

Barbershops offer more than trims

Still economic cuts mean uncertain times for barbers

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Six-year-old Elijah Warren climbed into a booster seat, grinning as barber Rodney Brower covered him with a cape. As snow started falling outside of [Signature Kutz Barber Shop](#) on South Driver Street, his older brother waited in the corner for the haircut to finish.

Trying to start a conversation with Elijah, Brower asked if he was going to be better than his brother at football one day.

"I already am," Elijah said.

After the laughs settled, he continued to talk about football and Brower continued to listen. Elijah said he wants to be a running back.

"We're listeners really," Brower said about barbers. "A lot of people come in the barbershop and it's not really about the cut, it's about the conversation."

But black-owned barbershops

have evolved since the 19th century, transforming from a service business for white clientele into a social gathering space in black communities.

[Quincy Mills](#), a history professor at Vassar College, chronicled black-owned barbershops in his book, ["Cutting Along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Barber Shops in America."](#)

In the 19th century, most black-owned barbershops served white clients exclusively. Wealthy white businessmen and politicians in the South refused to get a haircut next to a black man, Mills said.

Even in Durham, John Merrick served white clients in his barbershop, once named after the

co-owners [Wright and Merrick](#), to make money for future investments. In 1898, he started [North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company](#), which would provide security to several black families.

"In many ways, he made these compromises in his barbershop to help build enterprises and build black institutions for

African-Americans," Mills said.

From 1890 to 1930, a new generation of black men sought to change the face of black-owned barbershops.

"They wanted to open barbershops in black communities to serve black men and to provide a space in an emerging Jim Crow America that would escape the surveillance of whites," Mills said.

At the time, a major focus for barbers was shaving, an act that involved touching another man's face. Many viewed this as slave labor until the mass-production of the Gillette safety razor in 1903, which allowed men to shave at home. With the focus shifting to haircuts, more white men entered the barbering business, Mills said.

And by the 1930s, during the Great Migration, most black barbers had moved into black communities. With few places for blacks to interact freely, barbershops became a gathering place.

Black residents who moved to a new area would stop by the barbershop to make connections. And if a customer needed someone to do a job, he would go to the barber and ask who was reliable, Mills said.

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-Quincy Mills, Vassar College history professor



Rodney Brower, a barber at Signature Kutz, cuts 6-year-old Elijah Warren's hair. "I put a little laugh in their life," Brower said about his customers. Black-owned barbershops have become a social gathering space in black communities. (Staff photo by Ryan Wilusz)

Mills said. "When folks come in, they're talking."

Black-owned barbershops were places for men to interact with their community and relax.

"There's the barber and there's the people sitting in the chair," Mills said. "But it's the waiting public that I think gives black barbershops their character."

Customers would sit for hours waiting for a haircut, leading to conversations about politics, the community and religion. While these topics are still covered today, people also talk about sports, cars and relationships.

"The shop is a place that people can come and they can be debatable," Brower said. "You can be yourself and another person can be themselves. And at the same time, you can meet in the middle and shake hands without animosity."

Although customers often start the conversations, the barber plays a major role in the discussion.

"The barber makes a balance," said Samuel Jenkins, owner of [Samuel and Sons Barber Shop](#) on Angier Avenue. "If you are talking too much, maybe he lets someone else get a turn. He is like the director of the opera inside this space."

Different barbershops have different rules. Signature Kutz does not allow foul language and avoids conversations about religion. But both Samuel and Sons and Signature Kutz agree that being a role model for children is important.

When Jenkins began barbering, he would ask children if they have ever been fishing. He said it's surprising how many have not.

"I don't know about the white community, but there are a lot of broken families in the black community," Jenkins said.

"Sometimes the only mentors you end up having are the local drug dealers or the barber because you go to the barbershop."

When children are struggling, parents often ask the barber to direct them on the right path, Jenkins said.

"One reason you come into barbering is because you want to cut hair," Jenkins said. "The other reason you want to do it is because you want to see people do better."

But the uncertain future of barbering is making it difficult for barbershops to stay open, including Samuel and Sons, which [will move into Jenkins' house](#) on Dec. 18.

Mills thinks that living standards, an increase in appointments and technology have changed black-owned barbershops over recent years.

With more families living in poverty, getting a haircut has become less of a priority. And if someone is going to the barbershop, they could be working multiple jobs and have only 30 minutes to get a haircut, Mills said.

In-and-out appointments have taken away from the "waiting public" and the conversations that happen in barbershops. Mills said technology has had a similar effect.

"I have noticed that even inside barbershops there could be four, five or six people in the shop all on their cellphones," Mills said. "Public interaction, I think, is something that is changing."

But conversations have not completely disappeared. Brower

and Elijah talked back and forth about the Superbowl throughout the haircut. Elijah said he will play in the big game one day, and Brower said he wants tickets.

After the haircut, Brower rubbed alcohol on the child's hairline, causing a stinging sensation and a scowl from Elijah.

"You're supposed to be a football player. You're not getting soft on me, are you?" Brower asked.

Elijah responded with a smile.

Although the future of barbershops is unclear, Brower said he always wants to make a difference.

"I do this to be a productive member of society," Brower said. "If you provide a safe environment for a kid like this, they'll come to you the rest of their life."

"You can be yourself and another person can be themselves. And at the same time, you can meet in the middle and shake hands without animosity."

-Rodney Brower
Signature Kutz barber

Signature Kutz Barber Shop

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