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THE PINK PYRAMID SCHEME

How Mary Kay cosmetics preys on desperate housewives

By Virginia Sole-Smith

I met my first Mary Kay ladies at a beauty school wedged between a liquor store and an offtrack betting parlor on the backside of a strip mall near Poughkeepsie, New York. “Independent Beauty Consultant” Kim Montero was giving her very first “skincare class,” the preferred term for the direct-sales cosmetics brand’s shopping parties at which friends help friends buy lipstick, hand cream, and “unlimited opportunity,” as the company’s founder, Mary Kay Ash, described it. Mary Kay ladies have been holding skincare classes in suburban living rooms and church basements since the 1960s, and have come to represent a *Steel Magnolias* kind of Americana—all big hair and folksy aphorisms.

The modern-day version of the shopping party is a little more business, a little less coffee klatch, though the hair, pink packaging, and talk of “opportunity” are much the same. Presiding over the evening class was a kind of Mary Kay *consigliere*, Daria Rocco, carefully painted and pressed into a royal-blue skirt suit, the official sales director’s uniform, which she accessorized with black fishnets, black knee-high boots, several rhinestone pins, and a gold charm necklace from which dangled three heads in silhouette, one for each of her children. Next to Daria, Kim, at least ten years younger, looked uncertain un-

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der her own pancaked foundation and penciled brows.

Kim and I had first met two months earlier, when we both enrolled in the beauty school’s 600-hour esthetician training program, where we spent our weeknights learning to give facials and wax bikini lines. During class breaks, she smoked Newportts and showed me cell phone photos of her ten-year-old son and their cat, both at home with her live-in boyfriend. Before signing up for the program, Kim had worked—and been laid off from—a variety of low-paying jobs: bartender, bank teller, retail clerk. After signing up to be a Mary Kay consultant, she had received special permission to hold her “grand opening” skincare class in a small room off the beauty school’s main salon floor. Kim had actually signed up as a consultant twice before. “The first two times, I didn’t make any money,” she explained later. “But this time, with my esthetics knowledge, I think it makes a lot of sense.”

Happy to have a break from lessons in zit extraction, my beauty-school classmates and I crowded around the tables, chatting and flipping through glossy Mary Kay catalogues while Kim and Daria unloaded bottles of cleanser and foundation from a giant rolling suitcase printed with tiny pink hair dryers and makeup brushes. Some of the other students sold for Avon and Arbonne, though they seemed good-natured about being Kim’s competition.

“I’ll bring my catalogues next week!” one woman warned.

Kim passed out little Styrofoam trays stamped with compartments, like tiny TV dinner plates, and mirrors with black vinyl covers that folded back to make a stand. Some of the mirrors were streaked and spotted, and my tray had cakey crumbs of eye shadow lingering in the corners.

“This one is busted,” said a fortyish woman named Bronetta, trying to hand back a cracked mirror.

“Can you just use it anyway?” Kim whispered, eyeing Daria. “I don’t have any extras.”

Kim joined Daria at the front of the room, but before she could speak, Daria had begun: “My dream was always to be at home with my children while they grew up,” she told us, fingering the gold charms hanging around her neck. Not only had her Mary Kay business allowed her to realize that goal, Daria said, but she now earned a “corporate income” as a sales director. “My husband has even been able to retire early.” Mary Kay, she told us, let beauty consultants buy their inventory at wholesale prices and then sell it at a 100 percent markup. Consultants could also earn an extra “love check”—a commission of up to 13 percent on the purchases of women they recruited to join their teams—which helped explain why Daria had taken such an interest in Kim’s fledgling business. A new beauty consultant could set up shop with an investment of as little



as \$100, which would buy her the Mary Kay starter kit: trays, mirrors, and enough samples for her to hold her own skincare class.

As Daria spoke, Kim squirted bits of cleanser, moisturizer, and other products—all interchangeably opaque and gooey—into the various compartments on our trays. Daria briefed us on each one, instructing us to dab and blend as appropriate. We exfoliated with a tacky, granular scrub, then moved on to toning and moisturizing. I kept discovering grainy patches of scrub on my face that wouldn't wipe off. "It's really nice, right?" Kim asked us. "Doesn't your skin feel amazing?"

My classmates realized that they weren't just being sold makeup, and spoke up accordingly. *What was the minimum purchase requirement? How did the commissions work? How do you learn how to give these presentations?* Daria answered each question in the same assured tone. Bronetta had taken out a pad of paper and began jotting notes.

Soon it was time to shop. "Remember, ladies, if you order tonight, Kim gets half of every sale," Daria said. "You

really are helping a friend and yourself. That's how Mary Kay works."

A trim blonde student ordered eye shadows for herself and took a catalogue home to show her mother. One of the beauty-school instructors wanted a Satin Hands Pampering Set, and I bought the Satin Lips kit after Kim promised me that its exfoliating Lip Mask would cure my chapped lips forever. And Bronetta put away her notebook and bought the \$100 starter kit.

As the rest of us trickled out with our new purchases, Bronetta stayed behind to help Kim pack up. Together they lugged Daria's giant suitcase back out to her car, a Mary Kay-sponsored Chevy Equinox LT. I watched them head to the darkened parking lot, two women in foundation-stained white smocks, dragging pink luggage.

Daria strode on ahead, unencumbered and perfect in her blue suit, stiletto boots clicking across the asphalt.

In 1938, Mary Kay Ash, a twenty-year-old Army wife raising three children alone in Houston, began selling

books and housewares for Stanley Home Products. When her husband left her at the end of World War II, Ash employed her talent for direct sales to keep the family afloat. The way her biographers tell it, her children helped pack and deliver orders on Saturday afternoons as the family's version of quality time, and Ash tracked her sales goals in soap on her bathroom mirror. By the end of the 1950s, she had worked her way up to national training director for the World Gift Corporation. But when she was passed over for further promotion at age forty-five and saw the job go to a man she had trained, she resigned in protest.

Soon after, in 1963, Ash started Beauty by Mary Kay with \$5,000 and the tagline "Enriching Women's Lives." "I wasn't interested in the dollars-and-cents part of any business; my interest in 1963 was in offering women opportunities that didn't exist anywhere else," she later wrote.

After being told for years by her former colleagues to stop "thinking like a woman," Ash was now free to rethink

much of the traditional direct-sales business model. She ditched the accepted practice of assigning associates to fixed territories, instead teaching her saleswomen to build circles of influence by culling prospective customers from among their families, friends, and communities. Potential clients were invited to intimate shopping parties where they could sample products. Ash kept the gatherings small; she claimed her saleswomen could give their best, most personal service to a maximum of six guests. And unlike Avon's sellers, Mary Kay ladies would not knock on doors—that was deemed far too impersonal for their clientele, who needed, above all, to be befriended. "Whenever I meet someone," wrote Ash, "I try to imagine him or her wearing an invisible sign that says: MAKE ME FEEL IMPORTANT!"

Women who felt important were likelier to buy products, but, more crucially, they were likelier to want to join the Mary Kay sisterhood. A consultant's circle of influence could become her sales team, with each team member ultimately building her own team from her own circle.

In 1964, Beauty by Mary Kay hosted its first award night, for 200 people, in a Dallas warehouse. Ash made the chicken, jalapeño dressing, and Jell-O salad herself, and handed out dime-store prizes to her top earners. The event, known today as Seminar, became an annual tradition, and its production values grew with the company. Seminar has become equal parts Vegas show, beauty pageant, and megachurch revival. The top national sales directors perform a kick line with the help of an official Mary Kay dance troupe. Video footage of Ash, who died in 2001, is played repeatedly. Every time her image appears on screen, all the Mary Kay ladies in the arena give it a standing ovation.

In death, Ash has become something of a patron saint. When a beauty consultant is promoted to sales director, she flies for a week of special training to Dallas, where, between lectures on leadership and sales tactics, she can pose for a photo in Ash's own heart-shaped pink bathtub, which originally occupied one of the eleven bathrooms in her thirty-room pink mansion.

Ash began awarding the famed pink Cadillacs to successful sales di-

rectors in 1969, ensuring that her best earners would also advertise the company everywhere they went. Today, Mary Kay distributes millions of dollars' worth of cars, vacations, and jewelry at every Seminar.

Ash's talk of sisterhood, however, was no byword for feminism. Her real targets were the bored housewives turned off by *The Feminine Mystique* (published the year Beauty by Mary Kay launched) who wanted to earn pocket money without threatening their breadwinner husbands. God first, family second, career third, was Ash's mantra. "Although my late husband, Mel, was very supportive of my career, he let me know that beginning at seven each evening, I was to be Mrs. Mel Ash—period. Starting then, it was *his* time," Ash wrote of her third husband in her self-help book *You Can Have It All*.

That tension between empowering women and ensuring that they retain their traditional roles remains essential to the company's success. Mary Kay insists that it employs multiple sales directors who earn more than \$1 million a year—all while setting their own hours, working from home, and never having to explain to an unsympathetic boss that they want to leave early for a child's piano recital. The current recession has heightened Mary Kay's appeal. The company's sales force has doubled since 2003, to more than 2 million consultants in thirty-four countries. In April 2011 alone, Mary Kay signed up 165,000 new consultants, the greatest monthly recruitment total in a decade. The company does not disclose sales data beyond an annual wholesale figure (\$3 billion worldwide in 2011), but a press release from January 2012 noted, "Mary Kay is breaking records" with "a 15 percent increase in sales in 2011." March 2011 represented the "highest sales month in company history."

In 2008, in the early months of the economic crisis, Mary Kay launched a new television ad campaign, and it wasn't selling skincare: "Discover a part-time choice that can lead to independence," a voice-over intoned. "Earn extra money. Be your own boss. Need this now? Discover for yourself at marykay.com." The traffic to the website's recruitment page increased 108 percent in the following three

days. You don't need connections, an impressive résumé, or a college degree to get hired in direct sales—you only need an open wallet. Put that way, the company's \$3 billion wholesale figure seems to tell a different story; rather than documenting the success of these newly empowered women, it reveals just how much they spent to be in business with Mary Kay.

After Kim's skincare class, I went online to contact the sales director nearest me. My phone buzzed with a new text message a few hours later: "This is Antonella Miccarelli with Mary Kay. I just read ur email and would love to know what would be a great time to call you tonight!" She invited me to her house that same evening for a one-on-one skincare class and meeting about my Mary Kay career.

Like Daria, Antonella lived in Hopewell Junction, a tiny suburb twenty-five minutes outside Poughkeepsie that is generously dotted with crisp new subdivisions. Her house was the kind of oversize new construction for which the builders only put brick on the front. There, however, they had spared no expense, adding columns, a curved Juliet balcony over the front door, and smart black shutters framing every window. I parked my beat-up Subaru Outback next to her car—another Mary Kay Chevrolet—and rang the bell.

Antonella was small, with a sleek bob and big brown eyes. She wore a turtleneck and corduroys and was carrying a tired-looking one-year-old. She seemed slightly frazzled. Antonella told me she was late getting her daughter down for a nap. "Don't worry if you hear a few screams!" she said with an awkward laugh as she directed me to the dining room and swept off with the little girl.

The dining room's long, polished table and sideboard were set up like a department-store cosmetics counter, with Mary Kay products grouped on every surface. Poster boards decorated with neon-pink stars and snapshots of smiling team members were tacked up along the maroon walls. When Antonella returned, she sat across from me at the table and be-

gan reading from a flip chart. “In fact, did you know that when you host a Mary Kay party, you’re partying with a purpose?” she asked, before launching into her own Mary Kay story: She had been working insane hours for not enough money as a pharmacist when she was introduced to Mary Kay and realized the income potential of direct sales. “I’ll be honest with you,” Antonella told me, looking up from the chart. “My first reaction was, ‘But I save lives—all you guys do is sell lipstick.’”

Yet soon, Antonella stopped saving lives and started selling lipstick, “and really, so much more—this is about enriching women’s lives!” Like Daria, Antonella said she’d always wanted to be able to stay home with her children. “And look, here I am doing it!” she exclaimed.

Once again, the career sales pitch included product demonstrations. Antonella wanted me to try a microdermabrasion system that she promised would cure my adult acne, and was horrified to learn that I never wore foundation: “It protects your skin from the elements,” she said. “Promise me when you become a beauty consultant you’ll start wearing foundation every day for the sake of your skin.”

She then ushered me into her half-bathroom to try out the Satin Hands scrub. When I complimented the vanity with its brushed-nickel faucet, Antonella beamed. “This is the house that Mary Kay built,” she said, waving a hand around to indicate the bathroom fixtures, the cathedral-ceiling foyer, the dining room, and, presumably, the brick façade out front.

I left with the \$55 microdermabrasion kit and a brochure entitled “Have you ever considered pink?” which included “VERY CONSERVATIVE!” estimates of how much I could earn with my Mary Kay business. Annual profits ranged from \$17,040 for holding one skincare class per week to more than \$49,000 if I were to hold three classes per week. “\$100 may not change your standard of living,” said the brochure, “but it may change your life.”

Two weeks later, I met Antonella at the Bank Street movie theater in New Milford, Connecticut, where lo-



cal beauty consultant Margo Anderson was making her debut as a sales director. “We’ll be sharing more information about how our business is an incredible opportunity for women, especially during this unstable economy,” Antonella texted. “You’ll leave feeling so inspired about how you can achieve your dreams.”

We crowded into the small auditorium, snacking on the popcorn that Margo had packed in shiny pink gift bags for us. The room was a sea of women: sales directors like Antonella and Daria, dozens of star recruiters wearing red jackets, and a motley assortment of people like me—all guests of Margo’s “sister sales directors.” “We

do have some male consultants,” Antonella said. “And husbands are always welcome. You know, ‘family second, career third.’”

The sales-director induction began with Margo giving the Mary Kay equivalent of a tearful Oscar acceptance speech from a podium. She made sure to thank her Mary Kay mentors and the twenty-six members of her sales team individually. “Honestly, this is just a big girlfriends’ club!” she said.

We gave round after round of applause to new consultants, different kinds of “star” consultants, consultants who had recently earned the right to wear red jackets, and consultants

dubbed “Directors in Qualification.” In order for a beauty consultant to achieve this rank, her team had to place \$18,000 in wholesale orders during a single four-month window and then maintain at least \$4,000 in purchases each month thereafter. If a director missed the mark two months in a row, she’d be forced to give up her title.

Finally, it was time to hear from the night’s guest speaker, Independent Elite Executive National Sales Director Barbara Sunden, who was billed on Margo’s invitation as the “#1 National Sales Director in the Entire World!!!” Sunden was small and soft-spoken but somehow terribly intimidating. As she took the podium, the microphone malfunctioned. “We are going to need a working mic, I just can’t speak loud enough for you all to hear me without it,” she said coolly—and quite audibly—as Margo raced around looking for a replacement.

Technical difficulties resolved, Sunden told us why success with Mary Kay meant so much more than free cars and big paychecks. For her, it was about defying social expectations—what people assume a stay-at-home mom can do with her “silly little Mary Kay business,” which for Sunden now brought in an annual income of more than \$1 million. She made a Mary Kay career sound almost subversive.

After Sunden’s speech, Margo invited the special guests to join her at the podium. I slunk down in my seat, but Antonella was at my elbow. “You’ll love this!” she whispered. “It’s the best part!” So I filed up to the front, where Margo handed each of us a long-stemmed rose, her eyes shimmering with tears and three distinct shades of Mary Kay Mineral Eye Color.

“These roses are my gift to you, and they represent your future with Mary Kay,” Margo explained, holding her own rose aloft. “The stem is for the support you’ll receive from your sister consultants, your director, and our wonderful company. The green leaves represent the money you will earn. The thorns are the growth points and obstacles you will overcome along the way. The pink represents the ultimate symbol of success in our company—the beautiful pink Cadillac! And the fragrance of this rose is the sweet smell of your success.”

The theater combusted into applause as we returned to our seats. Antonella turned to me with a happy sigh. “Well, Virginia,” she said, “what did you think? Are you ready to achieve your dreams?”

Antonella perched on one of the movie theater’s flip-down seats and keyed my address, credit card data, and Social Security number into her iPhone, while the other guests gathered up the extra bags of popcorn, much of which now crunched underfoot. The next afternoon I received a text from Antonella: “Hi congrats on a great business decision! I just read my emails and the company accepted the agreement!” I was officially a Mary Kay lady.

A few days later, UPS dropped off a large box printed with black and pink daisies. Inside was my starter kit, filled with product samples, catalogues, and dozens of Styrofoam trays and folding mirrors. When she called me about my new consultant training, Antonella again congratulated me on “the wonderful decision” I had made to join her unit, *Bellas of the Ball*, because our current national sales director was Barbara Sunden. “Barbara has been with the company since 1972—she was trained by Mary Kay Ash herself,” Antonella said. “So our unit has strong bloodlines. We are direct descendants of our great founder.”

The first step on my Mary Kay to-do list was making my initial inventory investment. Of course, Antonella was quick to work in the standard caveat, necessary because it’s the technicality that separates Mary Kay from a pyramid scheme: “Buying inventory is always optional with Mary Kay, and if anyone has told you otherwise, they were lying to you. You do not have to buy products in order to be a Mary Kay consultant.”

There was a slight pause. “But there are some advantages.”

It was true, Antonella acknowledged, that some consultants preferred to wait to order products until after they had made some sales using the catalogues and samples in the starter kit. But she didn’t think it was the best course of action for me, because she could tell I was so serious about my Mary Kay career. “I was just like you, Virginia—terrified to place

my first inventory order.” At the time, Antonella and her husband were working their way through some sizable credit card debt. “But my husband said, ‘Ant, you have to do this right. How are you going to sell from an empty storefront?’” Antonella ordered \$1,800 worth of inventory, set up a lavish display on the island in her kitchen, and invited four friends for a skincare class. She sold out her entire inventory of skincare products that first night and turned a profit of about \$2,000 in her first month.

That \$1,800 turned out to be a magic number. Once I ordered that amount, I’d be automatically promoted to Star Consultant—climbing a rung on Mary Kay’s ladder without making a single sale—which entitled me to a range of perks, including direct shipping whenever a customer ordered a product I didn’t have in stock. No driving door to door dropping off orders. “Remember that your time is money,” Antonella said. As I became more successful, I’d want to keep even more in stock. Antonella had around \$2,500 in inventory on hand most of the time.

My final step would be to “Book a Power Start,” which meant finding eight people in a two-week period who would agree to let me book skincare classes with them. I could expect a couple to cancel, but as long as I hit five out of the eight, Antonella assured me, I’d be on track. Which brought us right back to step number one: How much inventory did I need to get me through those five to eight classes?

When I delicately conveyed that I didn’t have \$1,800 on hand, Antonella was unconcerned. “I actually don’t suggest that my consultants use personal funding to buy their inventory, even if they do have the money,” she said. “I find that unless someone holds you accountable, consultants forget to pay themselves.” Instead, I could apply for a Chase Mary Kay Rewards Visa card. “What you need to understand is that this is not a debt,” Antonella said firmly. “If you spend eighteen hundred dollars on a new couch, sure, that is a debt sitting in your living room. But this eighteen hundred dollars is an investment in your

business.” This eighteen hundred dollars would also be almost half of Antonella’s December wholesale goal.

For the half dozen Mary Kay consultants I interviewed, the “corporate income” Daria talked about, to say nothing of Antonella’s Mary Kay dream house, never seemed to materialize. These anecdotal accounts reflect the findings of Tracy Coenen, a financial-fraud investigator and former Mary Kay lady who founded Pink Truth, an online community that describes its mission as giving “a voice to the millions of women who have had negative experiences with Mary Kay.” Extrapolating from data published in the company’s *Applause* magazine, Coenen estimated that fewer than 300 U.S. Mary Kay ladies are earning a six-figure income after business expenses—roughly 0.05 percent of the 600,000 American consultants.

Coenen also estimated that the highest-earning sales consultants generally order only about \$50,000 worth of products per year, meaning the most they’re making annually from direct sales is \$25,000. But hostess gifts, official Mary Kay skirt suits, travel, and other expenses—not to mention the challenge of moving so much inventory—eat into their profits. “Almost everyone loses money,” said Coenen. “Most of those who do profit are making about minimum wage.”

A business in which only a select few earn real money while everyone else pays to play sounds a lot like a pyramid scheme. The Federal Trade Commission distinguishes between recruiting salespeople to sell a product, which is perfectly legal, and making money exclusively through “fees for participation,” which isn’t. What constitutes a fee is, of course, vague, but the FTC has charged some multilevel-marketing companies with employing pyramid schemes. In those cases, the majority of sales occurred between company and salespeople; the retail products were essentially decoys. The FTC has never taken action against Mary Kay, and an agency spokesperson told me that he was “unable to confirm or deny” whether the company had ever been investigated.

When I contacted a public-relations manager at Mary Kay headquarters, she

was quick to emphasize the same technicality that Antonella had: buying inventory is “a personal choice.” On top of that, she said, the commissions that sales directors earn on purchases by their team members are paid by Mary Kay corporate itself; they’re never taken out of the pockets of lower-level consultants. The company’s website is equally emphatic: “Is Mary Kay a pyramid scheme? Absolutely not,” reads one FAQ. “The entire marketing structure is based on and intended to foster retail sales to ultimate consumers.”

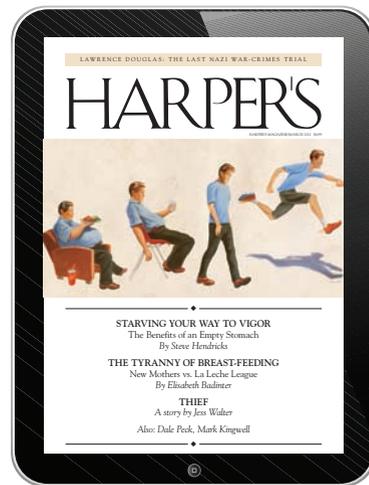
Despite this supposed focus on the ultimate consumer, however, Mary Kay has little real idea where its products end up. When I asked the press officer to comment on Coenen’s income estimates, I was told that the company tracks only wholesale figures. After a saleswoman places her order, Mary Kay disassociates itself from its carefully cultivated girlfriends’ club; every consultant is her own business, independent from (and yet completely dependent on) the mother ship.

On the Pink Truth message boards, detractors share stories of Mary Kay-sponsored divorces and financial ruin; a kind of battered-woman syndrome pervades. Members struggle to understand how they could have fallen for the company’s cheap marketing ploys, even as many of them continue to defend their particular recruiter or sales director as the exception. There’s a lot of anger and a lot of fear, and when I posted a note seeking interview subjects for this article, I received several suspicious responses questioning my intentions, but no takers save for Lynne, now a forty-year-old real estate agent in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., who asked that I not use her last name.

Lynne joined Mary Kay in 2002, after tagging along with a friend to a Success meeting, held Monday nights in a conference room at the local Comfort Inn. Lynne had arrived in a black mood. She was working as a proposal writer and had just landed her employer a multi-million-dollar government contract; her bonus was a \$50 gift card.

At the Success meeting, she had walked in to find a crowd of chatty, cheerful women. The annual Seminar in Dallas was coming up, and they talked excitedly about all the faux-diamond pins, designer handbags, and piles of

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Mary Kay products that would get doled out. Later, Lynne watched as the attendees stood to applaud a short woman in a red jacket that signified her newly achieved position as a team leader. The other consultants lined up to give the Red Jacket a series of gifts—red note cards, red candy, red coffee mugs—and pose for photos, after which the Red Jacket talked about how she never thought she'd be able to run her own business because she was partially deaf.

The woman was older than Lynne, but she looked younger, rosy and triumphant. The sales directors and the senior consultants seemed like friends cheering on her accomplishments. Lynne signed a new-consultant contract that night.

She put \$1,200 worth of inventory on her credit card during her first meeting with the recruiter, telling herself that doing so “felt reasonable for a part-timer.” Once she saw her sales director’s fully stocked shelves, she added another \$600. Lynne turned out to be great at selling, and the first order of inventory moved quickly. She also loved the girlfriend time at Mary Kay parties. She became an expert at make-up application. And she wasn’t embarrassed to approach complete strangers and start chatting about her new business and how it was changing her life.

By March 2004, Lynne’s Mary Kay career was going so well that her husband suggested she quit her day job, where she was earning \$75,000 a year, to do Mary Kay full-time. It seemed entirely possible to replicate and even surpass her old salary within a year, so Lynne took a part-time job while she built her business. She turned her basement into a showroom, painting one wall bright pink. In January 2005, she quit her part-time job to focus all her energies on becoming a sales director.

When I met Lynne last winter at a Panera near her house, it had been over a year since her last skincare party. “I’m so embarrassed now, to think about the things I did back then,” she said. Lynne has an expressive face with a big smile, and she laughed a lot when she talked about Mary Kay, though occasionally her eyes looked damp behind her glasses. She wore a long black skirt and boots, dressy for a Saturday, because she was

meeting a real estate client after our lunch. “I almost wore a pink jacket for you because it was so Mary Kay,” she said. “Like, not official Mary Kay, but so Mary Kay. But then I put it on and I just looked so fat, I couldn’t do it.”

After we ate, Lynne pulled out her laptop to show me almost a decade’s worth of pictures documenting Mary Kay parties. “Here we are at a Star Consultant barbecue at our director’s house,” she said. A photo of women in pastel business-casual milling around an expensive hotel suite was followed by women playing volleyball and eating hamburgers. “Here’s a mixer with our National. Oh God, that director there is the lady who invented the Flowers and Chocolate Plan.” I asked what that meant. “More stalking of women,” she said, almost under her breath. “You hand out roses and chocolates and say it’s in honor of Mother’s Day or whatever, but really you’re just trying to get their contact info so you can call them for an appointment.”

Lynne found out that she’d qualified to be a sales director the same day she discovered she was pregnant with her first child, in November 2005. It felt like everything was clicking into place. A few months later, she flew out to the Dallas headquarters for her Director in Training week and had her picture taken in the famous heart-shaped pink bathtub with two other almost-directors. In the photo, all three are crouched down, wearing matching gray suits and holding up champagne glasses. Lynne is in the middle, leaning forward with her chin resting on her hands, right in the point of the heart. She is smiling, but looks tired. Above her head is a portrait of Mary Kay Ash, gazing beatifically from a golden frame perched on a golden easel. “Even then, I think most people were a little torn about doing this, because the line was so long, and it was all so campy,” Lynne said. “But at the same time, there’s this huge tradition that you can only be successful if you take the picture in the tub. So nobody was willing to forgo that step.”

The next month, Lynne’s unit fell short of the \$4,000 requirement. Her Mary Kay mentors weren’t fazed. Just make up the difference out of your own pocket, they told her. You’ll do better the next month. So Lynne

made up the difference herself that month. And then every other month for a year, just barely holding on to her director status.

Although Lynne was great at teaching her unit how to sell, she couldn’t do what successful sales directors do: persuade her team members to buy. “I couldn’t push them to front-load their inventory when I knew I wasn’t selling what I was buying myself,” she said. One month, she finally did get a new consultant to put \$1,800 worth of inventory on a credit card. “It felt like I was losing a little bit of my soul.”

Lynne started to feel increasingly alone inside her big girlfriends’ club. Her husband was anxious about the credit card debt, and she couldn’t figure out why she was having problems meeting her monthly goals when everyone else talked up their big paychecks. “It took me a long time to realize that having inventory on your shelves is not a sign of success,” she said. We looked at pictures from another party, a debut for a new consultant that Lynne hosted at which only two people showed up, one of whom was the consultant’s mother. “That would happen a lot. Everybody acts like they’re selling all the time, and it’s really hard to tell, because everybody lies.”

About a year after she began frontloading her own inventory, Lynne sat in the audience in yet another hotel conference room, this one in Scottsdale, Arizona. It was the 2007 Fall Advance—“because in Mary Kay, we don’t go on retreats, we only advance”—at which Mary Kay unveiled a new line of mineral eye shadows that would cause all previous eye shadows to be discontinued. Consultants could clear out their inventory by encouraging women to use more of the old product. A sales director demonstrated by applying seven different colors of eye shadow to her own lids, a look Lynne described as “absolutely ridiculous.”

The next presentation was from a different sales director, who had “just one question” for the crowd: “Who wants to have a ten-thousand-dollar Christmas this year?” Every hand shot up. Like any retailer, Mary Kay consultants do their biggest business during

the holiday season. It's also a prime time to recruit new team members as women look to pick up holiday shopping money. "Of course! Everyone wants to have a ten-thousand-dollar Christmas!" exclaimed the director. As the presentation went on, Lynne watched the women in the audience taking notes. Some had even pulled out calculators, but it was hard to see how they'd offload the old eye shadows and other products being discontinued in time to stock up on the new holiday deals. The speaker was undeterred. "So you know you want a ten-thousand-dollar Christmas," she concluded. "How are you going to sell that if you don't put ten thousand dollars' worth of new products on your shelves?"

Lynne realized the consultant sitting next to her, a usually cheerful stay-at-home mom, had started to cry. "How can anybody afford to do that?" she whispered. "I can't put any more on my credit card." Lynne thought of the hours she would spend making gift sets and booking appointments and how she would yet again turn her family's annual holiday party into a work event by manning the Mary Kay room all night. There was no way she'd have \$10,000 to show for it by the end of the holiday season. "Here they were wanting us to buy, buy, buy, when we all knew—because they just did the presentation about it!—half the stuff would get discontinued before you'd ever get it off your shelves."

Lynne resigned from her directorship soon after, but she stayed on as a consultant. She had over \$15,000 in credit card debt and a basement full of unsold products inching closer to their expiration dates. It took three more years to fully extract herself, paint over the pink wall, and get rid of the products. In 2011, her husband filed for divorce, citing as one of the reasons their "different attitudes towards money." "He meant the whole Mary Kay thing," Lynne said. "We just never got past it." But it wasn't for lack of trying. When her husband first began to talk about leaving, Lynne cleared every last Mary Kay product out of the house, selling much of it at a loss and throwing the rest in the trash. "I didn't want him to see so much as a bottle of lotion and be reminded," she said. "I didn't want to be reminded either."

But she hasn't left Mary Kay behind entirely. The consultant who debuted with only two guests at Lynne's party remains one of her best friends and is her son's godmother. Lynne's new career in real estate allows her to apply her sales knowledge, and the commission checks are at least bigger.

"Oh gosh, we were all so happy," Lynne said as we looked at a picture of women in sequined cocktail dresses and layers of Mary Kay makeup smiling into the camera, their arms slung around one another. "I guess I didn't know who I would be without Mary Kay to define me."

In October 2011, a year and a half after I attended her skincare class, I texted Kim Montero to see whether she was still doing Mary Kay. "Not really," came the response. We met for lunch on a warm fall Tuesday, an hour before Kim needed to be at her job tending bar. She had quit Mary Kay in 2010. "I wanted Mary Kay to work," Kim said. "I really did." She succeeded in becoming a Red Jacket, with a team of seven consultants under her. Daria mentored her constantly. Kim put on a skirt suit and a full face of makeup every morning to sit in her house and work the phones, trying to book the ten skincare classes she needed to hold every week to sustain her business. Most weeks, she averaged one or two.

When she didn't have classes booked, Kim would hang out at the local mall wearing her red jacket. She left cards at local businesses and put a raffle box in her neighborhood's Smokes 4 Less store. Anyone could write down her name and number and be entered to win a free facial for herself and her friends—and everyone was a winner, a new member of Kim's "circle of influence."

One week, she drove to meet a winner, finding a sulky teenager waiting outside a run-down ranch house. Dogs barked from behind a chain-link fence. "Nobody's coming," the girl told Kim. "All of my friends canceled on me at the last minute. Sorry." Since she'd made the trip, Kim decided she might as well give the girl a facial and see if she'd buy anything. Her client led Kim inside and down the hall to her bedroom. They couldn't use the living room because her

brother and his friends were playing video games. So Kim stood in her suit and heels, with her flip chart and samples, and gave her spiel amid the piles of clothes and half-used styling products in the girl's bedroom. Her client loved the facial, but, she finally explained, she couldn't afford to buy anything. She had just started working at ShopRite and wouldn't get her first paycheck until the following week.

"The crazy thing is that I kept going after that," she said slowly. "But I guess when you're doing it, it is a little like being in a cult."

Kim didn't decide to quit until several months later, when her boyfriend started to comment on the piles of unsold inventory taking over their spare bedroom. "I think he felt bad for me, because he knew how much I wanted this, and he could see it wasn't working out," she said. After Kim went three months without buying new inventory, she was deemed "inactive." She found the bartending job and held a half-off sale to clear out the guest room.

"I did gain confidence," Kim said as we finished our sandwiches. "I can get up in front of anyone now and talk. I couldn't do that before." She was also sorry to lose touch with Daria, who had seemed like such a successful role model. "She gave me these heart-shaped earrings at my Grand Opening party—she's very nice like that," she said. Kim's "inactive" status lasted for a year, giving her plenty of time to reconsider. "I'd just have to pay twenty dollars and do the product order to get started again," she said. "But really, this time, I'm done."

For a while after our one-on-one session, Antonella texted me every few days: "Will u be a statistic or will u step into ur greatness?!" "How can I help u achieve your dreams?!" Then she switched to emails and occasional Facebook comments. Ten months later, I began receiving notices that my contract would soon be terminated. In the final month, a national sales director named Vivian Diaz emailed offering to text me daily with a list of activities that would jump-start my business. All I had to do was agree to text her back as I finished them and await new orders. "Let me warn you up front that you will be PUSHED more than you have ever been PUSHED before," she wrote. "This is not for the faint of heart." ■