

The Washington Times

College duo basks in salon business

June 11, 2007

When Kris Hart and Graham Galka met on a road trip in college, they never imagined that they would be running their own business one day.

Today, the two George Washington University students are co-owners of Relaxed, a tanning salon located a few blocks from the heart of their D.C. campus.

"Starting our own business is the most rewarding thing we've ever done," said Mr. Hart, 24. "We took our vision and made it into a reality."

The two met in 2002 when Mr. Hart offered Mr. Galka a ride to their hometown of Philadelphia. They talked in the car about their goals and realized they were both interested in owning a business.

"People on campus had been complaining for years that there should be a tanning salon closer to campus," said Mr. Galka, 21. "So we started doing research to figure out whether we could start a salon of our own."

The two talked with their business professors, industry consultants, peers and anyone else who would lend them an ear.

"We knew that neither of us have a background in the business," said Mr. Hart.

"We'd never even been tanning," said Mr. Galka. "But we both had the desire to start our own business."

After learning as much as they could about tanning salons, the new business partners began shopping for space, equipment and loans.

"We began walking the street looking for retail locations and bothered every leasing agent in Foggy Bottom," said Mr. Hart. "Most people wouldn't give us the time of day because we were so inexperienced. But we finally found a landlord who liked our energy and took us in."

"We had to teach ourselves how to do a lot of the business, like talking to equipment distributors and polishing our business presentation," said Mr. Galka.

"Our business plan was not very good at first, so a lot of banks turned us down," said Mr. Hart. "But by the time we finally got a small-business loan, we had refined our presentation skills to a science."

The two students finally opened the glass doors to their trendy urban salon in March 2006 at the corner of F and 21st streets Northwest. But the worst wasn't over for the young entrepreneurs.

"The first six months were the most difficult," said Mr. Hart. "We were having trouble getting permits, we weren't making money and both of us had to get another job just to get by. I was so stressed that I was pulling out my hair."

"We definitely stumbled a bit," said Mr. Galka. "Business was really slow when all the students left for the summer. We had to go out and do guerrilla marketing, like standing by the Metro stop to hand out fliers."

They even took on a third partner, Todd Stromberg, a 36-year-old chapter adviser

affiliated with their fraternity, Phi Sigma Kappa.

"We were working 24 hours a day and still not making any money," said Mr. Hart. "It was then that I learned the importance of perseverance."

Eventually, the students did return, and after a year, the small salon slowly began to reach profitability.

Today, Mr. Hart and Mr. Galka have 10 employees and more than 2,500 customers, and the tanning duo is taking in profits and discussing plans for expansion, possibly to other cities.

"We'd like to open something up in Philadelphia so we can be closer to home," said Mr. Hart. "But we're not going to move too quick; we've got a good thing going."

Mr. Galka lives on campus at George Washington University while he completes his undergraduate degree in international affairs.

Mr. Hart lives in Mount Pleasant and plans to complete his degree in entrepreneurial management as soon as he gets enough time away from the shop.

"We got to take all the lessons they teach in business school and actually make it happen," said Mr. Hart. "Hopefully, one day we can go to our professors' classes and pass on some of the knowledge we have gained."

Bryce Baschuk