

 Print this page

Close Window

From dallasobserver.com
Originally published by *Dallas Observer* Oct 09, 2003
©2003 New Times, Inc. All rights reserved.

Think Pink **How Mary Kay got its groove back** BY SARAH HEPOLA

Kimberlee Simko had a well-paying corporate job and a thousand complaints about it. One day, a girlfriend suggested Kimberlee speak to her aunt. This aunt wasn't just successful; she was living The Dream. She owned a big house. She was her own boss. And she had done it working for Mary Kay.

Mary Kay? The giant, pink mythos of it made Kimberlee cringe. Everyone knew about those pink Cadillacs and the helmet-haired Betties who drove them. But one look at Kimberlee, and you could tell she wasn't one of Them. "No way I'm spending my life selling lipstick," Kimberlee said. Before this gig, she'd been in the military.

A year passed. As Kimberlee grew more miserable, her thoughts wandered--hawking makeup wasn't exactly her thing, but could it possibly be worse than this?

She visited the aunt.

When she tells this part of the story, Kimberlee's eyes soften. She plays with the rings on her right hand--four, five, six of them. You can see her watching this moment in her mind's eye: the aunt at the door, in a sharp suit and jewelry that could lure a fish onto dry land. The lacquered nails. The hair just-so. And yet, the woman had such an air of calm that Kimberlee felt at home. She wanted what this woman had. Not just the flash and the snap, but the presence. The peace.

"How are things?" the aunt asked.

"I hate my job," Kimberlee blurted, tears quivering in her eyes.

"We're going to fix all that," said the aunt.

What happened next is crazy, and Kimberlee knows it's crazy, but what can she say? It felt right. The aunt laid out a beauty consultant contract on the table. By this point, Kimberlee was sobbing.

"Just sign here, sugar, and I'll take care of the rest. Now, do you have a checkbook?"

Kimberlee signed over a blank check for a starter kit.

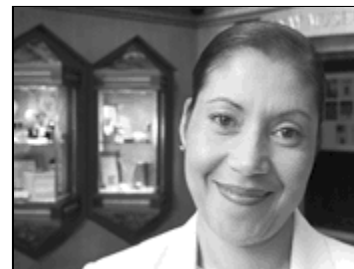
"Don't you worry about a thing," the aunt said and sent her home with a plate of cookies.

Peter Calvin



Pretty in pink: The Mary Kay Museum, located inside the corporate headquarters in Addison. Clockwise from top left: A portrait of founder Mary Kay Ash, who died in 2001; life-size figures of Ash and the company's current sales force uniforms; a gallery devoted to national sales directors.

Peter Calvin



Maria Jimenez quit her waitressing job to become a full-time consultant. She tripled her income in a month.

Peter Calvin

When she pulled into her driveway, Kimberlee's husband came out to greet her. "How did it go?" he asked.

She burst into tears. "I think I'm a Mary Kay consultant."

Kimberlee Simko told me this as we sat beside each other at the Mary Kay seminar, held in the Dallas Convention Center in July. "That was nine years, two diamond rings and five new cars ago," she tells me. Now 42 and a mother, Kimberlee thinks it's funny--her initial skepticism that surreal day--because, like many women at the seminar, she considers joining Mary Kay one of the best things she's ever done.

The word "seminar," which conjures images of dry panel discussions and PowerPoint presentations, doesn't nearly capture the pageantry of this three-day event, attended by a total of 53,000 over two weeks. The seminar features elaborate awards ceremonies, musical numbers, fog machines and something dangerously approaching indoor fireworks. "This is the Academy Awards, a Broadway show and Miss America all in one," says one of the company directors. It is also a good old-fashioned motivational hootenanny, a celebration of womanhood and warm fuzzies that feels something like mainlining an entire season of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Over the next three days, I will hear a litany of moving testimonials about triumph through Mary Kay. Single moms and former nurses and frumpy housewives and stressed lawyers who changed their lives. Their stories of transformation are impressive and, indeed, inspiring. Like Kimberlee, many of them were skeptical. But now they are making hundreds of thousands of dollars. A few of them are even making millions. Their message is the same: If I can do it, you can do it.

As Seminar begins, and the capacity crowd quiets to a hush, a video montage shows scenes from founder Mary Kay Ash's life. There she is in sequins and a fur wrap. There she is in pearls and a feather boa. A recording of her voice booms over the loudspeakers, echoes through the dark hall. "God is using our company as a vehicle to make women the beautiful creatures he created." It's as if she is speaking from the grave. Mary Kay died in 2001, at the age of 84, but her company just keeps getting stronger. This year's 40th anniversary theme: "The Dream Grows On."

I find all this a little shocking. As a Dallas kid who grew up in the '80s, I had a vague understanding of Mary Kay. Those women sold makeup, right? Like Jehovah's Witnesses sold Bibles? But now, decades later, Mary Kay Cosmetics seemed as contemporary as blue mascara. How could "the convenience of direct sales" compete with the simplicity of Internet shopping? How could an antique company survive the swarm of makeup brands, all available for discount prices at your local SuperTarget, your local Sephora? Did Mary Kay even exist anymore? I imagined the tiny, aging saleswomen doddering from door to door, selling hot pink lip crème to old women who still use White Shoulders perfume and give their life savings to televangelists.

At the end of the first day, a PR rep asked, "Did anything surprise you about Seminar?"

"It's just so *big*," I said.

She smiled. Everyone says that.

It's also surprisingly young. As a woman in her 20s, I expected to be the youngest one here, but I'm not--by a long shot. The seminar floor is dotted with a few fragile, aging Southern belles, but for the most part, the women here are very much vibrant. Women in their 20s making more money than I do. Women in



Karen Piro, Dallas' No. 1 Mary Kay saleswoman, has netted more than \$6 million in her 27 years with the company.



their 30s and 40s reveling in a newfound career. I never considered selling Mary Kay products, but the company is so much bigger, more profitable, more youthful than I imagined that when the PR rep meets me the next day and asks, "So are you ready to sign your beauty consultant agreement?" I kind of choke on the response. "That's funny," I say. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about it later.

So why the popular misconceptions about Mary Kay? For one, Mary Kay's iconic founder is dead. She was a dynamo, and without her, the company's profile inevitably dipped. Toward the end of her life, her press was more critical; her business began to flounder. Also, Mary Kay Cosmetics does not advertise. No commercials, no billboards, no slick ads. So the evolution of the products has happened largely outside the public eye. Unless you personally know a Mary Kay saleswoman, you'd have to go to the company's Web site, www.marykay.com, to find out about its popular teen line, Velocity. "Kick it with friends, do the relax thing," the Velocity Web site once read in its amusing version of faux teenspeak. Velocity is a hit, second in sales only to TimeWise, their classic three-in-one skin-care product. Other revitalizing lines include a luxurious "private" spa collection of lotions and spritzers in creamy pastels and a series of men's fragrances. But people don't think of these things when they think of Mary Kay. They think of makeup from their childhoods, of playing with their mothers' foundation, perhaps, shoveling it on thick like spackling.

The products have come a long way since then. And sales continue to climb. But the truth is that Mary Kay's continued success isn't really about cosmetics at all. Mary Kay wanted women to go into business for themselves; through that, and through her direct-sales company, they would change their lives, make money, have it all. "It was never about the makeup," Mary Kay Ash once said. Oh, she loved makeup, wore gobs of it, but the makeup was just a vehicle for her Business Opportunity. Mary Kay Ash was a self-help guru, long before we all rolled our eyes at the phrase "self-help guru." To Mary Kay Ash, her company was about "enriching women's lives." She wrote motivational books like *You Can Have It All* and *Miracles Happen* (her 1981 autobiography was recently reissued by HarperCollins), whose tagline reads, "Expect great things and great things will happen." When she appeared on a television talk show wearing a mink stole and diamonds, she addressed the camera directly. "I would like to talk to all those women at home, behind four walls," she said. "To that woman who thinks she's hemmed in, she's not. The only thing that holds you back in this company is you." Like all self-help gurus, she was extremely charismatic and kind of corny. But no matter what you thought of her wigs, her grandeur, her diva-dom, it was impossible not to admire the woman's drive.

She opened her dinky 500-square-foot storefront operation in 1963, back when a woman had to have a man's signature to own property in Texas. But these days, the notion of a "Business Opportunity for Women" sounds almost old-fashioned. Quaint. Is it still necessary? Is it serving a purpose? Here at Seminar, where thousands of women--women my age--are high-fiving each other, jangling new car keys in their hands, smiling and waving from the stage like beauty queens, I can tell you that it is.

Maria Jimenez taught elementary school in Mexico before coming to the United States. She still looks like a teacher, polite and mild-mannered, her hair pulled back in a tight bun. But she doesn't speak English (Mary Kay staffer Liz Zuckerman-Landa translated our conversation). When Jimenez immigrated in 1997, she could only find work as a waitress. About six months ago, a woman approached her at Olé, a Mexican grocery store in Plano, to ask if she'd ever considered selling makeup for Mary Kay.

"I already used the products," says Jimenez, 35, "but no one had ever offered me the opportunity." That's what she calls it: "the opportunity." Recruitment is a big part of the Mary Kay business model, kind of how witnessing is a big part of evangelical Christianity. For the word to spread, there has to be new blood. And Jimenez made a perfect recruit--a mother, frustrated with her current job and bruised enough to take a risk.

"I never thought I could sell anything," Jimenez says. "I'd never done it before." Tentatively, she signed on. She returned to Olé, this time wearing a crisp suit, hose and pumps, and a dainty Mary Kay lapel pin. She stood outside and approached women and girls as they passed. She was nervous, but Mary Kay provided her with the script.

"Hi, I'm Maria, a beauty consultant with Mary Kay. Can I interest you in a free facial?"

She sold \$600 in cosmetics right away. Within a month, she'd tripled her salary.

"It's changed my life," Jimenez says. She learned to drive. She quit her waitressing job. "You're crazy," her friends told her. "You'll be back," her co-workers said. But she didn't go back; she got a promotion. As a sales director, she has started building her own team with recruits. "Now what I enjoy the most is talking to women, being able to share the opportunity," she says. "I hope other women's lives can change the way mine has."

She is a shy woman who sometimes casts her eyes down at the floor as we speak. But she's growing more confident. She recruits everywhere now--at the movies, at the park, at Olé. Now she's the one stopping people as they shop.

"I don't know if it's just among the Hispanics," she says, "but when they see the way I'm dressed, when they see the way I look, they know there's something good to be said about what I'm doing."

People may think of Mary Kay as square and lily-white, but it is an increasingly multiracial company--especially when it comes to Hispanics and African-Americans, both of whom are historically underserved by mainstream cosmetic brands. Unlike other minorities, such as Asian-Americans (whose presence in the company is growing, but slowly), they may also more eagerly embrace the company's traditional motto, "God first, family second, career third."

This year, Andrea Newman became the youngest-ever black national sales director in Mary Kay, which means that at 32, Newman is essentially the CEO of her own company. The big-eyed, full-figured beauty stood onstage that afternoon at Seminar to accept her honor alongside her husband, a pastor in Jacksonville, Florida; her stepson; and her mother, who recruited her. "I went to a Mary Kay meeting and told her it was a cult," Newman says. "I'd never seen so many women so happy." The audience laughs; it's a common reaction. Newman gets emotional as she nears the end of her speech. "Promise me you won't look at where you are but where you're going. This is not just a dream for me but for everyone who wants to be on this stage. You can do it."

"Isn't that beautiful?" Kimberlee whispers beside me.

Outside in the lobby after the speech, an African-American consultant waits around for Newman. "I just wanted to meet you and tell you how empowering it was to see you up there today," she tells her.

Newman takes the woman's hands in hers, and they walk arm in arm down the hall. "Now tell me how long you've been with Mary Kay," Newman says, as they disappear around the corner.

In other parts of the economy, 2002 was a sucker punch to the pocketbook. But at Mary Kay, it was another record year. "As far as I'm concerned, 40 is fabulous," Tom Whatley tells the audience. "In a time of tremendous difficulty, you have rewritten history. Here we are getting stronger." Whatley is the company's president of sales, a tan and dapper man with slicked-back hair graying at his temples. Although the news of Mary Kay's recession success is surprising, it's also logical. Becoming a beauty consultant is a classic stopgap career, the kind of thing women pick up when they need extra cash or when their husbands are suddenly left jobless. With no ego-crushing application process--indeed, no barrier for entry at all save a hundred bucks--it's a career practically made for tough times.

Whatley delivers the numbers grandly: "1.6 billion in wholesale," he says. "A sales force of 1 million in 33 countries."

Make that 34. On September 13, the company's 40th anniversary, Mary Kay Cosmetics opened in Warsaw, Poland. Business is booming in developing countries, where cosmetic brand choices and (more important) job opportunities are limited. To celebrate its international expansion, Mary Kay placed its foreign directors

onstage at Seminar. They waved flags from their native countries--Brazil, Argentina, Guatemala--as they sang along to a familiar song, written in 1984 about starving children in Africa. Listening to it now, in this context, the song sounds like an eerie portent of 21st-century globalization. "We are the world," the auditorium sings. "We are the women. We are the ones who make a brighter day, so let's start giving."

After Whatley finishes his speech, Arlene Lenarz takes the stage. Since Mary Kay Ash's death, the company has been steered by Richard Rogers, Ash's son and the company's co-founder, but the public face remains that of a woman, Arlene Lenarz. The company's top saleswoman, she has netted more than \$11 million in her career. When she takes the stage, the audience stands.

"Are you ready for the three most exciting days of your life?" Her voice is growing froggy from public appearances, but she remains enthusiastic. Yesterday, Lenarz stood in the summer heat for hours while the local media interviewed her about the seminar's kickoff--100 pink Cadillacs parked outside Dallas City Hall.

"There's about 2,000 of these on the road today," she told them, gesturing with her manicured hand. One thing about Mary Kay: Everyone wants to know about the pink Cadillac. Even David Letterman, when Mary Kay Ash appeared on his show years ago, couldn't resist. "How do I get me one of them pink Cadillacs?" he asked. The real answer is that he'd have to be a sales director, and his unit would have to net \$96,000 wholesale in a six-month period. Then, he would get a two-year lease on a Cadillac DeVille. Mary Kay also offers Grand Ams and Grand Prix, but the big daddy--the icon--is the Caddie. The color is patented each year, and GM shuts down its plant in Detroit for two weeks to manufacture the cars. This year's hue is pearlescent, a minty breath of pink. They glitter outside in the Texas sun with vanity plates like PAZZAZZ and LUV LIF and 1MILLUN. "I've had one of these every year since I joined the company in 1972," Lenarz tells each interviewer patiently.

Long ago, in another life, it seems, she was a nurse.

"Mary Kay is more than a way to make a living," she tells the seminar audience. "It's a way of life!"

"Pretty amazing woman, huh?" Kimberlee says, nudging me. "She's kind of what we have left of the real Mary Kay."

"I'm humbled by that," Lenarz says later when I pass on Kimberlee's compliment. She is a petite fiftysomething with good cheekbones and a spray of frosted blond hair. She lives in Eden Prairie, Minnesota--a city most people couldn't find on a map--but that's appropriate, since so many of these women come from in-between towns and flyover states. They have rather small lives and concerns, but Lenarz has a politician's gift for treating them with empathy. In a conversation, she focuses on people, makes them feel as though they are the only ones in the room. "You have beautiful skin," she says off-handedly during our interview, and despite myself, I kind of glow. *Nightline* once featured her in a report on people who excel at their jobs. Like many successful businesspeople, she is friendly and flattering, and she believes strongly in the product she is selling. "There are three things that don't suffer in a recession," Lenarz tells me. "Bourbon, tobacco and makeup. My mother lived through the Depression, and she said if she had to choose between a loaf of bread and a tube of lipstick, she would choose the lipstick, because you feel better."

As we are talking, a consultant wanders up to Lenarz and grabs her hand. "I just had to touch you," she says, and continues on her way.

For the record, you do not have to be a woman to sell Mary Kay. A few men have joined the company, and some of them are quite successful. But the company is unabashedly designed for women. That was, in part, a response to Mary Kay Ash's experience shilling for male-dominated direct-sales businesses like Stanley Home Products. In her company, she wanted to treat women like royalty. She offered exorbitant incentive prizes--"Cinderella gifts," she called them--like diamond rings, brooches, necklaces. For a while, she gave away fur coats. That was before the PETA debacle of the late '80s, when the company was

busted for animal testing (chastened, the company teamed with PETA to salve its image) and before the fur coat became so horribly un-PC.

The seminar trade show is filled with these fabulous prizes, laid out in glass cases. There's even a Star Consultant Barbie up for grabs. Behind that are mannequins wearing each of the different Mary Kay uniforms. With each blouse, lapel, trim color and jacket signifying different levels in the company, Mary Kay boasts regalia as meaningful and complicated as the military's. Red blazer? That's a starting consultant. Pink suit with black sequined trim? Ooh, national sales director, the absolute tops.

The most crowded trade show area is always the makeup counter, where saleswomen cluster around the products, taking notes in their binders, their hands a sticky mess of colorful test stripes. Today, as usual, the most popular makeup section is the Velocity counter. The Velocity line is an orgy of pink sparkles and fruity smells. There's lotion and foaming gel in "on-trend" orange-and-white bottles like a Creamsicle, or an iMac. There's shimmer, dramatic eye shadow colors in a clear Lucite compact. "Oh," says one consultant, marveling over the counter, "let's just sell them all now."

A teen line was an obvious extension for Mary Kay. For one, every industry seems to be drooling to court a younger market. For another, most Mary Kay consultants are moms, who begin their business by selling to their family and the people they know. Who on earth wants makeup more than teen girls? And these days, it seems like they're the only ones with disposable incomes.

Velocity earned Mary Kay Cosmetics a dubious mention in Alissa Quart's excellent critique of teen marketing, *Branded*. In it, Quart quotes Mary Kay's vice president of global marketing, Rhonda Shasteen. "Kids will pull out our product after gym class, start a conversation. 'My mom's a beauty consultant. I can get you samples.'" For Quart, it is yet another example of how corporations use teens to hawk their wares, and she paints a disturbing portrait of adolescents who are treated, and who think of themselves, as nothing more than the sum of their brand names.

But here at Seminar, it's hard to fault the company for trying to stay vital. In a nearby booth, a makeover artist is performing her magic on "a Velocity girl"--one of the handful of teens who are milling around the trade show for just this kind of exhibition. She is fresh-faced and youthful, a 19-year-old college freshman whose mother works for Mary Kay. She sits in the chair, tiny speckles of embarrassed red in her face, as the makeup artist demonstrates for the audience how to apply blush to the apples of the cheeks. "Are you all using your Mary Kay tool kit?" she asks.

The women in the audience nod vaguely. The makeup artist has severe bangs and expensive glasses. She is far and away the most sophisticated woman here.

"I put a little bit of blush around the brow area, because that helps it look natural."

"I never thought of that," says a woman, scribbling in her notebook.

When the makeover is done, the Velocity girl steps into the audience and walks around so that each woman can peer at her refinished face. Her makeover is surprisingly subtle, not the vampy, thick-glossed look I had feared. As she walks slowly down the aisle, she blinks her lashes dramatically, giggling.

"Wow," the women around her say, as she beams. "You look beautiful."

Like any self-help movement, Mary Kay has its share of cynics. People dismiss it as a pyramid scheme, a get-rich-quick scam. "You can absolutely not make any money selling this makeup," writes one disgruntled former saleswoman on the Web site Cagey Consumer (www.cageyconsumer.com), which features user comments about direct-sales companies. She continues, "They used to make us dance the Macarena at weekly meetings! How humiliating!" Another former consultant gripes, "They tried to talk every girl/woman into buying as much product to stock on their shelves as they could possibly squeeze out of her." "I pity any woman who gets sucked up into this," writes yet another. "Run away and run fast." They

characterize Mary Kay as a relentlessly chirpy company that gouges its naïve sales force with flashy promises of diamond brooches and dream vacations. One poor guy writes that he has bankrolled both his ex-wife's and his current wife's flirtation with the company and now has a closet full of dusty, unused product. His post reminds me of a lighter moment at Seminar. When CEO Richard Rogers said to the audience, "We have the greatest sales force on earth. But there is another secret to our success. Do you know what it is?"

Someone yelled out, "Husbands!"

To be fair, the positive Mary Kay posts on Cagney Consumer vastly outnumber the negative. But I brought some of these reservations to Karen Piro, the top Mary Kay businesswoman in the Dallas area. Piro, 53, is a former elementary schoolteacher who was living in Iowa when a blond and leggy local television reporter approached her about joining Mary Kay. The woman was Mary Hart, who would go on to host *Entertainment Tonight*. After the Mary Kay skin-care products cleared up Piro's persistent acne, she signed up. Twenty-seven years later, she is one of the company's top sellers and has netted more than \$6 million.

"First of all, the company only requires \$100 to start," Piro says. Some consultants buy more, of course--some may even be encouraged to buy more, with the reasonable notion that the greater the financial investment, the greater the reward. What the complaints don't mention, however, is that Mary Kay has a long-held policy that any consultant can sell her products back to the company within 12 months at 90 percent cost. "I had the same concern when I started," Piro says. "What if I don't sell this? But my husband is a marketing graduate, and he looked at the information and said, 'You'd be crazy not to try this.'"

Although some complaints slammed the company for high prices, the cost of Mary Kay products falls "in between mass and prestige"--more expensive than Walgreens and cheaper than Dillard's. A tube of lipstick costs \$12. Blush is \$9. Their skin-care line is pricier--\$22 for body lotion, \$20 for moisturizer, \$18 for cleanser--but they are also the company's signature, and best-selling, products. Mary Kay consultants receive a 50 percent commission on all sales, purchasing the product wholesale, selling it at retail (the price is doubled) and keeping the difference. As consultants move up in the company by recruiting a team, the company pays them a percentage of their unit's sales. That's how Piro--after a quarter-century of recruiting women, who in turn recruited other women--can make such a jaw-dropping amount of cash.

Piro says most women in Mary Kay fail for the same reasons. "They don't come to training sessions. They don't come to meetings. There's a lack of discipline, poor time management. But isn't that the same with any business, anywhere?"

And for the record, Piro says, "I don't even know how to dance the Macarena. Where was that woman going to meetings?"

My own reservations about Mary Kay have to do with the nature of direct sales. I flinch when scruffy, big-eyed boys approach me with a list of magazine subscriptions, and at certain times of the year, I avoid Girl Scouts at all costs. I dislike the disruption, the pressure to buy.

"Boy, I understand that," Piro says. "That's why we don't go looking for salespeople. We want people who can let the person who's trying the product decide if she wants it or not. We don't want to pressure people, and we don't train anyone to pressure people."

I admit that was not my stereotype of the Mary Kay saleswoman. I pictured someone pushy and needling, something approaching the satiric women of *Hell on Heels*, the NBC made-for-TV movie. Based loosely on a true story, the movie features Shirley MacLaine as Mary Kay Ash, whose empire is threatened when the much younger Jinger Heath, played by Parker Posey, starts a rival company, Dallas-based BeautiControl. The portrait has a campy appeal--despite all their polish and gloss, these women are just harpies in pantyhose. But the women I met for this article were not like that. They were polite and kind. They were genuinely altered by their experience in Mary Kay. I know obnoxious women exist in this business, as they do in most. But it's not a requisite; in fact, in a job that requires an element of trust and likability, it's

probably an impediment.

A few days after our interview, I called Piro at home with a request. Although I'd interviewed several Mary Kay saleswomen, I had yet to experience one of the company's fabled facials. Could she give me one? Like, tomorrow? Piro was booked with other obligations, but she quickly found someone who could help. Her sister.

"Did Karen tell you it took nine years to recruit me?" Linda Bird jokes when I arrive at her Plano home. Bird, 47, now refers to herself enthusiastically as "a future executive senior sales director," but 18 years ago, she was working as a speech pathologist when she caught a glimpse of her sister's tax statement. "I really thought the job was like a hobby. Then I realized I was making a third of what she was, and I had a master's."

Rows of lipsticks line her dining-room table and converge at a makeup mirror. Q-Tips and a wash rag have been laid out daintily, like a place setting. "We let you apply the makeup yourself," Bird says, squeezing lotion in my hand. "That way you don't get home and wonder, 'Now how do I do this again?'" This is the company's "Try Before You Buy" policy. Bird hauls out a flipbook of suggested color combinations, and I glance at the before-and-after shots. A pale, pockmarked woman with a headful of frizz turns into a radiant beauty. The transformation is almost magical--from drab to fab. No wonder reality TV is flooded with makeover shows. Who can resist such a clean character arc?

As Bird looks on, I cover my face with ivory foundation. I stipple concealer under my eyes, using my ring finger to pat it on gently. I apply teaberry blush in circles slanting upward so as not to pull at my skin. I smear my lids with copper beach.

The decisions are endless: safari sunset or Persian spice? To goldenrod or to crystalline? It is almost overwhelming, and after a while, I begin to understand why people still need a Mary Kay consultant. It's not the convenience. Good God, makeup is as readily available as fast food. It's the *inconvenience* of sorting through it all, because makeup is all so mysterious and exhausting. It's nice to have someone sit down with you in private, walk you through the whole sordid process, match your fantasy to your reality. Saleswomen have sold me a hundred bad shades of red lipstick in my time, but no one has ever taught me to stipple before.

"Blending, blending, blending," Bird reminds me as I struggle to add an outside wedge of java to my eyelids. I make a frustrated face, and Bird assures me, "It just takes practice. There you go. That looks perfect."

Every Mary Kay seminar ends the same way. The lights dim, and 10 of the company's top saleswomen line the stage for a solemn "Candlelight Ceremony." It is an expression of solidarity and hope, the kind of thing you might find in a sorority, or a church--and this company is a little bit of both.

Each of the saleswomen holds an unlit candle in her hand. When the first woman lights hers, she says, "This light represents the future," and turns to the woman beside her, passing the tiny flicker across the stage. "This light represents humor," says the next. This is intended to symbolize how women light the path for one another in this company, and to underscore that, Mary Kay Ash always played the same song, "You'll Never Walk Alone."

Across the hushed audience, pockets of light pop in the darkness. They are not lighters, like at a concert, but electric bulbs on white sticks, sold outside at the seminar.

"This light represents knowledge," says one woman, who pivots to the left and dips her candle. She stoops slightly and cups the flame to help the woman standing beside her.

The wick ignites. "This light represents perseverance."