

Zig Zag Salon faces challenges and new protocol following COVID-19

By Alexis Austin

The gold decor, plants in every corner and various signs with quirky sayings like “What would Beyonce do?” can be seen when first walking into Zig Zag Salon. Clients fill all four seats and a full staff moves about, washing hair, cutting, coloring and styling. The sounds of chatter and laughter fill the air as top radio hits play in the background.

That was a typical day at Zig Zag Salon. Now, it runs with only one stylist and one appointment at a time.

Hair salon owner and stylist Freida Kohler-Abeita recalled the feeling of excitement she had when Zig Zag Salon decided to relocate further north after being at 32nd and Guadalupe street for 22 years. But just as she and the other stylists had settled into the new place, that feeling was replaced with stress once COVID-19 hit.

Zig Zag Salon is one of the many small businesses that has been affected by the pandemic, especially financially. While the salon has kept safety guidelines, its loyal clients have remained supportive to a business that feels like a friend or family member to them.

On March 24, 2020, Austin ordered all nonessential businesses to close. The number of small businesses that remained open in Austin declined by a mean of -28% between mid-March and mid-April 2020, according to data from the Intelligent Environments Laboratory COVID-19 Dashboard from the Cockrell School of Engineering at the University of Texas at Austin.

Upon reopening in May 2020, the salon decided to follow every rule. Kohler-Abeita said this included no walk-ins, appointments only and a mask requirement.

Revenue was another factor that has affected small businesses in Austin during the pandemic. Data from the IEL dashboard showed a mean steep decline of -44% in small business revenue during mid-March and mid-April 2020. Since June 2020, revenue has remained relatively steady at an average of -37%.

Having to limit the number of clients they could serve caused a financial strain, Kohler-Abeita said.

“We are a true small business so as far as revenue goes, having to do one client at a time versus we can kinda work people in when we need to, and we’re not doing that for the safety of just not having too many people in the building at one time,” Kohler-Abeita said.

Despite the financial difficulties, Kohler-Abeita said she was thankful for how her clients have been sticking around and supporting the salon.

“Luckily we have super loyal clients so everybody kind of stuck with us,” Kohler-Abeita said. “I think because we have had clients for so long, our client retention has been great through the years that they’re just on for the ride, so it works out for us.”

Lindsey Heron has been a Zig Zag Salon client for over 15 years. She said for appointments now a stylist will text you when you can come in, take your temperature at the door and everyone keeps masks on the entire time. Currently, the salon does one appointment at a time to maintain social distancing but sometimes schedules family members to get their hair done together.

Heron said despite the changes, the mood in the salon is the same. Everybody is talking and chattering; the only difference is they have masks on.

“I’ve been going for a long time. It’s like a friend and family member,” Heron said. “My girlfriends go there, my kids and my close circle of friends all go there. It’s like a small town salon.”

Anissa Garcia, another client at the salon, said her first encounter with Kohler-Abeita was back in 2016. She met her at the Austin Book Festival where she was styling hair for authors.

Two years later, Garcia went to a book festival in New York City. She said a hairdresser botched her hair badly and she remembered her friend who was a loyal client of Kohler-Abeita. She called in a panic to book an appointment and said Kohler-Abeita did an amazing job. Ever since then, Anissa Garcia said she goes to Zig Zag Salon every six to eight weeks to get her hair done.

“I couldn’t ever trust my hair in the hands of someone who would give you the complete opposite, but Freida is so creative and so talented,” Anissa Garcia said. “All I have to do is say something or show a picture of what I’m looking for and she’s got it!”

She said Kohler-Abeita is not a good hairdresser just because of her skills but because of her personality, the way she talks and treats you.

“Hairdressers become almost like family in a way because you share so much with them when you’re sitting in that chair,” she said. “They become someone you can confide in and trust. When you trust them with your hair, you trust them with parts of your life.”

Stylist Andrea Garcia is Kohler-Abeita’s sister. She has been working there for nine years and decided to do hair after graduating from high school.

She said she was guaranteed the job and wanted to pursue it since it ran in the family. With everyone working there, she said her favorite memory of the salon was always being around family.

“My mom used to come to the salon. She was the receptionist and would bring her dog, so I would bring my dog too,” Andrea Garcia said. “Also, my sister and brother are stylists, so it's like hanging out with family. I love the atmosphere.”

Kohler-Abeita said they plan to continue their current safety guidelines, including appointments, masks at all times and social distancing when possible. She said she wants to hire more staff and offer more services in the future but is focused on the health and safety of her staff and clients.

“We value everyone’s safety. Even with people getting vaccinated slowly but surely, I think we’re just gonna keep the masks until the majority of people feel comfortable and till the numbers start getting better,” Kohler-Abeita said.