North Philly’s Jr. Barber Academy teaches kids the basics of barbering and entrepreneurship

by Aneri Pattani, Updated: December 11, 2018

This story is part of Made in Philly, a series about young residents shaping local communities.

As a boy, Prentice Michael Boone didn't always have enough money to get a haircut. But he was tired of his scruffy look. At age 12, he picked up a pair of clippers and set out to change that.

It was a risky move, Boone, 39, admits. He might have ended up with a bald spot, giving his peers another excuse to tease him. But luckily, he got it reasonably right.

"That first cut led to doing another and another," said Boone, who goes by P. Michael. He practiced on family and friends, anyone who'd volunteer.

Today, he owns a barbershop in North Philadelphia, and is making sure kids in the community have a clearer path to the career than he did.

Over the summer, Boone launched the Jr. Barber Academy, a six-week course in which he teaches Philly youth the basics of barbering. The first session included six students, and the
second semester had 12 students, ages 7 to 17. They met for two hours every Saturday evening in Boone's shop.

The academy is one part of Boone's nonprofit foundation. He also gives free haircuts to the homeless and speaks in local schools about entrepreneurship and financial literacy. For the barber classes, he asks parents to donate what they can, up to $99 per class, to cover the cost of mannequins, individual clippers, and attendance at hair shows where students can see professionals practice.

It's not a formal training to get their barber's license, but rather an introduction to spark kids' interest, Boone said. They might choose to pursue it as a career or save it as a fallback option.

"The academy was born from thinking of other kids in the community who could be like me," he said. "It gives me joy to help them start on that path the right way."

The students may have promising futures, as the barber industry continues a trend of steady growth, bringing in close to $4 billion in 2017.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics gave the career a "bright outlook designation," projecting the number of jobs will increase 13 percent in the next decade, nearly double the economy's average job growth. Demand for services will continue to rise as the nation's population increases, the bureau said.

It also reported that the average annual income for a barber is about $30,500 and that most barbers are self-employed.

The growth of barber schools is another indicator of the sector's growth, said Maura Scali-Sheahan, CEO of the National Association of Barbers Boards of America. Of the 17 states represented by the association, 14 saw an increase in barber-school openings over the last decade, she said. In Pennsylvania, the number of schools grew from 24 in 2008 to 36 this year.

"They're not going to put a barbering program on unless there's a demand for it," Scali-Sheahan said.

Barbers are getting more attention, too, with an iPhone 7 advertisement focused on the growth of mom-and-pop shops and LeBron James' new HBO talk show taking place in a barbershop.

In one of Boone's recent classes, students sat in a row of chairs against the wall, fidgeting with their mannequins as Boone passed around clippers. "Right side, with the grain, close one guard," he instructed Christian Dorsey, 11, referring to the length of the plastic guard he should attach to prevent clippers from cutting hair too short.

Dorsey hesitated at first, fiddling with the clipper settings. Once he switched it to a one guard, he mimicked cutting hair, his hand hovering three inches above the mannequin.
"Get closer," Boone urged him, guiding Dorsey's hand until the clippers made contact with the mannequin. "Good job," he exclaimed, rewarding Dorsey with a high-five.

But the academy is more than hairlines and fades, a haircut marked by shorter lengths on the side and back of the head than on top. Boone aims to teach students life skills, give them a taste of entrepreneurship, and encourage them to dream big.

When a student asked about dealing with a peak — a V-shaped point in the hairline — Boone first congratulated him on asking a question. "That's how you get noticed," he said. "Now you're officially part of the class."

Then he answered that you could get rid of it or shape it up. "Personally, I'd shape it up," he told the class. "If you were born with something different, you should own it."

A bright outlook
Boone cuts hair for about 10 clients a day on the three days his shop is open each week. An average haircut costs $30. He's a one-man show, and is content with the business, preferring to focus on his nonprofit work now.

But his son, Haalim, 17, has big plans. "I want to own at least 10 barbershops," he said. Haalim has been shadowing his father for years now and helps run the academy.

Taylor Johnson, 11, one of Boone's students, hopes to become like the barbers she's seen on YouTube, traveling the world and cutting people's hair in different countries. She's not intimidated to step into the male-dominated field.

Historically, barbershops have held a unique significance for black men. Seen as a gateway to the community, shops have been used for everything from introducing health-care interventions and literacy programs to repairing relationships with law enforcement.

"It's a place you can come to stay off the streets and talk to a positive role model," said Jaydee Morgan, 23, from West Philadelphia who has been visiting the same barbershop twice a month.
for the last three years.

And it's unlikely to disappear due to technological disruption. A 2017 report from the market research firm IBIS World noted, "There are few, if any, opportunities for increased mechanization or substitution of labor."

Instead, many barbershops are using technology to their advantage, said Damon Dorsey, president of the American Barber Association. They're attracting more customers by sharing pictures of their best cuts on Instagram and streamlining the appointment-making process through apps like Booksy.

While franchise salons like Supercuts are nudging into the haircut industry, most barbers are unconcerned, Dorsey said. They focus on a clientele seeking more niche services, like a straight razor shave or styled beards.

"Supercuts is like the Walmart of barbershops," Dorsey said. "But a real barbershop can give you a really different haircut."

Skills for any future

The most important thing Haalim Boone learned from his father's academy is that barbers are entrepreneurs first. "You're always selling yourself," the teen said. "You're the centerpiece of your business."

For Christian Dorsey, the 11-year-old from West Oakland, the takeaway from the first class was the difference between upselling and downselling. One involves persuading a customer to purchase a more expensive item, he explained, while the other is about offering a cheaper alternative.

These are the skills Boone hopes students will use in the future, even if they don't go into barbering. Everyone can benefit from learning entrepreneurship, time management, and financial literacy, he said.

Schools don't always teach these skills, and youth, especially in low-income areas, may not have a chance to learn them by handling money or working a job, said Salomon Moreno-Rosa, an assistant director at the Urban Affairs Coalition, comprising over 70 organizations that aim to address poverty and economic opportunity in Philadelphia. It's important to provide children alternate routes to practice these skills, he said.

Learning to save, for instance, can help them prepare for setbacks on the way to achieving their goals, said Woody Beale, director of an after-school program run by the coalition that also teaches financial literacy.

"If you can just put $10 of $100 away, that's something you can always fall back on when something unexpected happens," Beale said.
Dorsey's mom, April Powell, agrees. She hopes the barber academy reinforces for Christian the importance of planning for his future. "Who's to say he can't have his own barbershop one day?" she said.

HEATHER KHALIFA / Staff Photographer
Curtis Bagwell, a friend and neighbor of Prentice Michael Boone, has his hair cut by Derek Brown, 9, while Boone watches over during a Jr. Barber Academy class in North Philadelphia.

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