

“Hands that Heal & Create”

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¹ Note that multiple angles of the same item are shown for a better perception/view of the room.

Nearly five million Women in America work more than one job, often sacrificing sleep and rest just to make ends meet. My photo essay, *Hands That Heal & Create* explores the everyday life of a 21-year-old Dominican Woman working full-time as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) while independently running her nail salon rented in a beauty suite. The artist in question is: Sherlisbeth, I was inspired to document her trajectory not only as the daughter of an immigrant myself, but because her journey reflects something I've seen my whole entire life; Latina and Black women carrying two, sometimes three roles at once, holding on to creative dreams even when the world makes them feel impossible. Life got in their way: immigration, survival, motherhood, bills, expectations and the exhaustion that comes with constantly being needed. And although life is unpredictable, witnessing her start early showed me why it matters to pursue dreams before the world teaches you to shrink them. Photographing her sacred space became a way to honor that lineage and how what ambition and exhaustion look like when they coexist inside one person.

This project began with my desire to document a form of undervalued and often overlooked labor so that my artist statement can emphasize the value of it. Beauty work in in Latina and immigrant communities is frequently dismissed as “extra” or “superficial”, even though it demands discipline, skill, and emotional sensitivity. When I stepped into her suite—the warm pink lights, the soft music, the neatly arranged tools, the small snacks she offers clients, I realized I was looking at a full ecosystem built from care. It was more than a rented studio; it went a healing space.

Through my images, I wanted to capture the parts people don't see: late-night cleanup, the strain in her back a 12-hour shift as CNA, the precision in her hands when she's already exhausted, and

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the emotional labor of listening, comforting, and uplifting her clients while quietly carrying her own worries.

Understanding her work also meant situating it within the broader context of Latina labor in the United States. Flores (1973) explains how Latin@ communities exist in an “internal colony,” where economic mobility is restricted and opportunities remain unevenly distributed. My friend’s decision to initially open her business, and even go further by moving her business to a beauty salon and renting her own suite room, rather than a larger commercial salon—directly reflects those limitations: the financial barriers, the licensing fees, the lack of generational wealth or access to business loans.

The Young Lords argued for community-controlled institutions and self-determination, insisting that Latin@ people historically learned to build their own paths when society offered none (Young Lords, 1971). Her suite is part of that same legacy. It is resistance. It is resourcefulness, it is she opening the windows for more money flow, a Latina Women saying, “I don’t have much, but I will build something for myself, even if I have to start off small.” Her story also mirrors the emotional weight that Latina women often carry. Stafford et al. (2019) found that many Latina adolescents describe being overwhelmed by expectations—from family, culture, school, and work.

Even as an adult, Sherlisbeth moves through the world with similar pressures. She supports her family, works full time as a CNA, manages clients, studies new nail techniques, and still shows up with softness. Beauty work itself requires emotional labor, which Hochschild (1983) defines as the management of one’s feelings to uplift others. In her studio, emotional labor appears in the way she listens, reassures, compliments, and makes each client feel cared for. These images

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attempt to reveal the invisible work beneath the surface: the patience in her gestures, the careful setup of her space, the way she creates calm for other even on days she feels overwhelmed inside.

Her studio also operates as a cultural sanctuary. Craig (2020) notes that beauty practices among women of color are not shallow, they are deeply political, tied to identity, affirmation, and resistance. In her suite, Dominican and Latina culture show up everywhere: the music, the bright colors, the warmth, the snacks, the way everyone is greeted like family. These details align with Hondagneu-Sotelo's (2001) idea of cultural micro-economies, in which immigrant women create workspaces that double as cultural and emotional hubs. Her business represents survival, but it also represents joy and cultural pride.

Economic and structural Barriers also shape her entrepreneurship. Auger (2011) describes how marginalized people navigate systems designed to slow them down— system full of waiting, delays, and uncertainty. Latina business owners experience similar struggles: slow licensing processing, inconsistent regulations, financial insecurities, and a lack of institutional support. These obstacles make entrepreneurship feel risky, yet my friend continues anyway. Her suite is a testament to resilience, showing how Latina women find ways to move forward even when navigating systems not built for them.

Throughout this project, I began to understand her nail suite not just as workspace, but as a living representation of gendered labor, cultural expression, emotional resilience, and artistic craft. The close-up shots of her hands reveal the skilled, steady movements Sennett (2008) links to craftsmanship. The wider shots reveal the environment she has shaped—cozy, pink-lit, and welcoming. The candid shots capture her humanity: the late-night fatigue, the joking with

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friends, the quiet pride after completing a difficult set. All of it speaks to the complexity of a Young Latina woman building her own path. Her motivational trajectory— her determination to build something of her own reminds me of the unfinished business our mothers, grandmothers, and aunts often had.

Overall, Hands That Heal & Create is ultimately a tribute: to her, to Latina entrepreneurs, to immigrant daughters, and to the women who came before us. It is a recognition of the labor— material and emotional, artistic and economic— that our communities often carry silently. By documenting one Dominican nail artist’s journey, I hope to honor not only her present but also the dreams of the women who never got the chance to start early. This project makes her visible, and in doing so, affirms that beauty businesses are powerful sites of resistance, independence, healing, and cultural memory.





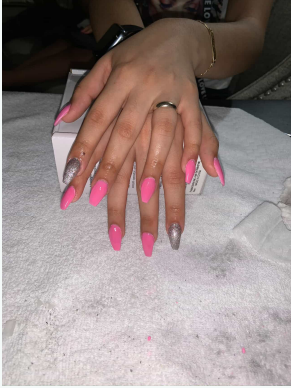
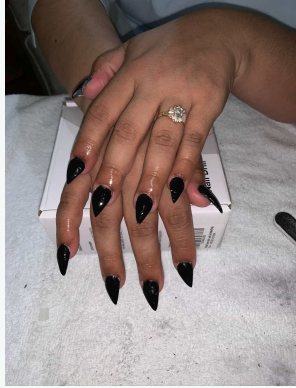
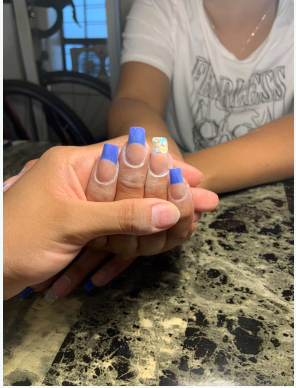

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Note that the order of pictures on page 8 are meant to show a 360 degree rotation view of how the room looks like.

| | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
|  |  |  |  |
| <p>Very First set-up (at home).</p> | <p>Very first set of nails.</p> | <p>Kept practicing.</p> | <p>Started to see progress.</p> |
|  |  |  |  |
| <p>Did not gave up.</p> | <p>She started to see potential.</p> | <p>Real potential</p> | <p>Financial potential.</p> |

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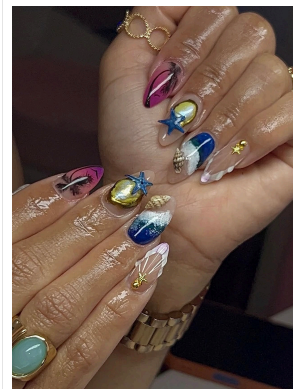


Sherlisbeth in her CNA uniform



1st photoshoot at her old nail room.

Note that from this point forward the images showcase the set up for her new nail room. Some pictures were taken earlier throughout the semester. Others were taken more recently towards the end of the semester. Hence why you'll see Halloween and Christmas decorations.



Her beautiful work now.



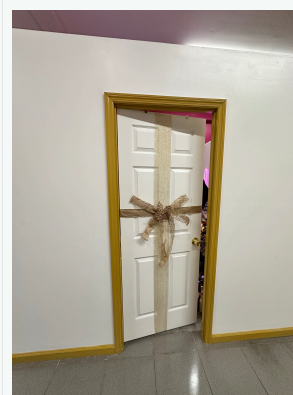
Entrance at the beauty salon.



Left side once you come in.



The front view from the entrance

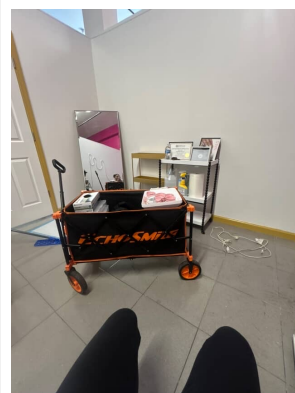


The door to her room.

Consider the door a starting point to imagine what the room looks like.



Door open



The chaos before organizing the room.



But she started to put things together.

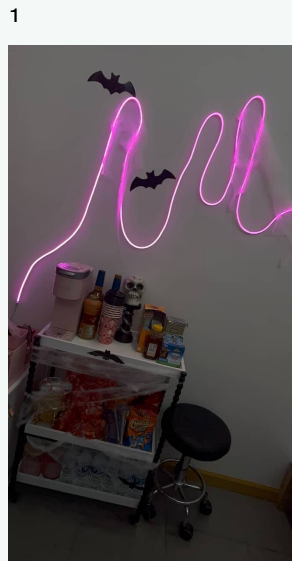
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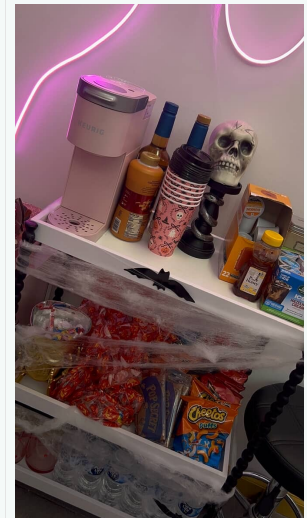
To the left once you come in through the door: Her pedicure Bowl.



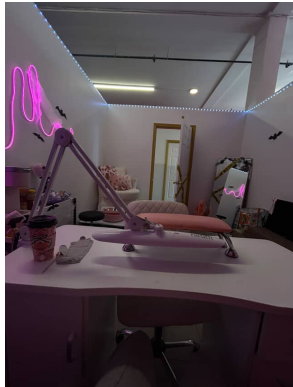
What her pedicures normally look like.



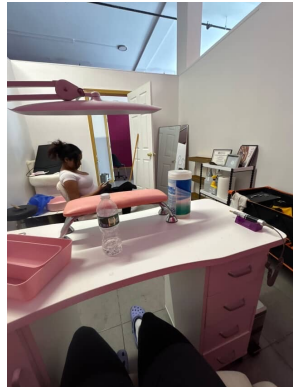
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Free snacks for customers



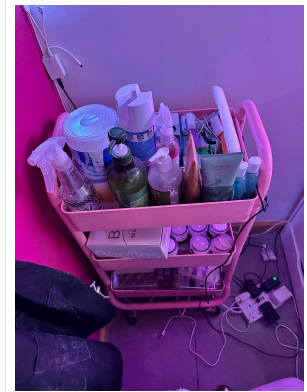
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Working table now.



Mini cart with nail essentials.



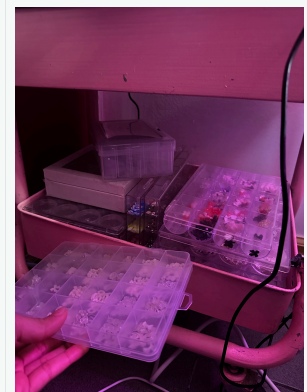
Nail colors to choose samples from.



Paint brushes & nail tip materials.



Acrylic powders.



Nail Tips.

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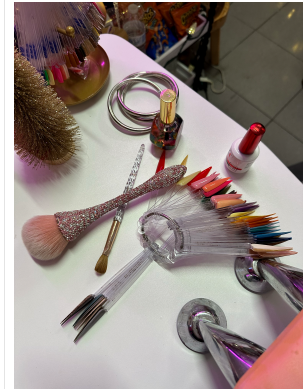
Gel polish.



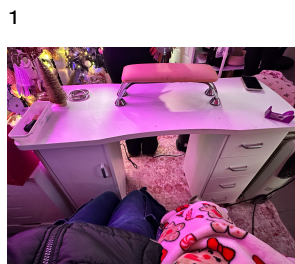
LED lights/nail dryer.



Nail drill.



Nail essentials more closed up.



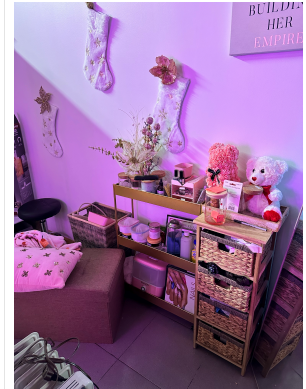
The purpose of this picture is to show where her furniture is located.



She keeps the brushes, color samples, dust brush and other mini essentials in this drawer.



To the right: her trash can—that must stay close and mirror.



Pedicure essentials are mostly stored here.



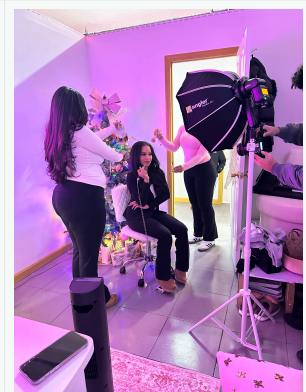
Nail files, nail drill bits.



Feet scrubs, she stores variety for customers preference.



Manicure soak bowl.



Note the purpose of this picture is to show what's on the right of the pedicure essentials aka the door.

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