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Hair a family affair with Aguilar



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/JOHN JAQUES

Tony Aguilar cuts the hair of Manuel Miera at the Aguilar Barber Styling Shop on the South Side.

Longtime barbering clan still gives customers an old-fashioned haircut

By MARGIE WOOD

THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Cutting hair is not just a job to the Aguilar family. They provide old-fashioned barber service, they teach their trade, they ponder the philosophy of it.

And we do mean family. Different branches of the family operate four shops in Pueblo, and that's just the Pueblo family.



It all started with Sal Aguilar, who became a barber in the Marine Corps in the early 1950s. When he got out of the service he persuaded his brother, Carlos, to join him in the business, and Carlos trained at the old Pueblo Barber College beginning in 1959.

Sal passed away several years ago, but Carlos continues to work at age 73, currently at Aguilar Barber Styling inside the South Side King Soopers center.

His sons, Tony and Louie, followed him into the business. Now, Tony owns the South Side store, working alongside his dad and three sisters: Loretta Lucero, Terry Romero and Jackie Carrillo. Tony's wife, Clara, works there as well, and their two sons, Charles and Brian, also trained as barbers.

Charles, who is 30 years old, used his barbering to pay his way through college in industrial engineering. He works as a business consultant and just bought into his dad's business to apply some of his education to the barber shop.

They moved just last week into larger quarters a few doors down from the old shop, and Charles spent a lot of time working on the transition and the business model.

Brian, 20, also is barbering his way through college, studying electrical engineering and business at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. He works weekends at the family shop, and kidded his brother about "coming out of retirement" to cut hair for a Katrina fundraiser last year.

Tony's brother, Louie, owns Aguilar Barber & Beauty Salon at 1330 U.S. 50 East in Belmont, and two of his three daughters work with him.



This family photo shows brothers Carlos (left) and Sal (right) Aguilar, who opened the first Aguilar Barbershop in West Las Vegas, N.M., with a young Tony Aguilar.

In the past, Louie and Tony were co-owners of the Perfect Image shop, but now their aunt, Pauline Maese, owns that business. And their cousins, Terre Heath and Julie Aragon, own Studio 127 at 127 S. Union Ave.

Another brother of Tony and Louie, Dennis, works in a shop in Denver, and there are also relatives in New Mexico working in the business.

But that's not all.

Tony taught for 12 years at the local barber school and from 1979 to 1986 was a partner in the Image Academy of Hair Designs, where he and Clara both taught classes. He also taught six years for the Department of Corrections, running a barber school at the Youth Offender System. His students were convicted of felonies "but given a second chance because of their age," he said. "I used to tease them that I was showing them a new way of using a straight razor, without blood-letting."

One of his students worked a year to clean up his prison status before Aguilar would allow him into the class, and maintained his good behavior for the two years of the program.

"He finished, and that was one of my proudest accomplishments," Aguilar said. "I think I had 30 graduates, and only three of them reoffended. One of them is cutting hair here in town, and most of them are working in Colorado Springs and Denver."

Tony sees his generation as a bridge between time-honored traditional barbering and the challenge of chain-store stylists.

"My dad sent me to barber school when I was 14. When Louie and I started our first business in 1972, we were the youngest brother-barber team in the U.S.," he said. "I was 18 and Louie was 17. Now, I think we're approaching being the oldest."

With 48 years in the business, Carlos Aguilar has an unbeatable work ethic, his son said. Carlos is taking a long vacation in Mexico this winter, but when he's in town he works long hours.

"We open at 8 a.m., but dad gets here at 7:15 and usually has two or three haircuts done by the time we open. He doesn't leave till 6 o'clock Ñ he brings his lunch in a lunchbox Ñ and if there are still people waiting when we close, he keeps on cutting," Tony said.

He remembers when all barbershops closed on Sunday and Monday Ñ and there was a lawsuit when that mold was broken because shopping centers were coming into vogue and they wanted barbershops to be open the same hours as the stores.

"It's evolving into a whole different world," Tony said. "The barber and beauty industries have kind of combined. We do women's hair, too, although we don't do nails. The men just find it a little tough to handle the smell of the acrylics and nail polish.

"When we started, we used to just cut men's hair Ñ clipper work, regular haircuts and shaves. Those services are still offered, but men don't treat themselves enough to come in and get the works Ñ shampoo, haircut, a facial and a shave. A lot of the schools now don't even teach barbering; they just teach hairstyling.

They're serving the chain outfits."

He would like to see a return to old-fashioned apprenticeships. "All the schools train kids to entry level, good enough to pass the state license exam, but they really do need to work with a master to polish their skills," he said.

Speaking of masters, Tony said he's open to leasing chairs to older barbers who don't want to work full time but don't want to be fully retired.



Tony Aguilar (right) and his wife, Clara, pose in their new barbershop at the South Side King Soopers center, along with their sons, Charles (left) and Brian, who also are trained barbers.

"I know there's a wealth of education out there that we would love to share with our youngsters," he said.

The new Aguilar's has 18 chairs, and all the barbers will be independent contractors, Charles said. "Other places may take 40 percent of a barber's earnings. But here, they lease a space, we provide the work environment and they can just focus on the things they enjoy Ñ cutting hair. That's why they come to us, and I would argue they're some of the best in the city."

His brother described the plan as "a new-school look with old-style quality."

Cutting hair Ñ standing on your feet all day with your arms up in the air Ñ isn't for the physically frail, but Tony says the people make it all worthwhile.

"If you love a job, it's not like working," he said. "My wife says I'm like the Fiesta queen. I know somebody everywhere we go. That's the beauty of this business Ñ it's a people business."

How about all the family togetherness?

"People ask how my wife and I can work together and live together," Tony said. "But we have to sneak away to get a break together. It's a real treat to work with my wife, and now to have the boys working with us is really special. To be able to work with my dad and my wife and kids Ñ there's no substitute for that family."

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