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## FEATHERS HAIR ARTISTRY

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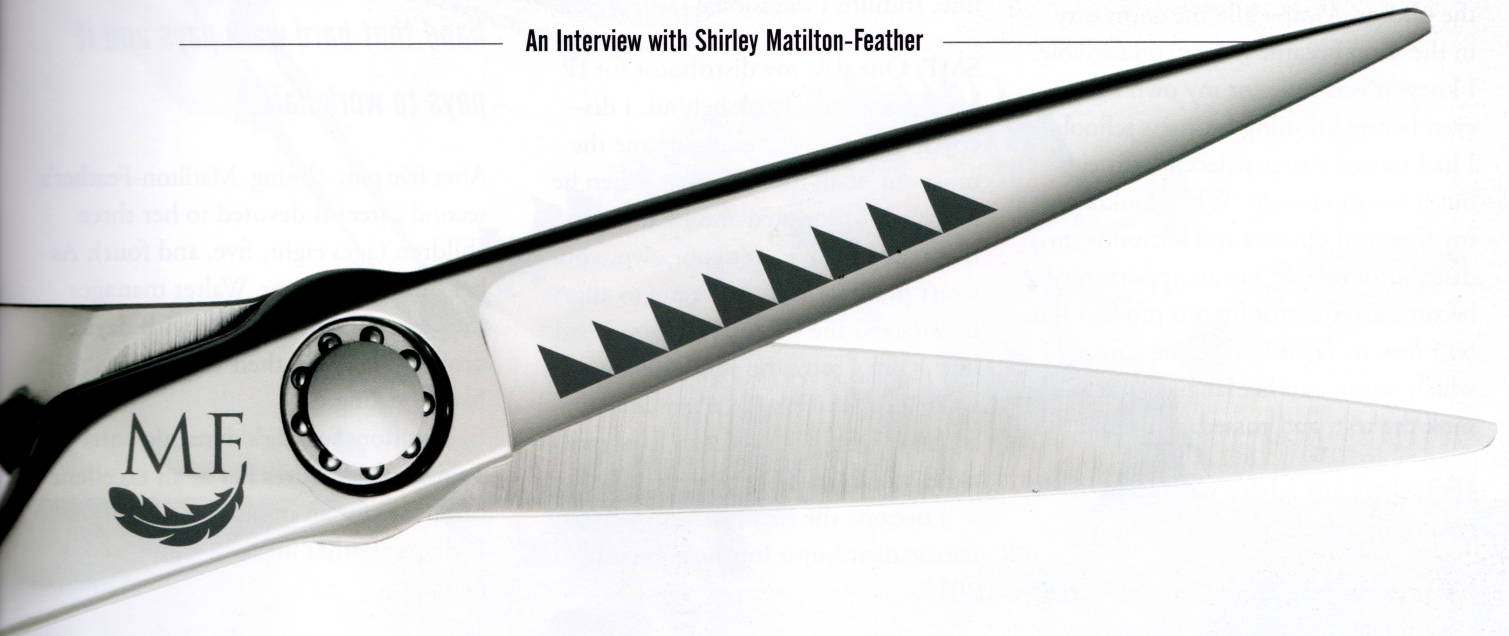
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# *Flying in Beauty with* **FEATHERS HAIR ARTISTRY**

An Interview with Shirley Matilton-Feather



by  
Jeanne Ferris

**UNSWERVING GRATITUDE HAS MOTIVATED SHIRLEY MATILTON-FEATHER (YUROK) FOR THE LAST TWENTY YEARS.**

Her unique salon, Feathers Hair Artistry (FHA), is a sanctuary for those seeking locks of beauty.

Respected as a master colorist and intuitive hair stylist, Matilton-Feather chooses a selective referral-only clientele. One appointment a day is dedicated for exclusive attention.

Loyal clients fly in from as far away as Alaska, West Virginia, and Idaho, receiving treatments starting at five a.m. Even literati like Alice Walker (Pulitzer Prize for Fiction), Dana Red Hawk (Penobscot poet), and rapper Supaman aka Christian Parrish Takes The Gun (Crow Agency) have flocked to Ukiah.

Matilton-Feather's high school goal

of becoming a hair stylist never wavered. Undeterred by the Bureau of Indian Affairs' refusal of a grant, she and her mother scheduled a meeting with Yurok Vice Chair Maria Tripp. The unconventional collateral: financial assistance required her promise to be a productive and independent tribal member. Matilton-Feather's dream to attend Santa Rosa Beauty School became reality.

Traveling everywhere while cutting hair in diverse cultures, she "regenerated unprofitable salons into money making machines for franchisees" and was offered a business partnership; her husband, Walter Feather Jr. (Round Valley), a nephew of Oglala Lakota activist Russell Means, gave sage advice to decline. Disappointed by her lack of business acumen, Matilton-Feather persevered by enrolling at California Indian Manpower Consortium (wait listed, then a one year application process) as

she continued working.

The rest is history—or rather herstory. Taking from precious family time, Ms. Matilton-Feather shared her career journey.

**Jeanne Ferris:** Please share how FHA reached elite status.

**Shirley Matilton-Feather:** After beauty school, I rented a chair but lacked a client roster, so the owner offered me 15 percent commission by selling the salon's hair products, which helped to pay for my chair. Within three months, I had surpassed sales goals beyond the other long-term stylists and when she couldn't keep stock and meet my sales growth, she told me I couldn't use their color line anymore and to get my own. So I called a friend in San Francisco who brought me a complete line that day. I also personally canvassed the neighborhood whose businesses I patronized and my church parish with a



personal letter and every person who sat in my chair, I solicited them for a referral with 50 percent off first visit on my business card.

Then I went out and brought in two homeless people from the park, I took “before” photos, shampooed, cut, and colored them, then took “after” photos and posted them on social media, which went viral. Three magazines picked up the photos. Meanwhile the animosity in the shop became too uncomfortable. I knew it was time for my own shop even before finishing business school. I had started a pretty decent nest egg but it wasn’t enough. While looking at my financial options and locations, my distributor offered me an opportunity to become an educator for our product line. So I flew to Texas to take the course, which was in another language [Spanish], took the test, and passed.

**JF:** Is there any advice you can give regarding success?

**SMF:** Persevere. Don’t do it for money, do it because you love it. The money will follow. It doesn’t happen overnight. At one time in my career, I was eight months pregnant and no one would hire me. The only shop that would hire me only had immigrants where you had to work so hard for the money. It was inhumane—cramped conditions that had no AC, no lunch breaks; it was like human trafficking. The others couldn’t file a complaint because they were illegal. I learned to speak Spanish one word at a time. Every day when going to work, I prayed to Creator to keep me from becoming bitter and to stay grateful.

**JF:** When did you open Feathers Hair Artistry?

**SMF:** In 2016. Within a year of opening Feathers Hair Artistry, we received Ukiah’s New Business of the Year. Not only is FHA the first Native-owned salon in the area, which I am very proud of, but I officially became the first Native American international educator in cosmetology for the US.

**JF:** Tell us about your color product line, Iridium Professional (IP).

**SMF:** One day, my distributor for IP left his accounts book behind. I discovered that he was charging me the most out of all his accounts. When he returned, I protested and he told me if you don’t like it, get your own, you won’t make it. That made me so angry I contacted the CEO of IP, who I had met when I took the educator test. I flew back to Texas to negotiate my contract with IP and broke free from my distributor.

I became the first Native American female distributor for the company in 2017.

**JF:** Any future expansions for FHA?

**SMF:** We’re excited about an eight-product hair care line that we’re launching in early 2020. It’s vegan and organic. Everything is being sourced, manufactured, and packaged in-state because we want to support California industry. As our third business, the revenues will be used to open another salon.

**JF:** How does FHA give back?

**SMF:** We have an annual coat drive for those in need. New socks are placed in the pockets as well. We donate to the Plowshares Peace and Justice Center and I personally like Project Sanctuary because I grew up with domestic violence. They have a safe house, court advocates; they help with bridging transitional housing, support groups, and prevention education.

**JF:** What is your life motto?

**SMF:**

“  
*Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today. In fact, it’s our family motto. Our kids know firsthand that hard work pays and it pays to work hard.*”

After five p.m. closing, Matilton-Feather’s second career is devoted to her three children (ages eight, five, and four). As her business partner, Walter manages the second salon and kids with daycare drop-off, keeping their family unit Native strong.

Matilton-Feather’s dynamic entrepreneurship ensures her as an excellent candidate for an insightful TED Talks. Perhaps another first as a California Native?