



Brewster mother creates second job from nitpicking

No, really, she picks nits

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BREWSTER - If head lice could put a face to the enemy, Maryellen Kumiega would be on their watch list.

The Brewster mother of two is a professional nitpicker, and she is personally responsible for eliminating thousands of lice from the heads of approximately 100 Cape Codders and summer visitors since starting her business, The Picky One, last fall.

"I was very busy this summer," said Kumiega. "I saw some beautiful homes."

She makes that point because head lice infestation is not a socioeconomic or hygiene issue, Kumiega says. In fact, she says, lice find it easier to cling to shafts of clean hair.

If anyone knows a thing or two about lice, it's a woman who has spent hundreds of hours combing through locks of hair for fast-moving lice and their stationary but sticky eggs, or nits.

Lice crawl - they don't jump or fly, says Kumiega, who also teaches preschool twice a week. Children pick up the lice when they cuddle or even read together, and their parents - usually their mothers - can get the bugs in the same way, she said.

Lice can't live more than 48 hours without a blood supply and they do not infest couches and cushions, she said.

But the pests can be very hard to remove if the infestation isn't treated properly, Kumiega said. And she should know - before she hired her own nitpicker and learned how to treat lice, she battled her own children's head lice for six months.

The over-the-counter head lice kit from the drugstore didn't work, nor did the prescription cream from her pediatrician, Kumiega said. Her children missed time from school and she missed days of work.

"It will consume your life," Kumiega said. "My problem is I was doing everything wrong."

At her wits' end, she confided in her sister, a teacher, who put her in touch with a professional nitpicker off-Cape.

Watching the woman work, Kumiega's new career was born.

"I finally had my 'ah ha!' moment and realized that I, too, could do this," Kumiega wrote in the press release for her business.

One woman who recently discovered her two children had head lice said she called Kumiega at 7 one morning in a controlled panic after locating the nitpicker on the Internet.

"I didn't treat it myself at home and wish on a wing and a prayer it would go away. I called a professional," she said. The woman said she didn't want to give her name because of lingering stigma associated with head lice infestation.

Kumiega calmly guided her through the process, she said. Her children picked up on her stress and were relieved when Kumiega pulled into the driveway. "They were like, 'Hey, mom, the lady's here!'"

Kumiega charges by the hour for an initial house call and treatment with a two-hour minimum, plus a travel fee. Except in cases where several family members with thick or curly hair are infested, the visits don't usually last more than two hours, Kumiega said.

Anxious parents can get a follow-up head check, but Kumiega usually finds families do fine by following her protocol, which includes an olive oil treatment.

She boils all her tools, including a long-toothed metal comb. And she keeps a wooden stick on hand to safely scratch her own head when the sight of lice makes her itchy.

So far most of her clients have found her through word-of-mouth and Internet searches, Kumiega said. She said nit-picking services are much more common off-Cape - and, she said, more expensive.

"They might hear about it in a conversation and think it's gross, but three months later they remember that information," Kumiega said.

Don't go nutty over nits

September is Head Lice Prevention Month. Find help:

- Maryellen Kumiega, 508-221-1054 or e-mail thepickyone@comcast.net, website www.capecodlice.com.
- www.headlice.org, the website of the National Pediculosis Association Inc.

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