider veins and sun damage. "We also have our own line of organic skin-care products, which we buy from a contract manufacturer in Taunton."

Fees charged run from \$20 for polishing fingernails and toenails, to \$125 for a one-hour, ultrasonic facial, to \$500 for a Botox wrinkle-removing procedure.

Chatterjee said that before the center opened, she was told that it would be too upscale for many Methuen residents. "But most of my business is coming from Methuen," she said. However, the location "could be better," she acknowledged, noting that it's easy for motorists to zip by the center without noticing it.

Revenues for 11 months of this year are expected to be "under \$100,000," a reasonable figure, Chatterjee said, given a rule-of-thumb "that it takes three or four years for any spa business to flourish."

There are six employees, four of whom receive commissions between 40 and 50 percent. The others are paid an hourly rate of \$12 to \$13, she said.

Many customers request massages and they may choose among 11 different therapies, she said, suggesting that the ultimate one is the "Signature Couple's Massage," costing \$300. "After receiving individual massages, a couple relaxes in a French tub with rose petals."

A general contractor from Methuen, Steven Field, 35, said he likes to vary his massages, all for the same purpose: "to relax after a day's work." He said he has tried other spas, but "there's nothing comparable to Moksha in terms of variety of services."

Her inspiration for offering these services "was growing up [in India] in a holistic atmosphere," Chatterjee said. "My father was a doctor who practiced homeopathy, using herbs to treat skin diseases, for the most part. The results amazed me, and I told myself that this was a line of work I wanted to get into."

But first, she received a master's degree in English in India and, after coming to the United States, took psychology and

English courses at Merrimack College in North Andover and psychology and business administration courses at Northeastern University in Boston.

She then managed her husband's medical practice for several years.

After settling on the former school building as the site of her spa-wellness center, she used her artistic skills, she said, to put all the design elements together. A 2,000-square-foot room, for example, was designated as the "party room," where "girls' night out" and other functions are now held. These activities are also a way to promote the center and its offerings, she said.

If her business continues to show promise, Chatterjee said, she would like to open a second center in the Weston-Wellesley area, possibly by the end of next year. "But everything depends on getting the right place in the right location." ■

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