

Gayle Giacomo recently
starred in the
Style Network reality
series *Jerseylicious*.

WHEN GAYLE
GIACOMO DECIDED
TO RELAUNCH HER
LATE HUSBAND'S
CELEBRATED
SALON, SHE ENJOYED
AN UNEXPECTED
RESULT:
A REINVENTION
OF HERSELF.

by Patti Verbanas
photography by Courtney Winston

A *Cut* ABOVE

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“Happy birthday, Gayle!” Clients chirp well-wishes from the shampoo sinks to the stylist chairs as Gayle Giacomo, owner of Gatsby Salon in Green Brook, weaves through the packed stations on the floor, chatting up regulars, answering stylists’ questions, and flashing her signature wide grin. Turning 52 this day, Gayle is the epitome of an accomplished business owner, a confident style-maker, and a charitable community leader.

But it wasn’t always that way. For decades, Gayle was simply “the wife.” Standing behind her charismatic husband, Danny Gianfrancesco, Gatsby’s founder, Gayle worked as the business manager, leaving the limelight to Danny. The roles suited their personalities: She was the administrator; he was the consummate showman. Even now, 11 years after Danny’s death from cardiac arrest, area salon owners still speak of this pioneering stylist who educated himself in New York and brought the latest trends in hair design to Central Jersey. When Danny was around, everything was exciting — hair shows, contests, awards, events. But then it all stopped.

Danny passed away while Gatsby was in the midst of an expensive remodel — a predicament that left Gayle with a choice: Sell the business or move forward. “A lot of people were interested in buying Gatsby,” she says. “But the salon was my life, too, and I just went full steam ahead. It was difficult. I was scared. I had a big place and a big overhead. Plus, our clients were very loyal — and spoke their mind. People watched every move I made.”

To ratchet up respect, Gayle, who was trained as a stylist, returned to the floor to work directly with the clients. “That’s what Danny did — it was expected,” she says. “But that’s also one of the hard things about this salon: I cannot keep up with his personality. I tried, but I’m not

him.” So, for the next 10 years, hesitant to rattle the Gatsby brand and risk clients, Gayle continued business as usual.

It was the couple’s philosophy that the salon should change its look every decade, and in 2009, this opportunity for a makeover sparked in Gayle a new ambition: She would reinvent Gatsby and make it her own. The success of this endeavor rode, however, on maintaining a continuum of Danny’s legacy. “Danny was the creator of Gatsby, and no one can ever take that away from him,” she explains.

In a bold move, Gayle decided to leave “Danny’s home” and relocate the salon to a smaller space a few doors down. Trading in Gatsby’s “antique-Victorian” aesthetic for a more sleek, modern design, Gayle worked with the architect to ensure that every square foot maximized its earning potential. “The modern look is different, but since modern can be very cold, we made sure the space had some femininity to warm it up,” she says. Most indicative of the transition was Gayle’s decision to redesign the logo. (Clients debate whether the new logo represents a G and a D for “Gayle” and “Danny” or whether it is mirrored double Gs as a nod to “Gayle Giacomo” or to “Gatsby” — and Gayle’s not telling.)

“She’s come a long way from next door to here,” says Christy Pereira, Gayle’s daughter who manages the salon. “She has become more of a businesswoman. Having these new walls around her has made the salon feel like more of her own.”

Unveiling the new Gatsby was a

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revelation to staff and clients alike. “No one likes change,” Gayle says regarding her concern about the approval of the clientele who still considered Gatsby “Danny’s salon.” “Everyone’s used to living in their own little box.” But the reviews have been overwhelmingly positive. “Clients tell me I should be proud of myself, that I did a great job,” she says.

And although there were clients who were initially critical of Gayle’s choice to move and start anew, this sentiment dissipated over time. “When you love somebody, you don’t need objects to help you remember that person,” Christy explains. “It’s what you *feel* for him, and that’s what I said to my mom: ‘You don’t need Danny’s cutting chair to make it feel like he’s a part of us. If you know that he’s a part of us in our hearts, then that’s all that matters.’”

Gayle pays homage to Danny in less tangible ways. She continues his mission to teach young stylists and inspire veterans to keep challenging themselves. Likewise, Gayle sends stylists out for training or brings trainers into the salon, and she encourages young talents to do events and photo shoots. “Hairdressing is not just a matter of cutting a straight line,” she says. “There’s art to it. Once they get out, they realize this.”

Giving back to the community is also a strong focus. As a cancer survivor, Gayle is committed to helping others with cancer as well as those less fortunate. Recently, the salon hosted charity events such as Locks for Love and has lent its styling and cosmetic expertise to fundraisers, including a fashion show at St. Vincent de Paul School in Sterling.

Charity, training, and a loyal clientele are all equal parts in the trinity that made Gatsby what it was when Danny was at the helm — and the same holds true in the salon’s new era. The important things never change.

“All I had been doing for the last 10 years was carrying out Danny’s dreams,” Gayle says, “but now I’m carrying out my dreams with him — *our* dreams.” ✨

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