

In the Limelight with Dr. Harriet Comite

BY MICHELLE E. BIGGERSTAFF

After adopting Berks County as her home years ago, Dr. Harriet Comite has built a successful dermatology practice, raised accomplished daughters Marisa and Laura Kaplan, and – with the inspiration of her mother – perfected the art of organic container gardening. She lives in Wyomissing with her high school classmate (and partner in work as well as in life) Alan Geltman, with whom she reconnected in 1999 at the famous New York City restaurant Tavern On The Green.

Q: Since you're from Far Rockaway, New York, what brought you to Berks?

My husband and I were looking to relocate. He had a position as a radiologist with Community General Hospital in the city. We saw there was a need here for a dermatologist too. We thought it was a great place to raise children and still be able to visit my family in New York – and we were right; it has been a wonderful place to live and work and raise kids.

Q: What led you to dermatology?

In medical school, you're exposed to all specialties. I really loved dermatology because of the ability to examine an area directly and diagnose immediately. I find it rewarding treating people of all ages for medical, surgical and cosmetic issues. I've had patients tell me how treatment improved their lives. For instance, I often see someone who's withdrawn become more confident after successful treatment.

Q: That must be a great feeling – to be able to make a positive impact for a patient.

Absolutely. I love what I do. I'm very passionate; it's fun and gratifying. I hope to be remembered for improving lives; as a doctor, I can't think of anything better.

Q: How did your practice begin?

I started my practice in an office in the doctor's office building at St. Joseph's Hospital until I moved to my current location in May of 2000. I worked two 12-hour days while my girls were young so I could be a hands-on mother. I'm so glad I was able to pursue my profession and be home for special moments with my daughters, both of whom make me very proud. My oldest, Marisa, is a graduate of Wharton and Harvard and works as a financial adviser in Johannesburg, South Africa. My younger daughter, Laura, is starting medical school in New York, so I'm glad I had that time with them.

Q: Does Laura have plans to follow your footsteps...into dermatology?

Maybe. She's always liked what I do. She started coming to work with me from time to time when she was just three, so we'll see. I come from a family of doctors; both my twin sister Florence and my brother Stephen are also physicians in New York, so Laura will be yet another doctor in our family.



photo by John A. Secoges, Secoges Photographics

Q: Finding a balance between career and family can be difficult. Was – or is – it a challenge for you?

Definitely, but I'm grateful to have been able to do it. Family is important to me – being a mother to my daughters and being a daughter for my mother. My mom, Helen, who is a Holocaust survivor, came to live with us a few years ago, and she and I enjoy gardening. After a day of work, it's great to be outdoors, check my plants and spend quiet time together. Bending was becoming difficult for her, so I had a friend design some raised planters. They're amazing because I can plant all the vegetables I want in them and pulling weeds, or other maintenance, is so easy.

Q: What's the most important thing people should know about skincare?

Prevention is key. Early in my career I learned that skin cancer prevention also leads to younger skin. Just like eating right and exercise prevent disease and help you look great, avoiding sun exposure keeps skin healthy as well as looking good. As a cosmetic dermatologist, I do reverse damage, but prevention is best.

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