

Makeshift barbershop offering free trims at city schools to help motivate students to learn



‘A good haircut builds confidence’

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Abdi Abdullahi climbed into a stool at School No. 15 with a big smile.

His little legs dangled below him, searching for purchase as he swung around in a seat that was a bit too tall for a first grader. Someone ruffled the top of his head and offered him a high five.

And then, Abdullahi waited. A staff lounge at his elementary school had transformed into a barbershop, and he was next in line.

Photos of classic red, white and blue barber poles posted around the room set the scene. Three barbers from Brothers and Sisters Unisex Salon lugged in black cases brimming with supplies: Clippers and trimmers, combs and brushes, barber capes and big hand mirrors. A soft R&B playlist filled the space; one of the barbers crooned along while he worked.



TOP: Barbers Carl Williams, Roberto Murray and Devon Reynolds of Brothers and Sisters Unisex Salon crowd around Kaylan Gastion after his haircut and chat with him before he gets down from his chair. Reynolds is the owner of the salon that came to the school. **ABOVE:** Reynolds cuts Gastion's hair.

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Haircuts

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Today, the kids would not be customers, though — at least not in the traditional sense. They would get their hair cut, but those haircuts would be free.

Devon Reynolds has spent the last seven years quietly traveling to city schools to do this work, believing that if students feel better about how they look, they might work harder in school.

“What’s up? How you feeling? You all right?” Reynolds asked the boy.

Abdullahi smiled even bigger.

Free haircuts at Rochester city schools

Looking and feeling good was an obvious theme at School No. 15’s makeshift barbershop that day.

As students sat patiently under the hum of clippers at work, teachers and other staff from the school bustled in and out of the room, offering positive affirmations to the young ones in their care.

“You’re looking so sharp,” one teacher told Levi Bennett, another student at the school.

The boy gave a bashful shrug.

“I’ve witnessed kids wear hoodies in class and be quiet because they don’t feel confident,” Reynolds said. “A good haircut builds confidence. It makes you



Devon Reynolds, owner of Brothers and Sisters Unisex Salon, checks with a mother about what kind of haircut to give her son.

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more receptive to learn, more willing to answer questions, to be more friendly. All of it connects.”

For some families, however, a haircut is a luxury — one they may not always be able to afford.

A simple haircut these days can cost about \$20 for young boys, Reynolds said. One of the students in his chair that day had two other brothers at School No. 15.

Twenty bucks apiece would leave their parents out \$60, when many families in Rochester are struggling just to buy groceries or pay their bills.

“That could be milk and eggs and cheese,” Reynolds said. “That could be \$60 toward an oil change.”

Brothers and Sisters Unisex Salon: A community barbershop

His effort to provide free haircuts to city students started through a practice Reynolds calls conscious capitalism. He believes that business owners should not take from their communities without helping to uplift them in return.

In the last few years, Reynolds opened Sweet Ida Mae’s Food Pantry. He travels to homeless shelters to offer free haircuts. He puts on a community Halloween party and Thanksgiving dinner. He organizes political forums and free health screenings.

He does all of this to help see his community thrive like he has. “We are a community barbershop,” he said.

At School No. 15, Abdi Abdullahi hopped down from the stool with a sleek zig-zag design etched into his hair.

It was something a little extra, but Reynolds wanted the boy to feel special.

Now, he was ready to get back to learning. The first grader gave Reynolds a quick wave and scurried down the hallway toward his classroom.

“See you later, son,” the barber called after him.