

Published November 28th, 2018

Keeping your hair Sharp in Lafayette

By Jon Kingdon



Sharp Barbershop staff, from left: Dustin Lowenthal, Gabe Colorado, E.J. Colberg, Sheldon Torson and Angelo Gerosolimo. Photo provided

In movies like "Barbershop" and shows like "The Andy Griffith Show," the barbershop was far more than a place to get your hair cut. It was a place for friends to meet, share ideas, debate the issues of the day and leave the shop looking better than when you walked in.

Since 2016, the Sharp Barbershop at 1001 Oak Hill Road in Lafayette has proven to be such a place. When Sheldon Torson decided that he wanted to open up his own barbershop, he had a vision of a place that would bespeak to a friendlier time with his barbers and the overall environment of the store: "I have worked very hard to find the old-time barber chairs from the 1920s and 1930s which are no longer made."

Torson's manager, E.J. Colberg, says the shop is more than just unique chairs: "The entire shop is all traditional. We're not trying to be trendy or new age. Besides the classic chairs, we have old church pews and old-time light fixtures. We provide complimentary whiskey, beer (legal since 2017) water and juice boxes for kids. It allows our customers to be more relaxed in the chair, whether for a haircut or for a hot towel shave."

Just as important for Torson and his staff is communication: "We want to anticipate and listen to the wants and needs of our customers. We offer crafted haircuts that fit our customer's head shape, texture and lifestyle."

It was Torson's long held dream to open a barbershop and he always knew what it would be called: "In 2009, long before we began Sharp, I registered the name with Contra Costa. I have a tattoo with a straight razor and the razer is built into the name of the store."

Torson followed the three rules of real estate in opening his shop in Lafayette: location, location, location. "I searched for five years for the right spot," said the owner, who grew up in Concord. "I wanted a small town that was underserved in the industry, a place with adequate parking that was right off the freeway and near BART." He says they plan to do fake shaves on the kids at the future Canyon Club Brewery in Moraga or Philz Coffee Shop in Lafayette. "We want to help new businesses here and we want to be able to let our customers know of their businesses when they come into our shop."

As welcoming as the shop is, the final product is what's most important, says Torson: "At the end of the day, a barber has to be an artist. Cutting is like sculpting. We are creating a shape and we have to have an eye for aesthetics. The best barbers are natural artists and have a passion for detail."

Though the clientele is almost exclusively male, there are women who will come in and ask to have their hair to be styled "on the masculine side," says Torson.

Yet it is not an uncomfortable environment for women, says Colberg. "A lot of mothers will bring their children in to get their hair cut and then their husbands will come in not long after. We get a lot of customers through word of mouth."

It's the welcoming attitude that Torson wanted to establish: "It's important that the adults and children feel comfortable in our shop. Whatever their needs are, we want to be accommodating. We have Amazon Echo and will play whatever music a customer requests, though drawing the line at offensive music. It also allows us to learn about new artists."

Cutting hair may not be for everyone, but it's a happy crew at Sharp. Says Colberg: "I like the lifestyle that working as a barber allows you. You're your own boss and you control your hours. There is no competitiveness here at all as regards our customers. As long as you're in Sharp, we're just happy to have you in the shop. People are welcome to try all of our barbers."

Convenience has been an operative word at Sharp as they try to operate around their customer's needs. "The store will open up at 7 a.m. to allow people to get their haircut prior to going to work," Colberg says. "Still we will take special requests. I tell my clients that if it is crucial, contact me and I will fit them in instead of taking a break."

Torson has also developed a special group of customers: "I met Jeff Head, the strength trainer for the San Francisco Giants and at his direction, I became one of the barbers for the team. I will take care of 10-15 players prior to the games about twice a month. During the off season, some of the players will make the trip out to our shop as well."

Torson is already leaving a legacy by taking on an apprentice named Dustin Lowenthal, allowing him to learn how to cut hair rather than going through barber school. After two years of training, he will then be allowed to take the state board written and practical exams.

"I have been able to take tips from everyone in the shop and have been learning their tricks of the trade," says Lowenthal appreciatively. "We have our own unique brand here. It's different from anywhere else and people recognize our style."

Though the shop does not take credit cards, an ATM machine is available in the back of the store. Appointments can be made online at Vagaro.com/sharpbarbershop, which allows people to see the schedules of the barbers at any time.

Torson gives much of the credit to his father for his career choice: "His advice was to be your own man or you will have to deal with someone else's bull. I know we will never be replaced by robots."

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