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Sweet Sixteen

After 16 years, stylist Jeff Casens still looks up to Marianne Strokirk.

By Anne M. Raso Photographed by Jeff Stella

Good instincts have played a pivotal role in Marianne Strokirk's success. She relied on them when she opened her first salon more than eight years ago in Chicago, and she taps into them regularly when choosing her staff. "I just pick up good vibes from people—even if they have no previous experience in the field," says the 52-year-old Swedish native, who counts Princess Diana and First Lady Hillary Clinton as clients.

It was those vibes that led Strokirk to hire Jeff Casens 16 years ago when she was a senior stylist at the Charles Ifergan salon in Chicago. A struggling musician, Casens walked into the salon looking for an odd job to make ends meet between his flutist gigs. Strokirk, however, saw someone for the long haul. "He had enthusiasm and style," she recalls. "I knew he had incredible potential. I also knew he would be a quick learner."

The goateed Casens didn't expect to become anything more than a salon receptionist at the time, but Strokirk's magical scissor work caught his eye and changed his mind. "Marianne is the queen of the straight cut," says the 38-year-old Casens. "She was doing the sleek, sophisticated, no-fuss styles long before anyone else. When I first met her, she was the only person using a razor at a



Jeff Casens with Marianne Strokirk

top-level salon like Ifergan. After about three months, I had realized it was a really great way to make a living—and with a really wild crowd of people to be around. I registered with the state as an apprentice, assisted Marianne for about three years, got my license, then my own chair."

Strokirk did more than inspire Casens to join the hair-dressing profession, however. Her influence also encouraged him to experiment with new cutting techniques. "Working with her helped me to learn some of the most difficult work, like *efilage*, which is opening and closing the scissors perpendicularly on the hair. She knows how to blend layers subtly, and how to frame a face."

"From the beginning, working with Marianne has been like working with a friend," Casens continues. "There was never a 'teacher' attitude. The only problem we ever faced was a bit of a language barrier since she's Swedish, but we found ways to get over that. We eventually knew what the other was talking about by demonstrating what we meant."

Casens isn't the only one who has benefited from the relationship. "Jeff is just a fun person to be with," says Strokirk. "He's inventive, personable and loves what he does. I love to see how he talks to customers, as much as watching the work he does on them. It's great to see how he adapted what I taught him to his own style. His enthusiasm goes back at me and makes me do better work. I always knew he could reach the top of this field before he ever even held a pair of scissors in his hand." ◊