

Final Gina Le

Hello: I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And, I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: We're here today with Gina Le of Gina Le Salon located in the Meatpacking district in New York City. Thank you for joining us today. Why don't you tell us about your salon, how long have you been in the business and how did the salon come about?

GL: Okay, so I've been in the business for a very long time, over twenty some odd years. My salon, the Gina Le Salon, this is the second salon I've had in the Meatpacking District. My first salon was Gina Thomas, I had a business partner in that one, and I had that one for seven years. We split up and then I ended up taking over this space on 13th Street, and made it Gina Le. I've been here 15years. I've been in the meatpacking district when it was just starting to become the Meatpacking District.

KK: Yeah, I was going to ask you, 15 years ago or longer it was not what it is today, the Meatpacking District. Were you one of the first businesses in that area?

GL: Yes, I was definitely in the very beginning. In the beginning it was like you had your people that were already there, you had like The Old Homestead, you had Jeffrey, who was really the pioneer. Jeffrey came in with this very exclusive store that all these people came to visit but it was like in the obscure neighborhood. And then really it was, I was truly one of the first, to be honest with you. There was nothing there. It was scary, it was old, there was a lot going on in that neighborhood and it wasn't really great stuff. There was only like a handful of places that were there from the very, like, beginning, and then we came in. The salon really came in at what was the beginning of the Meatpacking District.

KK: You know, it's interesting, I'm thinking we're such New Yorkers, but people that might listen to this may not know, but I am sure if they ever watched Sex and the City, that's what made the Meatpacking District every body knew about. So that sort of puts it in perspective I think.

VC: So were you already established when Sex and City came along?

GL: You know what's so interesting? I never watched the show. The only time I'd go over to a friend of mine and she would have her shows, you know, she's like "you want to watch my shows?" And, she'd have them all programmed and we would just sit and maybe watch a few episodes with her.

VC: Since Covid began, what changes have you seen in the Meatpacking District?

GL: Major changes because it was really where everybody wanted to be. They wanted to move into this neighborhood so you have, first of all, in the Meatpacking District there is an amazing association. They took care of me, they're really generous and kind

they're always there, because I'm part of the association, the Meatpacking – but then it became, the nonprofit became a BID, it became a business district because you have like Tesla, Google, you have the High Line, you have all these major, major big, big – Dior, all these stores moving in because they want to be in the Meatpacking. Like Wix, my new website, by the way if you'd like to go to it, it's Gina Le Salon. Wix moved into the neighborhood and became part of the Meatpacking Association. So the Meatpacking Association reached out to me and said, "Gina, times are hard, we know you're struggling. Would you like to work with Wix, because they're trying to get neighborhood people that need things, and that need help." So, they actually, Wix as a summer program for their interns, helped me build a new website for free!

VC: That's fabulous!

GL: I felt so blessed. And so lucky, you know? The Meatpacking Association, shout out to Jeffrey and everybody there. They were like, what about Gina, what about the smaller businesses, let's not forget them.

VC: That's wonderful. That's wonderful that you got so much support.

GL: Yeah, absolutely.

VC: So what about your business, the salon, how has that changed? How had Covid impacted that? I know that the salons were closed for a while and then they reopened. So how has your business been impacted?

GL: It's been a struggle. I still feel there are people who are worse off than me. I feel like it could be worse. I think maybe once everybody's been vaccinated and things are somewhat feeling safe, everybody feels a different way. It's so challenging because you have people that you know, are a little bit relaxed about it, they feel like okay, I can go out, I can move around, there are other people that are really still afraid and don't come out. Another thing, nobody is working from their offices so no one is commuting into Manhattan, so they're working from home. That could mean their second home. Or they moved, or they're home in Brooklyn and they don't want to go underground and take a subway to come see me. They want to go down the street to a local place. Or they moved, they just said, "I can work from anywhere so I'm going to move to where my family lives, Boston or I had one client who moved to Hawaii, Australia back to Australia because that where her family is. And she can work from there, she can work from everywhere. So, home, wherever that is, they don't necessarily have to come back to me so that is the struggle. My poor clients, they're all over the place. But then I have some who are still living in Manhattan that will come underground for me, they'll commute into the city. I have my regulars who are close by maybe, but I also ended up getting new clients. For whatever reason my name was given to them from someone else, or they googled me and said, they're in the neighborhood, or they walked by which is a positive thing, otherwise I don't know if I could still remain open. That would be a challenge.

KK: What have you done to the salon with the restrictions of Covid? What have you needed to do for your salon to make sure things are safe?

GL: Well, I have to book differently. I can't really book too many clients at one time. I have Plexiglas dividers by every chair, by the desk, and also in the back where there's the shampoo station. There is a divider between the two chairs which was a blessing. And that was another thing that my client is my printer. He printed all my business cards and all my invitations. He went from printing to Plexiglas dividers in his company. That's how he survived this. And he's been a client, I know him my whole life. We grew up in the same town, so he came in, he measured and he sent me Plexiglas dividers. For free!

KK: Don't cry now. It's all good. Everybody loves you, that's why.

VC: So when the city closed the salons, what did you do?

GL: I came to the salon every day. First of all, I'd work out every morning. I'd go for a run. And then I would come to the salon because at that time I had people booked already, because I always book out like a week, two weeks. Or my clients pre-book the following month, so I cut their hair today, they book four weeks. So, I was kind of going through my day and I'd call and they'd be like, "oh, just book me for next week." And then I remember everyday, kind of just contacting people and then people leaving messages so in a way kept me sane because I had to come to the salon. I had to check emails, check messages, call clients, rebook them, reschedule them. And then a lot of them said "why don't we just wait till things get a little better. That was another thing, I was starting to travel to people that felt safe and comfortable with me coming to them. They would send me a car and I would go to their homes. And so, I've been to like Jersey, Long Island City, Brooklyn, Upper East, Upper West, they would just get me car services. So I'd pack up my stuff every day, I would bring color, cut, whatever it was. I mean not right away, obviously, in the middle of the shutdown I just came to work. What I ended up doing during the shutdown was mailing clients their color or walking it to them. Or they would come and drive by curbside and I would hand it to them. So that kept me busy for a while. Just saying, do you want me to send you your color, I'll Facetime you, or Facetime haircuts.

VC: Wait a minute, Facetime haircuts? Wow! How did that work?

GL: We would Facetime each other and then I would go through depending on if I was cutting their hair or showing them how to color their hair. So if it was cutting it was basically really just giving them direction whether to pull it straight down or hold it vertically, hold it horizontally, to walk them through how to at least get, not necessarily a cut by me, but like just to get them through the shut down. The same way for color, my clients once they would receive their color I would Facetime them so I would have to just walk them through how to apply the color. And, often they actually would have their partners come in and help them. It was like a family thing at times, so it was very interesting. And then, of course, I did some renovations to the salon while we were

closed. We painted, we cleaned up, we changed things so we could reopen and it would feel fresh and clean so we did things like that.

VC: You're a woman and a small business owner. What's it been like to run this successful business over all these years? I know you said that during Covid you had a lot of wonderful support from your business community. Are there any other aspects of being a woman business owner?

GL: Well, I also want to talk about – I'm going to cry again, come on! So, in May, this other thing I remember, I could pay my March – in March we closed. So March I was kind of okay, April I was okay. May when I started talking to clients and calling them and moving their appointments and rescheduling them they actually pre-paid for their haircuts and their hair color and their hair treatments so I could pay my rent for May because my client gave me money before. So May I got through May and then I ended up getting a small business loan and I could pay the summer. So it's been a very major struggle but I've been in the industry a long time, I have some great clients, as you know Kathleen is one of them. They're supportive, they're wonderful, they're my friends, my family and they took care of me. I just feel like I have been through so many other things in this city that I don't – I was thinking about it today. I've been through a blackout, September 11th, Sandy, terrorist attack. I watched the second tower fall from my salon because I was on the corner. I actually went to the salon, I looked down, because you could see clearly down Ninth and I saw the tower fall. So, I feel like I've been through so much that this is just one more thing. You know, you got to be strong. What else are we going to do?

KK: Well, you are strong and you've been through it and you're --- I keep thinking of that song, you're a woman – W O M A N!

GL: It's not easy anyway to live here and to own a business and to work here, right? It's not easy just in general. So, with this it's a thousand times harder. But at the end of the day there's something in me, I don't know, I just get up and I just go. So yeah, it's been tough but at the same time it's okay. I wake and it's okay.

KK: And, as you said you've had so much support, people in businesses that you would not have expected. That's because they really care about you.

GL: So, at the end of the day, I can't be down, I have to really keep remembering these things, that people are supporting me, people are caring, generous, kind so really, the silver lining are all these things coming to me, appearing. So that's what I try and focus on instead of being like well, woe is me, I am blessed in a way. I never felt alone because the whole world is going through it.

VC: So, I understand that you had been doing photo shoots prior to Covid. Is that still happening?

GL: The only photo shoot, the photo shoot I did recently was in the salon for the Meatpacking Association, the website and that came out really nice.

KK: Things are loosening up in New York, slowly but surely. You mentioned your website before, but where can people, I know the ones that know you but people who might be listening to this wanting to come to the salon.

GL: Instagram is a popular way to, social media of course, but a lot of people, if they want to find a salon, maybe that's convenient for them, they will Google us. Our website's pretty nice, I'm really proud of it and it was a beautiful gift from Wix and the Meatpacking Association. It's Ginale, one E, Ginalesalon, one E. Go to the website everybody please. And my Instagram, Ginalesalon. There you go.

VC: Last but certainly not least, do you have any advice for other small businesses out there that are trying to survive during this time?

GL: That's a hard one because it depends on the business, right? My heart goes out to a lot of friends who are in the restaurant business. That's a really big challenge. You know, stay positive, just try to get as much support as you can, people I know that have restaurants, I support. I try to get stuff to go, or just pop in before it started to snow, even in the cold, just go out and sit outside, have dinner, whatever, have drinks. Maybe talking to your landlord, trying to reduce your rent, my accountant, also another amazing, Trisha Capodagli, she helped me through this. She's the one who did all the paperwork for me and she ended up getting me the loan that I needed, the PPP, and I am so grateful for her because she did all the work, she was like "I got this." Of course, every business should do that. I guess you have to exhaust everything you can depending on your business. You have to exhaust maybe working with your landlord, working with your inventory, like maybe you can get a break on ... I tried, even when I have to do my color inventory or product inventory. But they're hurting too. Everybody's hurting across the board, right? So, it's a hard one. It really is a challenge. I've been working with my landlord, I've been trying to get some loans and stay positive and talking to my clients and trying to promote business however we can, social media is one big one. I send out Constant Contact, some emails to clients, trying to say hey we're having a special, a sale on gloss products, come in 30% off, 20% off, you know, buy one get one free. We try to do a lot of little promotional stuff too, to give back and maybe just get people interested in coming in for a gloss. Little things like that, getting out newsletters, reaching clients, say "we are open, we're following all the guidelines, we're safe, we're booking one at a time." letting them know that we're safe, we're conscious, we're clean.

VC: So Gina, is there anything we haven't covered that you would like to add?

GL: There's one more thing that I find that is happening right now at this time with me. That my work has become my social life. It gives me a reason to get up, get dressed, and I get to see people, and I get to talk to them and I get to laugh with them. That's a blessing right there. And this has become, you know, back in the day, I had

a social life and I had a work life. Actually my work life always monopolized my whole life but I had a little bit of social life. But now, work is my social life.

VC: I think that's true for a lot of people these days in many different fields. I think that's quite true. So, Gina, this has been awesome. Thank you so much for sharing your experiences and your stories with us.

GL: Get up and get out of bed, get out there and try to figure it out.

VC: Thank you.

KK Thank you.

GL: Thank you, it's been lovely.