

For Her, Eye Care Is 'I Care'

"I think you can treat people right and live by your own principals and still make it."
— Dr. Paula Newsome

By KAREN BARBER LANDS
Staff Writer

When optometrist Dr. Paula Newsome came to Charlotte five years ago, she found herself in an unfamiliar city with plenty of ambition, few professional contacts and no job.

She took a risk and opened her own eye care practice.

Now, she says, her early hardships in Charlotte might have been a blessing in disguise. She's learned through experience that there's often more to being an optometrist than eye charts and glasses.

"I never knew I had any business acumen," Newsome says. "I enjoy patient care a lot, but I enjoy the business side of it even more. I never thought I had the skills or the background to do it."

Newsome, who celebrates her 34th birthday today, these days also celebrates her newfound business savvy and her survival in a market where there are enough optometrists to fill 6½ pages in the Yellow Pages directory.

Whether it's sponsoring eye-wear fashion shows, hosting makeup artists to give tips to people who wear glasses and contact lens or simply sending birthday cards to patients, Newsome looks for offbeat, innovative ways to promote her Avante eye care center.

Her office in a refurbished house in the Dilworth Community on Lyndhurst Avenue looks and feels more like a boutique than a sterile doctor's office. The waiting area features plush gray carpet; chairs with wicker backs with seats covered in rose-colored velvet; a tall, six-sided aquarium and lush plants. In the adjoining room, scores of glasses are on display in a room carpeted and painted in a warm rose color.

She recently hired Charlotte's Lyerly Agency to handle marketing for her eye care center. "This kind of practice appeals to a certain market — those who want to be pampered and cared for," Newsome says. "We want to have the right look."

Among the changes is a distinctive logo, and she's shortened the name of her eye care center from Avant Garde to Avante.

Newsome says she knew at an early age that she wanted to enter some field of



JEEP HUNTER/STAFF

Paula Newsome in her office on Lyndhurst Avenue with the tools of her optometry trade. "Certainly I

want to make a living . . . but I enjoy what I do," she says. "I do it because I enjoy it."

Paula Newsome

Age: 34.

Job: Optometrist, owner Avante Vision Care.

Birthplace: Wilmington.

Education: Graduated UNC-Chapel Hill, 1977, degree in biology; graduated University of Alabama Medical School of Optometry, 1981, doctor of optometry and master of physiological optics; Eye Institute, Philadelphia, 1981-82, residency training.

Employment: Assistant professor, University of Missouri School of Optometry, St. Louis, 1982-84; consultant, Veteran's Administration Hospital, St. Louis, 1982-84; owner, Avante Vision Care, 1984-present.

Family: Single.

Quote: "I like to provide 'eye' care and 'I' care."

health care. As a child growing up in Wilmington, she was often ill and spent considerable time in the doctor's office.

At home, she says, education was highly valued. Her father worked for the N.C. Department of Education, and her mother was a teacher.

"There was never any question as to whether or not I was going to college," Newsome says. "It was just where."

She enrolled in UNC-Chapel Hill, where she majored in biology.

"Two months before I went to Chapel Hill, I had my eyes examined," Newsome recalls. "I knew I was going to be a doctor, but I didn't know what kind. When I had my eyes examined, I thought, 'I like what this man is doing.'"

So she wrote the American Optometric Association seeking information about the field.

After graduation, she went to optometry school at the University of Alabama Medi-

cal Center School of Optometry and graduated in 1981. She also received a master's degree in physiological optics.

Newsome says she was the second black female to be licensed to practice in North Carolina. The state has more than 700 licensed optometrists, but only about 630 or so practice in the state, says Dr. John Robinson, secretary of the State Board of Optometry.

Average salary figures for optometrists are not compiled, he says, because most optometrists are in business for themselves. "One reason people go into optometry is that you are your own boss; it's a private entrepreneur's practice," Robinson says.

After optometry school, Newsome did a residency at the Eye Institute in Philadelphia, where she spent 1½ years. For another year, she took a teaching stint as an assistant professor at the University of Missouri School of Optometry in St.

Louis. She also spent some time as a staff consultant for a Veterans Administration hospital in St. Louis.

A brief marriage brought Newsome to Charlotte in 1984. With little luck finding a job in an existing practice, she opened her own 1,000-square-foot office in a building on 5th Street.

She wasted no time getting the word out about her practice.

"The very first thing I did was a newsletter," Newsome recalls, adding that she drew upon her high school yearbook staff experience to design it. She sent it to people living in nearby neighborhoods, and she also sponsored an open house.

She also wasted no time getting involved in community and professional activities. For example, she's on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Civic Index citizens forum and on the boards for Leadership

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Textile, Furniture Industries Usually Shut Down For Vacation

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days, down from the week-long or two-week vacations taken during the summer. That's partly a result of two-income families, in which husband and wife must coordinate different work schedules with vacations."

Graham of Wichita State says managers and professionals still

aren't taking all of their available vacation time, however. He says intense worldwide competition and deregulation has forced many companies to cut back on staff while maintaining production levels.

"I work with a lot of organizations, but I don't know of anyone in management who takes two or

three weeks of vacation," Graham said. "At the employee level, like the factory worker, they take every drop of vacation they can."

Many companies, particularly in manufacturing industries, allow little flexibility in vacations.

In the textile and furniture industries, for example, many

Carolinas companies close the week of July 4 and Christmas. Company officials say it's easier to close down the plants for a week than to have employees take time off at different times of the year.

"In the Lenoir area, it's reasonably typical for furniture plants to take the week of July 4

off," says Brent Kincaid, vice president of operations for Lenoir-based Broyhill Furniture Industries. "It's very difficult to schedule optional vacations with production employees. If an employee has a particular skill and is not available for work, it could disrupt the whole productivity of a company."

Optometrist Doesn't View Business Through Rose-Colored Glasses

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Charlotte, the Mecklenburg Coalition for Literacy and Focus on Leadership. She's also a member of some professional groups, including a committee for the American Optometric Association.

"I did not get on those boards to boost my practice," she says. "I felt I could make a difference. I was tired of people complaining and not doing anything."

Kevin Patterson, an IBM engineer and president of Focus on Leadership, a program to develop black leaders, said Newsome was one of the people instrumental in starting that program. She's also the reason he got involved.

"She called me and told me she was working on a special project, but it didn't have a name yet," he recalled. Newsome volunteered him to be the group's facilitator, which eventually led to the president's post.

"We've worked hand-in-hand since then," Patterson says.

Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners Chairman Carla DuPuy works with Newsome on the Charlotte Civic Index, a 70-member group studying ways to solve the city's problems.

"There are a lot of people there with a lot of different agendas," DuPuy says. "Paula certainly doesn't try to dominate — anything but that — but when she feels something has not been articulated well, she will bring it up and explain it with grace and ease."

Patterson says most people don't realize Newsome's professional accomplishments.

"People think that the most important part is being a good optometrist," Patterson says. "But it's different when you run a business. . . . You could be the greatest optometrist in the world, but if you don't have the business skills you won't be as successful as she's been."

Newsome wasted no time enrolling in business courses at Central Piedmont Community College, where she drew upon the resources of its Small Business Center. For the past two years, she has attended a one-week business executive program at the Dartmouth College business school. The program is specifically for minorities.

Last year, she began looking for larger quarters for her practice, and in October 1988 moved into her present office in an old house with 2,300 square feet of office space.

"We had outgrown our other building," she says.

Newsome says she isn't worried about bigger competition.

"I like to provide both 'eye' care and 'I' care," she says. "It's a long-term family type of relationship."

That goes for her three employees, too.

Three years ago, Newsome was

having lunch at a Charlotte restaurant and was impressed at how pleasant and helpful the hostess was.

She handed the woman her card and asked her to call that afternoon when she got off work. She later hired the woman, Ann Faulkner, to be her office manager. Today, Newsome says, Faulkner is her valuable assistant who helps with preliminary screenings and patient records.

"I intend to live in Charlotte . . . my reputation and my name, everything is at stake," she says. "Certainly I want to make a living . . . but I enjoy what I do. I do it because I enjoy it. If you enjoy something and take care of it, the money part will take care of itself."

Newsome wants to expand her business and add a partner. Her five-year business plan includes a second office and possibly a third. Avante' has a safety glasses division, which provides protective

eye wear for industries. She's also considering a different type of business venture, though she wouldn't be specific.

Newsome attributes her success to her upbringing, her ambition and her assertiveness.

"My father always taught me that it was important that I be able

to take care of myself."

But that doesn't mean she's had to hurt people in the process.

"I think you can treat people right and live by your own principles and still make it," she says. "You don't have to be a jerk to make it."

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