



Skin care business heads toward \$1M revenue

By **Abha Bhattarai**, Published: August 12

Few thought it was a good idea for Ada Polla to start a skin care line in Washington — not industry insiders, not mentors and especially not her father, a dermatologist who originally created the products for his medical spa in Geneva.

“My father — well, he no longer looks at me like I’m crazy, but he still wonders whether I wouldn’t be more effective in New York,” said Polla, 34. “But I think it’s nice to be a small fish in a smaller pond.”

Polla founded Alchimie Forever, a collection of lotions, cleansers and other skin products, as a student at Georgetown University’s business school in 2003. Much of the company’s business comes from wholesale sales — which are slated to hit \$1 million this year — to spas and boutiques throughout the country.

In June, six Life Time Fitness locations, including those in Columbia, Rockville, Fairfax, Sterling and Centreville, picked up the company’s line on a trial basis. If all goes well, Polla said Alchimie Forever products could end up at the chain’s 90-plus spas, almost doubling the brand’s current presence.

“It’s really a potential game-changer for us,” said Polla, who operates the company from a showroom on Wisconsin Avenue NW.

Alchimie Forever’s products are geared toward preventative care — protecting skin from sun damage and other factors that could cause premature aging, Polla said.

Polla wrote the company's business plan for an entrepreneurship class during her first year at business school. She invested \$500,000 of her savings and her family's money into the company, and spent the summer in Geneva testing new products.

By the time the second year of business school rolled around, Polla was running Alchimie Forever from her bedroom, in between classes.

"There was a credit card machine next to my bed," she said. "I wanted to get a sense of whether this was a viable idea. If it wasn't, I could go find a real job after business school."

It turned out it was viable, though at time Polla had doubts. She had barely gotten her bearings when the economy began to falter, and spas began cutting back on purchases.

"It was very challenging," Polla said. "I almost felt like I got a second MBA in running a very small business — not in terms of growth, which is what we're focused on now — but in terms of survival."

She cut back on business travel, began meeting clients for coffee instead of lunch, and laid off one employee from her staff of four.

Polla said, "I looked at each of our accounts and thought, how can we get 10 percent more from these customers? Are they buying all of our products? If not, can I talk them into adding one more?"

Business began to recover last year She added new clients — including two in Mexico — and hired one more employee.

This week, the company is rolling out its 17th product: a chemical peel. Polla said sales for the first six months of the year were up 40 percent from 2011.

"We've finally hit our groove," Polla said.