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Now here's a lousy job

Professional nitpicker Dawn Mucci visits the finest of families

KATE FILLION | Oct 31, 2005

"Want head lice gone?" ask the large magnets attached to the doors of Dawn Mucci's minivan. "No pesticides used. Fast and confidential services."

One day last week, she pried off the magnets and tossed them into the back seat before driving to an in-home appointment in Toronto, explaining, "No one really wants the neighbours to know they have lice." Mucci, the founder and director of the Lice Squad, is Canada's premier nitpicker: her cellphone trills merrily every few minutes or so. "It's pretty busy right now in Toronto," she sighed. "Forty to 50 calls a day."

A former garbage truck driver and certified aromatherapist, Mucci has sold 12 Lice Squad franchises in Ontario and envisions a national empire. "This morning I heard from a lady in Montreal: 40 out of 198 private school students were sent home with lice. And then there's the West! Every urban centre has lice." New franchises cost about \$25,000, but she estimates that between home visits and school checks, a busy nitpicker can make \$90,000 a year. Mucci herself charges \$55 an hour.

Yet money isn't why she loves her job. "I like being able to help. Most of the people who call have been struggling for months, and have tried five or six over-the-counter treatments. It's not the plague, or bird flu. But it *is* bugs. On your *head*. People are generally very happy to see me," she says, stopping in front of a tidy brick house where a man waited anxiously on the front lawn. "That'll be the dad."

The dad greeted her with the reverential mixture of gratitude and desperation usually reserved for a top surgeon, cautioning that the atmosphere in the house was, well, "Stressful. My wife is going a little crazy."

Mucci, a willowy 36-year-old with long, sandy blond hair, marched in with a large black rolling suitcase and surveyed the scene. Two little boys, one with a newly shaved head, sat cross-legged on furniture covered in bedsheets, while their mother pointed sadly at the bare floors. "We've rolled up all our rugs. I'm doing laundry night and day and picking through everyone's hair one strand at a time. Then I find a bug on my pillow," she said. "I can't stop crying."

The woman continued talking -- "It was the daycare, they let the kid who started it come back after one day!" -- as Mucci strapped on a magnifying visor and headlamp, covered the dining room table with clean towels and rows of sterile implements, and trained two bright lamps on the scalp of the child who had recently been relieved of most of his hair.

With a thin bamboo stick of the sort used for kebabs, Mucci lifted up small sections of the remaining hair and peered at them. "The key is eliminating not just the bugs but the nits. Start at the hot spots, the nape of the neck and around the ears," she instructed, then ran an electric comb through the child's hair. "If it stops humming, it's killed a live louse," she said, then pronounced him bug-free.

"See, hon? You did a great job!" the man told his wife, nearly dancing off to work after Mucci checked him and gently noted that while he did not have lice, he might want to invest in some dandruff shampoo. After the woman was also cleared, she studied Mucci's neatly labelled samples of nits and lice in plastic sandwich bags, and asked, "Where did lice originate, anyway?"

"There were lice combs in Cleopatra's tomb," said Mucci, inspecting the older boy's head, "and here is a nit." But it was too tiny, and too close to his hair's shade of brown -- "Nits are not white, like most people think," she said -- for anyone else to detect.

Mucci massaged a blend of NitPickers Secret Concentrate and hair conditioner into the boy's scalp, covered his head with a shower cap for five minutes, then combed out the mixture with an exceedingly fine-toothed NitFree Terminator -- "the only comb that works without tearing the hair" -- stopping every 10 seconds to wipe it on a clean paper towel and count the tiny brown specks. "About 60," she decided.

"Each one could hatch a bug?" the mother asked. "Thank God you're here." When all the nits were gone and the mother had detailed follow-up instructions -- and had decided to purchase a comb and the secret potion - - Mucci hit the road again.

"That was mild," she shrugged. "Often we see 10 to 15 live bugs and more than 100 nits. I've treated everyone from a four-month-old baby to an 88-year-old grandmother," including the scions of some famous families. "There shouldn't be such a stigma attached to this," she said. "Look, I was the kid who got sent home all the time with lice. My father used to rip my hair out with the comb, scream. I had pesticides poured on my head . . ." She stopped to compose herself. "It's just, no child has to go through what I went through."

Then Dawn Mucci headed north for the next nitpick, quite unconcerned about the risk to her own head. "In five years, I think only one of my nitpickers has ever caught lice," she said before waving good-bye. "We're careful, and we avoid head-to-head contact with our customers. Obviously."

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