

## Head and heart into hair

Vern Cole says his passion for helping men and women confront hair loss sets his business apart.

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Pioneer Press

When Vern Cole first got into the world of cosmetology in 1978, he seemed off to a fast start. Through his older brother, who was already in the hair business, the self-described high school jock landed an apprenticeship with Horst Rechebacher, the founder of a Minneapolis-based chain of salons and the Aveda beauty-products empire. And he sought out Joe Francis, founder of the Cost Cutters chain, to learn about the business side.

Then the unthinkable happened: Though still in his early 20s, he started losing his hair.

"My hair was a part of my business, so it was like a curse to me," Cole said. "Now I feel, as a somewhat mature adult, it was a blessing."

A blessing because it led Cole, now 46 and sporting stylish gray locks, to launch his own, Roseville-based hair restoration company.

Known today as Hair Restoration Institute of Minnesota, Cole's company reported sales of about \$1.2 million last year.

It hasn't been easy. Hair loss is a touchy subject for men and women. Advertising HRI's services and reaching out to customers is a challenge.

"There is a fine line to walk so you don't offend people," said Karen Moe, Cole's business partner.

Another challenge: finding people as passionate about treating hair loss as Cole is. Cole says his passion and ability to identify with customers set his company apart.

Cole got into cosmetology at 18, with little knowledge of the craft. Having never fussed much with his own hair, the idea of working with someone else's seemed daunting, and the distinctive smell of perm solution was foreign to him.

But a career counselor had told him he'd be well suited for the job — or for a career as a minister, counselor or nurse. With his older brother Michael already in the hair business and



A Hair Restoration Institute of Minnesota client undergoes a 20-minute laser therapy session to heal cell tissue and stimulate blood flow to the scalp in August. PHOTOS BY RICHARD MARSHALL, PIONEER PRESS



Owners Vern Cole and Karen Moe examine the results of a hair restoration procedure for Donna Prewedo, of Oakdale, in an August session. Below: Before and after photos show what the procedure did for Cole's appearance.

working for Rechebacher, Cole thought he'd give it a shot.

In 1982, after his training with Rechebacher and Francis, Cole bought his own salon. He went independent in 1986 under the name Hair By Cole and Co.

But he spent his free time exploring hair restoration.

It was a frustrating and often demoralizing experience. Cole said he found that most hair restoration places were more interested in selling him their product, regardless of whether it would work. Some of the treatments would have cost as much as \$8,000 to \$10,000.

In 1992, Cole started Hair For Life Professionals in Roseville, using the proceeds from the sale of Hair By Cole. His new company focused on treating hair loss with laser hair therapy and the full-head bond method,



PHOTOS COURTESY OF HAIR RESTORATION INSTITUTE OF MINNESOTA

through which a cap of hair is bonded to a patient's head. Though the company didn't do in-house surgical hair replacement, Cole had affiliations with doctors who did.

Eager to expand, Cole merged with Hair Solutions of

Minnesota in Bloomington in 2004 and renamed the company Hair Restoration Institute of Minnesota. In 2006, Cole bought out the owners of Hair Solutions and brought on Moe as 30 percent owner. Cole owns 70 percent of HRI.

Moe joined HRI in 2005 as a sales consultant after spending a year and a half at the Hair Club for Men.

Cole said of Moe: "I thought, 'If I don't hire her, she'll be my competition.'"

In September, HRI consolidated its offices in Roseville and Bloomington into a bigger space in Bloomington, where the company can serve more customers. Cole expects the expansion will help push the company's sales to \$3 million within the next year and a half to two years.

Cole and Moe expect to be busy because of a fairly new product line called Virtual Reality for men and Virtuaesse for Women. Manufactured by American Hairlines, the nonsurgical hair replacement product is a modernized version of the hair cap. Hair is grown on what is best described as a contact lens and bonded to a patient's head. The lens breathes and looks better than the hair caps of old, Cole said.

A hair cap was the first hair restoration product Cole tried for himself. He now uses Virtual Reality.

The Virtual Reality product from American Hairlines was sold only to Hollywood stars and makeup artists until three years ago. When American Hairlines decided to make its product available to the general public, executives licensed it to only a handful of hair replacement salons. Lance Centofanti, vice president of American Hairlines, chose HRI because of a deep trust he held in Cole.

"He brings out the best in people," Centofanti said. "Vern sees the potential in people beyond what they see in themselves."

Vincent Staupé contributed to this story.

### COMPANY SPECS

- Name:** Hair Restoration Institute of Minnesota
- Business:** Surgical and cosmetic hair replacement
- Location:** Bloomington
- Web site:** www.hrimn.com
- Revenue:** \$1.2 million
- Employees:** 11
- Founded:** Hair For Life, which merged with Hair Solutions of Minnesota, was established in 1992.
- Owners:** Vern Cole and Karen Moe
- Competitors:** Medical Hair Restoration, Reese Hair Restoration, Hair Club
- Challenges ahead:** Continuing to grow and attract new clients and finding employees who are sensitive to the issue of hair loss.