



Profile: Celeste Hilling

Skin Authority founder honored as first recipient of the ‘Spirit of Giving’ Award by the Beach and Country Guild

By Arthur Lightbourn



Celeste Hilling
Photo/Jon Clark

Quick Facts

Name: Celeste Hilling

Distinction: Founder and president of Carlsbad-based Skin Authority, a “skin care life style” company that in six years has become a leading provider of medical grade skin care products and services in the U.S.

Born: Austin, Texas

Education: B.A., Louisiana State University, 1980; M.B.A., University of Texas, 1982.

Family: She and her husband, Ted Hilling, have been married for 13 years. They met when both were running in a marathon. They have a daughter, Kirsten, 10, a student at Horizon Prep.

Physical Regimen: Works out daily in her garage gym.

Interests: Volunteerism

Philosophy: “Surround yourself with good people. You are who you surround yourself with.”

When you’re the oldest of 12 children in a family growing up poor in Texas, “caring” is something that comes early and naturally. At least, that’s how it been for Celeste Hilling, who practices the gentle art of caring both in her personal life, as an active mom and community volunteer, and in business, as the founder and CEO of Skin Authority, a “skin care life style” company that in six years has become a leading provider of medical grade skin care products and services in the U.S.

Hilling’s company focuses on promoting a healthy skin care “way of life” among women, men and teens in which skin is recognized as a frontline barrier against disease and vital contributor to self-esteem. On Oct. 14, Hilling was honored as the first recipient of the “Spirit of Giving” Award by the Beach and Country Guild, a local nonprofit volunteer women’s organization that, for almost 40 years, has been raising money to benefit San Diego’s two United Cerebral Palsy centers.

“When the Guild decided to recognize an individual or company with the Spirit of Giving Award, Celeste’s name was absolutely the first one discussed and overwhelmingly approved,” said Guild treasurer Linda Nordstrom.

“I’ve been a supporter [of the Guild] for about 11 years,” Hilling said.

Hilling is also development chair on the board of the New Children’s Museum of San Diego, a former member of the advisory board of Scripps Memorial Hospital, La Jolla, and a founding member of DOCS (Doctors Offering Charitable Services).

And, if that's not enough, she is also the talk show host of Skin Health Today, a weekly Internet radio program syndicated on World Talk Radio and Voice America's Health Channel.

We interviewed Hilling in her home where she lives with her husband, Ted, co-founder of Skin Authority, their daughter, Kirsten, 10, and their two dogs: Bear, a goldendoodle and Turbo, a boxer.

Hilling is blonde, green-eyed, trim (5-ft-8, 132 pounds) and a vibrant 51 years young. A native Texan (without a discernable drawl), Hilling was born and raised in Austin, as the eldest of 12 children, responsible for helping bring up her siblings, who were 11 to 16 months apart. "You see how it shapes you when you get older," she laughed, "because you realize you have to take control of everything."

Her father was serving in the Air Force when she was born. Both her parents were great believers in the importance of education. "They believed if you have your education, you have everything."

Walking the talk, her father, in his mid-30s and under the GI Bill, became an attorney now practicing in Shreveport, Louisiana. While her father was going to university and law school for four years, her mother worked at a bank and supported the family on \$325 a month "and we lived off of that," Hilling recalled. "Our parents always made sure we were loved and had food on the table, and when you have those things you don't realize you're poor."

To pay her way through college, Hilling worked at three jobs. She earned a B.A. from Louisiana State University in 1980 and a master's in business administration from the University of Texas in 1982.

Armed with her M.B.A., she joined the sales force of Xerox in Dallas before being recruited into the high tech industry with Wyse Technologies in San Francisco. "It was a great learning experience. I was one of the only women there in sales and marketing. "There I met a handful of people and decided to start a software company called SLATE, to build applications for mobile devices, and we were acquired by Compaq Computer." She came out of the acquisition with cash and stock in Compaq, which rose from \$19 a share to \$170 a share when the personal computer industry boomed.

She served as president of Compaq's consumer software business unit and vice president of Compaq's consumer division until 1996. Wanting to resume her entrepreneurial career, she spent a year working on a feasibility study and a business plan before venturing into the beauty and wellness industry.

"My background is technology and my husband's background is risk management," she said. "So definitely our backgrounds are not pharmaceutical. But what we did before starting Skin Authority is we launched a company called C.Spa. "It was our way of getting into the industry and learning how to do all of these things. We started our first one in La Jolla. We did facials and all those kind of things in [day spa] locations to learn about what the consumer wanted, how to service them, but, most importantly, the kind of products and the kind of things that they really wanted; and what were the most common types of skin conditions."

They sold C.Spa in 2001 to Steiner Leisure Ltd., a publicly-held company. The sale positioned Hilling and her husband to open Skin Authority in 2003. "When you look at health overall," she said, "You understand how your skin is tied to your overall health as your largest independent barrier against disease. "People often think of skin care as being very cosmetic... using creams and lotions to maintain this organ. "But the truth is and statistics show if someone has a melanoma, a form of skin cancer, they are 31 percent more likely to have another form of cancer or disorder. So you can see there's a direct tie when this immune system [our skin] starts to deteriorate, the rest of our body does." So, when she founded Skin Authority with five people, including herself and her husband, "It was more about education for the consumer, not just selling lotions and potions, but really putting professional guidance behind that skin health so people can understand what they can do proactively to take the best care of this suit of armor that we have for the rest of our body."

Skin Authority, now with a staff of 25, operates clinics in Carmel Valley, Carlsbad, Temecula and San Juan Capistrano and distributes its proprietary line of medical skin care and treatments nationally through 145 certified resort and destination spas. "We started in a garage," she recalled. "We assembled our kits in a garage. And the very first time we ever exposed all our products we had a party at our house. We invited some 200 people and we set up 10 massage beds in my bedroom. And now we have 10,000 square-feet of clinic, administrative, manufacturing and warehousing facilities in Carlsbad."

The company also has a large Web-based clientele using its products that it supports with a licensed bank of skin care coaches on staff who provide advice via online consultations, telephone and e-mails "to make sure what you're

choosing to do with your skin is the right thing for you. “That’s what has made our company so amazing [in its growth and consumer response]” Hilling said. “We’re sort of like the Jenny Craig of skin in that you can have your skin care coach that helps you stay with something long enough to see a result.” Skin Authority develops all of its products and owns all of the product formulations. “We work with chemists, immunologists, people who we’ve organized as an advisory group to us to assist us in designing [products and services].

“A lot of people put their names on products and they have no idea what’s in those bottles. They’re all about the sales and marketing, but they don’t understand the formulations. We sit there in the lab and we have to know what’s going in there. And we do studies outside of what the ingredient manufacturers have done to make sure that whatever they are telling us this ingredient will do is really what it does.”

Anyone wishing to learn more about Skin Authority may do so by visiting its Website at: www.skinauthority.com and by registering for one of two “boot camps” to be held on Sunday, Nov. 1, 12 p.m. and 2 p.m. at the New Children’s Museum, 200 W. Island Ave, downtown San Diego. Boot camp fee is \$45 and includes a one-on-one consultation, treatments, a \$25 retail gift certificate, a one-year subscription to Spa magazine, food and beverages.