

Suburban Life

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'La Prairie'

It's the Rolls Royce of the skin-care products

By Jeanna Whittaker
staff writer

FOR 22 YEARS, Richard Van Vrooman earned his living as a lyric tenor. Recording contracts and appearances on the stages of the world's great opera houses provided a lucrative and stressful life for the handsome singer from Kansas City.

Then, when he was 40, Van Vrooman decided it was time to marry, settle down, and raise a family.

"I had given up everything for music," he said. "I loved it." He wanted to support a family on a way that was interesting, yet would not require constant international travel. Music, as he had known it, would not allow him to.

THE ANSWER was derived from past experiences and a willingness to try something different, he said. It came packaged in an invitation from a next door neighbor in Switzerland, who collected his recordings.

The neighbor also owned the famed Clinic La Prairie, a licensed Swiss medical facility. The clinic was popular with kings, sheiks, elder and younger statesmen, and a gaggle of the world's most beautiful women.

His neighbor wanted Van Vrooman to head a new La Prairie U.S. Information Center. The center would answer questions and handle all the bookings

for Americans who were clammering to bring their health problems to the hospital and clinic in Clarenz, Switzerland. Van Vrooman accepted the offer.

THE TIMING and combination of circumstances were perfect, Van Vrooman said. He had been treated at the facility for cholesterol problems and was impressed with the care he had received.

Van Vrooman believed in the research begun there in 1931 by the late Paul Niehans, M.D., whose work with fresh cell therapy had attracted a Who's-Who clientele among the rich and famous, including Charlie Chaplin, Marilyn Monroe, Konrad Adenauer, Winston Churchill and Pablo Picasso.

Van Vrooman's job is primarily to promote the clinic and make arrangements for its patients. But as president of the North American Information Center, he occasionally promotes a line of skin care products, introduced in 1978, that grew out of the doctor's research.

LAST WEEK, Van Vrooman and La Prairie sales vice president Anne Fleming visited Detroit to promote the clinic and introduce the line of skin care products to Saks Fifth Avenue customers.

From its beginnings, the clinic has been a retreat for celebrities. Van Vrooman told the women during a

brunch at Archibald's restaurant in Birmingham. However, he said, although many of these famous figures refer to the clinic as a "fountain of youth" because of the rejuvenating effects of the treatments administered there, the clinic does not claim to be able to turn back the clock.

Instead, a stay, seemingly beautiful surroundings, a diet of fresh foods and high-quality medical care produce an arresting effect on the aging process, he said.

The clinic's program of fresh embryonic cells derived from a herd of black sheep owned and pampered by the clinic helps fulfill Niehans' original goal of slowing the effects of aging, he said.

THE SKIN CARE line, carried locally by Saks Fifth Avenue and Mira Linder's Spa in the City, is an outgrowth of the clinic regimen, Van Vrooman and Fleming said. It began as a fresh cell cream each client carried away as a gift at the end of his stay at the clinic.

"La Prairie was never designed for sale," Van Vrooman said. "When they left, the clients were given a tube of cellular gel Dr. Niehans had developed for skin disorders. They kept ordering the gel because they said they were seeing results."

From that original placenta gel, he said, researchers developed a wrinkle cream, which was also presented to clients as a gift. From that evolved the La Prairie line of skin care products.

THE COMPANY does not have to promote the line with extensive advertising campaigns, Van Vrooman said. Its fame is based almost exclusively on word-of-mouth endorsements from clinic clients.

In the line, Fleming said, are products named simply day cream, night cream, wrinkle cream, and so forth. The regimen, she said, takes no more than three minutes in the morning and again at night. It is designed for women, and men, who are looking for ways to eliminate unnecessary and complicated steps from busy schedules. Results can usually be seen within a month.

The price is expensive, Van Vrooman said. A package of seven ampules containing a newly introduced cellular cycle product is priced \$175 and is recommended for use twice a year.

ONE-OUNCE CONTAINERS of La Prairie's famed wrinkle cream are \$30. Facial kits containing skin conditioner, day and night cream, wrinkle cream and mask are \$275.

But, Fleming said, like her, many

busy women are willing to spend an extra dollar to obtain convenience and results.

"It's worth it if you get an extra hour in a day or a week," Fleming said.

"Our customer lives very much in the fast lane. Sixty-one percent of our clientele are executive working women."

THEY WANT to keep their energy level. They want to remain attractive because it is good for their jobs.

"They also want to indulge themselves, to pamper themselves. If that costs a little bit more, then they are willing to spend the money."

The products are so rich in cellular ingredients that smaller-than-normal amounts are required to accomplish the desired effect, she said.

By following simple directions, she said, clients soon discover that though La Prairie products are priced higher than other lines they don't need to be replaced as often and therefore cost less over time.

VAN VROOMAN said he likes being a walking endorsement for the products. His virtually wrinkle-free face, he said, is the product of using the creams, gels and lotions, and living by the example of the clinic.

That is no small feat, he said, because for years his skin was tortured with heavy stage makeup, lack of sleep, the stress of stage appearances and a diet that frequently lacked quality ingredients.

His life on the stage and as a singer, he said, contained most of the negative factors Clinic La Prairie was designed to remedy.

"This is not just a beauty treatment. This is for people who are looking for a source of energy. This is for recharging the quality of life."



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— Richard Van Vrooman

YES, HE said, there are people who approach the clinic and the products with unrealistic expectations. No, he said, neither the clinic or its products can stop the aging process.

"But, yes, we can slow the aging process, and yes, we do treat medical problems. Our clients gain in energy levels."

"We handle their problems naturally by treating them biologically, not with drugs."

The skin care line, Fleming said, is also designed to repair what can be repaired and prevent further damage from occurring.

Let's face it, she said, no one, herself included, wants to give up all the fun things in life that are bad for us, whether it's sitting in the sun, staying up too late, or eating wrong foods.

"All you have to do is try it once. The results are there."



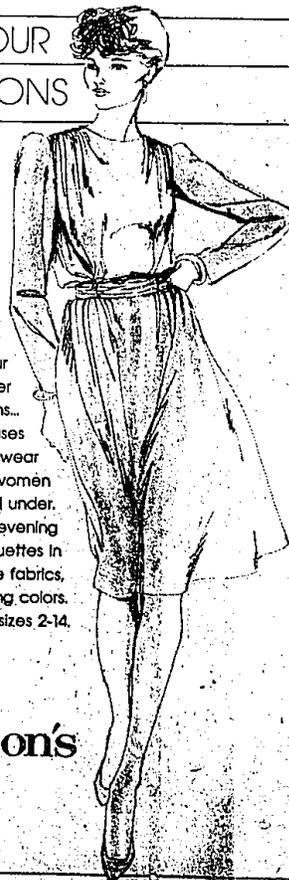
Patricia Gordon (at left), a Farmington Hills resident, was one of the guests invited to learn about the Swiss-manufactured line of skin care products when Anne Fleming came to the area to talk about them. The line was not originally designed for consumer sales.

GARY CASKEY/staff photographer

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Tribute to a lifelong volunteer



Friends, relatives and fellow members of Pioneer Women Halmat turned out late last week to pay tribute to Frieda Leemon (above) and her work in behalf of youngsters in Israel. The tribute comes simultaneously with the opening of Beit Frieda, a child care center named after the Farmington Hills resident, where Arab and Israeli tots play and learn together (at left). Guests met a pledge to match funds for the day care center. Then some contributed to a This is Your Life skit with the guest of honor in the spotlight. The skit told of her birth in Poland and youth spent in Detroit. It continued with her first affiliation with a national Zionist organization while at Wayne University that led to her lifelong concern with the children of Israel.