

# Umhlanga-based founders *buff* up their business portfolio



By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Mother-daughter team Tracy Gielink, and Kim and Debbie Davidson, founders and owners of Umhlanga-based businesses [The Barnyard Theatre](#) and [Teremok Marine and Spa](#), recently launched their third, Buff Beauty Parlour.

With Buff, they've taken an owner-client approach in all their decisions. "Having supported these businesses over the years definitely helped us decide what we liked and didn't like, so we approached Buff as the client rather than the owner, creating the type of experience we would like," explains Tracy.

"We've been referred to as game changers, which is an enormous compliment, but we just follow our intuition. We are all very discerning and know that value-for-money is important at any price point, so we simply seek to provide people with the type of experience we would like to receive."

In the same way, they only sell products they've tried, tested and would buy themselves. Besides Durban's Wicked Donuts, Buff has exclusivity in KwaZulu-Natal for stocking local retail lines, Skoon (a natural skin care range for women), Bonafide Beards (a male grooming range) and Alila (a professional make-up range).

What's more, Buff is Essie's first flagship salon in South Africa, fitted with the brand's manicure stations that have a built-in extractor system to minimise the dust and strong odours associated with acrylic and gel. "Essie is a market leader and has been in existence for 30 years... We approached Essie about creating a more formal, recognised affiliation," says Tracy. "They had just introduced their flagship programme and loved our concept, so it was a good fit.

Here, they share their familial entrepreneurial journey and more about this new venture...



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■ **You own and run three Umhlanga-based businesses. The first was a theatre in Gateway which opened in 2001, followed by a five-star hotel and spa on Durban's Marine Drive two years later, and now a beauty parlour in Umhlanga. Comment on your individual journeys and how you've influenced each other.**

Debbie: It started 15 years ago with the theatre quickly followed by Teremok and, in both instances, it was the excitement of the challenge that ignited the passion to create something truly unique. I have always used myself as the yardstick when determining what the definitive end result should be, firstly as a theatre patron, then as a hotel guest and lastly as a client looking for the best grooming parlour. Buff is the pinnacle in terms of what went into creating a brand and it has been rewarding beyond belief.

Kim: Mine certainly began and continues with the same inspiration - my mom and business partner, Debbie. Until I got to high school, my mom was a housewife, but probably took it as seriously as she does her businesses nowadays. People who know her now cannot believe that she fetched, carried, volunteered (tuckshops, PTA and charities), baked, cooked, entertained, sewed, knitted and crocheted! She then slowly forged her career path with strength, courage, determination and vision, all of which she passed on to Tracy and I. We used to work with my mom from the time we were in school, learning her strong work ethic. I then studied public relations and, after five years of carving out my name locally at The Sharks (rugby), I was ready to join my mom again. I have been with her every step of the way for over 15 years now, and the businesses are a collaboration of our (her, Tracy's and my) joint vision and talents. I think we often forget how far we've come in 15 years, establishing three truly amazing businesses. Teremok is my baby, and as any entrepreneur would know, it takes guts, determination, self-belief and hard work to make your mark and to make your business a continued success.

Tracy: I am a qualified journalist and still love writing. My mom always involved us in her work and, from when I was a teenager, I helped her with the eventing she did. We are all very close and it was inevitable that we would all be involved in any businesses that opened. When the theatre opened, I helped with developing the booking system, doing costumes for shows and even now I am happy to be in the kitchen taking orders for pizza. We all worked together in creating the Teremok brand and the actual hotel, and being a foodie, I stepped in to overseeing the kitchen and menus. Also being more creative than logical, I had no idea I had an entrepreneurial brain until I took over the spa which was then being managed by the therapists. I loved building the business and learning about a new industry. Now I am relishing the challenge of having to set up Buff and running it on a day-to-day basis. I had limited knowledge of this aspect of the beauty industry, but it's good to look at things with fresh eyes and I love being able to learn new things. We spent three years developing this brand and it's been the most amazing, rewarding journey.

■ **Being so actively involved in these businesses, how do you maintain a work-life balance?**

Tracy: I was listening to the founder of Dermalogica, Jane Wurwand give a talk and she said there is no such thing as

balance. That was epiphany! You need to aim for overall balance instead of constantly trying to attain it in everything, especially when you're a working mom.

Debie: I've been extremely lucky that my two daughters have walked every step of this journey with me. I've taken on the role of brand custodian as this allows me to indulge my overactive creative mind. I am not a believer in balance but rather in resilience, and find what I do so exciting and rewarding that the blurred lines between the two don't bother me.

Kim: I do the publicity and marketing for The Barnyard Theatre at Gateway, I run Teremok, and I've stepped back at Buff due to my other commitments, but have overseen the launch and media, as well as getting involved in the brand and marketing - we need to play to our strengths. I've learnt that work-life balance is ever-elusive and striving for it often puts more pressure on you. I can never truly switch off (my phone is on 24/7 for Teremok), but I've learnt to try 'check-out' as far as possible when I'm away from work, and gym is also crucial in managing stress and a healthy lifestyle. Working with family probably also makes it trickier as I can't meet my mom and sister for coffee without work coming up, and our family chat group is often more consumed by 'shop talk'. The fact that I've only just got married (at the age of 41) and have no kids of my own probably makes the juggling less demanding.



Picture: Supplied

### ■ Why the beauty industry?

Tracy: We have a spa that specialises in anti-ageing, but there became more of a market for nails with the advent of the gel/nail polish hybrid. My mom and I have had acrylic done on our nails for a very long time and eventually we decided we would rather be supporting our own business rather than paying someone else. We realised a stand-alone, specialised nail business was needed, as the business model would not work within our existing spa. Being clients ourselves, we are painfully aware of how hard it is to find a good nail technician and felt the industry could do with a blast of fresh air in terms of pairing world-class treatments with a design-orientated space. The same applied to waxing, so we decided these two aspects would be the focus of the business. There are also good profit margins in these two areas. If you look at businesses and industries that continue to grow despite the recession, health and beauty continues to go from strength to strength. We spent time researching the local market and realised there was a gap, while similar businesses overseas flourished.

### ■ Which treatments and products are your current bestsellers?

Tracy: At the moment we're doing a lot of pedicures and there's a huge demand for acrylic nails. In terms of bestselling products, [Skoon](#) cleansers have been very popular, and with men, the [Bonafide Beards'](#) beard oil, cleansing bars and beard comb key rings have all sold consistently well.

### ■ The name, Buff emphasises the nail aspect of the salon. With the focus on nails, how do you market your complete offering?

Tracy: The name worked for us on three levels. The nail reference was the obvious one, but it also alluded to being in the buff (being happy with yourself and your body) and also a person being 'buff', a term used to refer to in-shape men, and

the male market was very definitely one we wanted to cater to. We coined the slogan 'Little Shop of Miracles' and it's not hard to market as a whole as everything falls under beauty and grooming solutions.

We're using social media for our marketing and we accounted for this when we planned the interior. There is a life size Betty Boop standing on a red carpet which is for selfies, plus there are plenty of other selfie and Instagramable opportunities within the space. We have created certain hashtags for people to hopefully use when posting about us. Also, anyone wanting to access our free W-Fi needs to check in on [Facebook](#) to gain access.

### ■ What advice would you give to aspiring entrepreneurs?

Debbie: Never be afraid to dream big, to use those dreams to motivate you, and your fear of failure to rule you.

Tracy: Of course it's scary, but nothing is ever achieved by staying in your comfort zone. Don't be afraid to do something because you don't have a qualification in that field. Passion and hard work surpasses that.

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