

Alumni Spotlight

CUYAHOGA VALLEY CAREER CENTER

Jennifer Cortez

Class of 2004



CVCC is so excited to welcome back Jennifer Cortez, our Educational Aide for our high school Cosmetology program and a proud 2004 graduate of Nordon High School and CVCC's Cosmetology program. Jennifer first discovered her love for hair and makeup right here at CVCC, where her journey into the beauty industry began.

"I was always the one doing my friends' hair and makeup growing up," Jennifer recalls. "At the time, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life, but my grandma was a cosmetologist, which inspired me a bit. Then I toured CVCC, saw the Cosmetology lab, and instantly knew—this was it. This is where I wanted to be."

Jennifer shares how CVCC changed her perspective on both education and life. "Before coming to CVCC, I was just going through the motions with school. But once I joined a hands-on program doing something I was genuinely passionate about and had chosen for myself, everything shifted. My grades went up, I became more responsible, and I learned how to manage my time effectively. In the real world, no one's there to wake you up and tell you to go to work and push you—you have to make that decision yourself. That's one of the biggest lessons CVCC taught me."

After graduation, Jennifer moved to New York City to attend Il Makiage Makeup Academy, where she was fortunate to learn from Ilana Harvaki, the original founder and a New York-based makeup artist to celebrities. She then continued her education at Christine Valmy International School of Esthetics & Cosmetology, supported in part by a scholarship she received from CVCC. Jennifer's career has taken her coast to coast, including California and nearly a decade working at Dolce Lusso salon in Charlotte, North Carolina, where the salon and director of education, Britt Dion, played a crucial role in helping her secure advanced Aveda training and NFL connections. Following her extensive Aveda training, Jennifer became an Aveda makeup instructor herself and eventually opened her own salon suite 9.5 years later. During her time in Charlotte, Jennifer spent over a decade in high-profile roles including working New York Fashion Week and serving as the lead makeup artist for the Carolina Panthers TopCats cheerleading squad for nine seasons! "I wouldn't feel right sharing my NFL and Aveda accomplishments without acknowledging Dolce Lusso and Britt Dion, who were instrumental in my journey."

"I'm grateful for the incredible opportunities I had through my team connections," she says. "Doing makeup for game days, photoshoots, and the swimsuit calendar was unforgettable. Being in the stadium when it was empty was surreal. Alongside that, I freelanced for weddings, magazines, and special events." Despite her time in Charlotte, Jennifer never forgot her Cleveland roots—often leaving the Panthers' locker room decked out in Browns gear. "It's true what they say, Browns fans are loyal!" she laughs. Life shifted during the COVID pandemic when she had her son. "Watching my parents leave after visits became harder. Running my own business and raising a child was tough. I needed my village, and my village is in Ohio."

After returning home, Jennifer started working at Drybar in Legacy Village. Not long after, she was sent the job posting from CVCC for a Cosmetology Educational Aide—talk about a full-circle moment! "I thought, why not? I applied—and got the job! I never thought I'd be back, but I'm truly loving it. Having summers off with my son is going to be such a gift, and I still take on freelance work for weddings and other events. It's the best of both worlds."

When asked about her favorite memory from her time as a student, Jennifer shared, "I had an amazing instructor, and my classmates became like family. We formed a true sisterhood. I'm still close with a few of the girls I went through the program with. My experience in the Cosmetology program truly prepared me for life in the salon and beyond." She added with gratitude, "I've been in the industry for 21 years now, all thanks to CVCC which gave me the tools and confidence to step into the real world right after graduation." CVCC is thrilled to welcome Jennifer back—not just as an alumna, but as a mentor helping guide the next generation of beauty professionals. Keep shining, Jennifer!

Written By: Makayla Robertson, CVCC Media Specialist

