

State College's Hidden Pregame Barbershop

At about 4 p.m. on Wednesday afternoon, Spencer Haley can be found adding the finishing touches on a young male student's haircut before removing the Kobe Bryant themed barber cape, allowing the customer to stretch their legs and admire Haley's handiwork.

The 6-foot barber always has a smile on his face besides for the 30-40 minutes he spends hyper focused on patiently delivering a high-quality haircut. Haley's arsenal features a number of different razors, blades, ring lights, and sprays, including one called "Barbicide." After receiving feedback and paying for the service, the young man gives him a quick, strong handshake followed by a "see you around."

The Pregame Barbershop is a black-owned barbershop tucked away in the corner of 413 East Calder Way. It was opened six years ago by Dondre Shivers, a Penn State alumnus who noticed a lack of barbershops catered towards black people and other people of color who tend to have hair textures and patterns that must be handled with specific care. Spencer Haley, one of the three barbers at The Pregame Barbershop, often builds a natural rapport with many of his customers; they see about 30 a day, of which he cuts a third.

Haley, 31, has been cutting hair for 10 years, starting out by giving his friends and family haircuts. He attended Penn State, earning his bachelor's degree in Geography before starting an barber apprenticeship and eventually working full-time at Pregame. Despite pursuing his second degree, a master's in data analysis, Haley says he still wants to cut hair on the side regardless of what the future holds for him.

The Pregame Barbershop has come a long way from its beginnings in 2019. The pandemic halted work for them almost as quickly as they had started; they resorted to cutting hair with masks on

once they were allowed to return to work. The hip-hop radio station constantly playing, pop culture art and drawings from students along the walls, and basketball-themed capes, according to Haley, were all Shivers' ideas for the kind of environment he wanted the small place to have. Haley has been a go-with-the-flow kind of guy there, making small talk with customers, cracking jokes with coworkers, and creating a comforting atmosphere.

Haley, who has improved his cutting skills over the years with the help of his seasoned coworkers, expressed a sense of pride in the diversity between the three barbers; He's of Native American descent, and his coworkers are Puerto Rican and African American. This diversity gives the men a well-rounded background in understanding the various textures, lengths, and patterns they come across. "You kind of have to be good at every type of hair," Haley said

The demographic here is certainly different from New Jersey, and trends have changed over the years as well. The modern mullet fade, Haley said, is one of the most prevalent requests today. He also receives his fair share of unusual requests regarding haircuts. One older gentleman once asked for "a burst fade on the sides, a "V" in the back, lines pointing to the V, a mohawk, and eyebrow slits," a request Haley happily obliged to.

The ambitious New Jersey native once attempted to open a sneaker resale store in a vacant room of the shop. While that didn't work out, others in the shop have had ambitions of their own. The space adjacent to the sneaker store-turned waiting room is now occupied by an outside hairwoman that does both braids and nails for clients in the area. Shivers holds men's groups after business hours, where men of color are encouraged to be vulnerable.

"It's kind of become like a community here."