

Brenda Reyes hunches over a client's hand. She picks up a long skinny silver tool. It's called an electric nail drill that smooths fake nails, prepping them for the next design she's about to stick on. Nail dust, like snowflakes, is flying everywhere. White specks are falling on the floor, on the table, and near the chair next to her.

"Brenda, tell me, is the light blue with glitter and silver rhinestones a better choice or the red ombre with square-shaped butterfly charms," asked Brenda's client, Tanisha Espinal.

Brenda puts the drill down and picks up her vape. Back and forth, Drill, Vape, Drill, Vape. It's the way Brenda works. She's got about six clients a day. Some come as far as three hours to have Brenda use resin and canned aerosol spray to glue trinkets to their nails. They come in little pink bunnies representative of playboy bunnies, (think 1970s Playboy Bunnies), butterflies, and flowers. Brenda also handpaints her own tiny designs. They fit on nail beds, commemorating the change of seasons. Pumpkins and ghosts for the fall, snowflakes and candy-canes for winter, beachballs for summer, and Powerpuff girls for the spring.

Tanisha requested snowflakes on her acrylic French styled toes (pink with white trim) in October. Brenda jokes with Tanisha and asks, "Christmas designs already?"

Whatever you want, Brenda can do it, she is the best in the game," says Tanisha.

Tanisha travels three hours from her home in Pennsylvania because she thinks Brenda is the most sought-after nail technician in the Bronx. Plus, she believes no one does nail art better than her ladies in the Bronx. The borough where nail art originated. Also the borough that put nail art on the map. A niche art form and market, intricate nail designs hold cultural significance in this borough. Nail artists in the Bronx rose in popularity when hip-hop artists such as Cardi B promoted their Bronx nail technicians. Artistic movements such as hip-hop and long nail art originate in the Bronx. These pop culture movements, even nail designs, have been seen as a kind of cultural protest against clear nails and gel manicures. It goes against dominant mainstream culture as a way of protest. Although more accepted now, as they were mimicked in affluent neighborhoods in New York, there was a time when long nail art was deemed, "ghetto."

Ironically, though, Brenda with dismay has noticed short square airbrush nails are trending again.

Brenda was born in Mexico, where she studied nails, and didn't move to the Bronx until she was 20, with dreams of using her nail money to pay for law school. Although she reminisces about being a lawyer, Brenda has turned her hobby into a lifestyle that started with the need for income and quick money, so she started working in salons.

On Instagram, you see red, white, and green Christmas trees, hand painted lash designs on white Christmas trees, red jewels, gingerbread charms, and big bow ties, all in the spirit of the Christmas season. Brenda has amassed about 6,000 followers on Instagram. While other nail techs in the Bronx only have 3,000 followers on Instagram. A competitive and growing market, rivals such as Chantel Slays says “we all have our own thing going on, you got to have what it takes to make it, and as long as you have a loyal clientele they will keep coming back.”

Some of these designs for 10 fingers and 10 toes take up to three and a half hours, but Brenda’s clients keep coming back. Bronx local Sara Garcia comes once a month for that three and a half hour session where she sits patiently while Tanisha finishes her set. This day Brenda took Tanisha for 1 and a half hour because she had a line of clients. Tanisha and Sara come to Brenda every month, Brenda has many regular clients.

While Tanisha does her nails they conversate back and forth from nails to family details, as Tanisha speaks, Sara mentions, “Brenda does god’s work being our therapist.”

“The light blue would look good on your skin tone Tanisha, with glitter and silver rhinestones. Tell me you work or go to school?”

“Right now just working.”

“How is your son?” asks Tanisha.

“He is good,” said Brenda, “just his dad can be annoying. You know my father-in-law doesn’t like me because I am not Muslim. He told me boys cannot wear gold.”

“Girl, does he defend you to his father?” asks Tanisha. Then she proceeds to tell Brenda she wants a snowman for her next set and a pedicure.

“Yes, we can do a white snowman on your middle finger, and yes I told him last time if you love me you will follow me right now, or I am leaving, I am only responsible in this world for our son, I do not need you,” said Brenda. Adding, “He followed me.”

“As he should follow you, remember the guy I told you about he ghosted me.”

“Baby here go exfoliate your hands.” Brenda uses a wood stick to apply an orange exfoliator on Tanisha’s hand.

“The soap is right here and a paper towel.”

When Brenda is done drilling down Tanisha's long nails, Brenda applies the light blue acrylic powder combining it with water, mixing it with a brush and applies it on Tanisha's 10 long acrylic nails which last up to a month.

Once the four weeks are up. With a nail bed that looks grown out. With cuticles that need to be cut. With acrylic that bends. Tanisha makes the journey back to Brenda. She does this all year. Tanisha would never cheat on Brenda who can tell when her clients have betrayed her. From the way their nails are filled down, to how the cuticles are cut, to the thickness of the acrylic, as Brenda says, other nail techs do a "bad job especially when the natural nail is broken."

Renting chairs to different salon owners is a difficulty for Brenda as prices for rent always increase. Brenda hopes to open her own salon one day and not have to hop around different places.

No matter where her salon is located, because Brenda has rented chairs in multiple salons over the years. Clients like Tanisha make the long journey to Brenda "My nail technician and therapist in one."