







# SPA PIONEER

BURKE WILLIAMS DAY SPA OWNER  
BILL ARMOUR SHARES HIS INSPIRATION

BY ERYNNE ELKINS

PHOTOS BY DAVID YOUNG-WOLFF (OPENING AND FAMILY SHOTS)

SPA PHOTOS PROVIDED BY BURKE WILLIAMS





AT THE END OF THE DAY, IF YOU FEEL GOOD ABOUT WHO YOU ARE..THAT WOULD BE THE HIGHEST DEGREE OF SUCCESS I COULD ACHIEVE. —BILL ARMOUR

There are days when I wake up and think, ‘This is how it should have played out.’ And then there are days I wake up and I am humbled that 1,500 people would choose of their own volition to work for Burke Williams,” says the spa’s owner Bill Armour. He adds with a laugh, “There are also days when I think, ‘Gosh, I don’t really belong here...’” Entrepreneur, father, grandfather, and husband, as well as pioneer of the Day Spa concept, Bill reveals what prompted him to develop the well-revered, multiple-location Burke Williams spa group. “It began as seeing a potential market and knowing that people would partake if they were just given the opportunity.

We took that product and built a new home for it.”Spending the afternoon with Bill, his wife Theresa, and their family at the couple’s Malibu home, I get to know the man behind the Burke Williams brand that has expanded to nine locations throughout California. The home’s immaculate backyard is lined with fruit trees; bunches of blooming white roses spill from the balcony overhead. As his three grandchildren race around the pool with Bill and Theresa’s white Labrador re-

triever and son Bourke’s Rottweiler in tow, I turn my attention to Bill. He has a calm and easygoing manner about him. I ask Bill to take me back to the beginnings of Burke Williams, now synonymous with the term “Day Spa” in California.

Born in Denver, Colorado, Bill’s family moved to Southern California when he was a kid. Theresa met Bill when she was in high school. “I was 16 years old; we were set up on a blind date. I met him in the seventies and everybody was a hippie. And there he was at a golf shop, wearing plaid pants. He wasn’t like anybody else. He’s not bound by the way other people think. That is what amazed me and attracted me to him,” she recalls. Their courtship blossomed—they’ve been married for 32 years. Having taught golf for a decade, Bill transitioned into a career in sales that required frequent international travel. On these overseas trips the duo acquired an appreciation for resorts and spas—during the seventies, spas weren’t popular in California, let alone the U.S. This ignited a spark of inspiration. Bill recognized a void in the local market which presented the question: Why not bring the same element of massage therapy and relaxation to California? “Part





of its genesis was out of (the realization) that we had a very hectic lifestyle. My wife was up at six in the morning and exhausted by 11 at night with kids running around. There was no place someone in that position could escape to rejuvenate. This concept did not exist,” he explains.

Although a familiar spa offering nowadays, at one time therapeutic massage was considered taboo. Because Bill was steering into previously uncharted waters, opening a therapeutic massage center in the U.S. required an adult entertainment license. He persevered, obtained the license, and opened a 3,000 square foot storefront in Brentwood. They named the space, ‘Burke Williams’—Bourke after his first-born son (spelled differently as research showed that people had trouble pronouncing “Bourke”) and Williams as the derivative of his own name, Bill. Bill saw the brand name as a way to legitimize the center as a proper upstanding family-run business. Having trained in massage, he took on the role of masseuse and at the onset had a total of one client - his next-door neighbor.

Within one year, the facility outgrew Brentwood and in 1988, reopened as a 7,000 square foot space in Santa Monica, offering added “spa” amenities. Bill’s foresight and trail blazing acumen helped pave the way for today’s lucrative day spa category. Day spas currently have the highest profit margins

and account for 78.9% of total spas, followed by resort and medical spas. Today, the flagship is located in a different part of Santa Monica - in an area measuring over 21,000 square feet, it is the largest in the Burke Williams Day Spa portfolio. Most properties feature whirlpools, saunas, treatment rooms, private locker rooms, and a Quiet Room - a post-treatment area “where you continue that sense of bliss.” Just as the spa’s offerings have expanded, Bill’s children have also grown with the business. Today, Bourke, 29, oversees the Spa infrastructure; “I make sure the Spas are running,” he tells me. Signature Treatments such as Hunter’s Retreat and Savannah’s Surrender are named in tribute to Bill’s second son, Hunter, 26, and daughter Savannah, 21.

### SPA INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

Here’s a look into the progression of the spa industry: The economic boom of the 90s resulted in an annual growth average of 19 percent. In 1999, the U.S. spa industry earned revenues of \$5 billion with approximately 90.7 million spa visits. Double-digit growth continued into the mid-2000s but the recession ended the 22-year period of growth in per capita disposable income. Bill reiterates, “These last five years with the economic downturn have been trying on this company because it’s a luxury brand. We took a severe hit. It’s discretionary income... It’s where we gain our dollars.”





Things are looking up however. iSpa's latest figures for 2011 show that spa revenue has grown to \$13.4 billion, with 156 million spa visits made. Disposable income is forecast to rise by 1.7% in 2013 alongside a 3.5% growth in industry revenue—this means greater opportunity for discretionary spending on spa services. The baby-boomer generation is a key market given their desire for anti-aging products and services. To accommodate, Burke Williams Spas carry an exclusive line of skin care products. "It's called H2V. We wanted something that was active, that really had an impact," says Theresa, who heads the project. "Our latest addition to the H2V skincare line, the Youth Cell Activator, is one of our most innovative products targeting fine lines and wrinkles. This product was developed to activate and self-renew existing at risk stem cells," she explains. Backed by an art-meets-science philosophy, H2V combines the unique plant derived ingredients that creates an almost immediate reaction—it activates on the skin in just two hours after application. Used in-house, and also available online, I can attest to its effectiveness.

On my recent visit to the Santa Monica location for an Organic Enzyme Facial, I left the spa aglow.

With Mother's Day one of the spa industry's busiest holidays, I was curious to know the pattern for Father's Day spa visits. "In the beginning, we recognized that the market was truly going to be 95% female. But as the business got traction, we saw that men were starting to take care of themselves in a different way. Our male clientele has grown from 5% to about 30% of our business. We started developing services and products geared towards men." Bill continues, "It's an opportunity from a business perspective to see men come in and relax, unwind, take the stress out of their day for a moment or two and really experience something they've probably looked at from the outside and wondered what it was really like."

After a series of photos, we wind down in their nautical-inspired—living room. Bill and Theresa relax on the sofa; their grandchildren continue running around. I'm curious to hear Bill's thoughts on Father's Day. After a slight pause, he responds,



“It was a time to celebrate my father, to really slow down. He adored getting the family together.” To which he adds, “I love the day. I’m carrying on the same tradition. I get to see all of my kids, who are living their own lives, all come together. We feast and joke and play and have fun.” Not long before, when I had asked Bourke, father to the three energetic children - twins Aurora and Emmy, and Isaiah—the question, he voiced a similar sentiment, “It’s definitely a day to honor my father because of everything that he is (and) he’s given me. My father is my moral compass.”

This moral compass is navigating the future. “We are launching a company-based philanthropic charity that will be employee, company, and personally sponsored by Theresa and myself.” Called ‘Hands for Hope,’ its purpose is to help employees of Burke Williams in need. I ask Bill what influences his business and personal life on a daily basis. He says, “In our home life, we try to live by morals, standards, integrity, and all that that would encompass in terms of generosity, gratitude, kindness and social responsibility. We try to bring a more foundational aspect

of a value system to the company.” Theresa adds, “(Faith) is the central theme of our life. It does inform every decision we make. The principles guide how we behave. When we began the business, we were young, we always had trust, we knew we were fine with or without the money, with or without the things, because there was something bigger and better that we were working on.”

It is evident that spending time with family is important to the Armours. Bill credits his marriage as the greatest influence on his personal growth. Ask Bill to define success, and he responds, “At the end of the day, if you’re able to close your eyes and feel comfortable with the decisions you’ve made, if you feel good about who you are, then having that clear conscience would be the highest degree of success I could achieve.” Alongside the roles of entrepreneur, father, grandfather, husband, and pioneer already indicated in my notes, I also add... Leader. 📌

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