



Helping through Haircuts

Camp Florence youth use their barbering skills to aid others — and learn about themselves in the process.

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The woman smiled as she sat down in the hard plastic chair at the Helping Hands Coalition in Florence, but her hands told another story. Over and over again, she nervously touched the red bandana covering her head.

“Most of it’s falling out already,” she told Salvador, the young man standing behind her, silver scissors and barber’s clippers arrayed on the table next to him. Then she added, more to herself than anyone, “It’s all gonna come back eventually.”

A few minutes earlier, the woman had given Salvador the ultimate hair request: shave her head. She has breast cancer, she told him, and was losing her hair as a result of chemotherapy.

Salvador spoke quietly as he untied her bandana and began cutting. “You’re brave to do this,” he said. “A lot of people wouldn’t do this because of others’ perceptions.”

Nearby, a young man named Austin combed and clipped his way through the woolly white hair of an older man with a wild, unkempt beard. A stream of people trickled in and out of the Helping Hands kitchen in the next room, grabbing a free meal before heading back out to the surrounding streets. On the front door, a flier with clip art of a barber declared: “Free Haircuts.”

The story of the woman with the bandana is one of many Salvador, Austin, and other young men from Camp Florence Youth Transitional Facility have heard since they started cutting hair at Helping Hands about eight months ago. Helping Hands supports the homeless and others with unmet needs by offering free meals, clothing, basic supplies — and, thanks to the youth, monthly haircuts.



Camp Florence youth Austin (left) and Salvador give free haircuts once a month at Helping Hands Coalition, a Florence organization that provides services to the homeless.



Salvador unties the bandana of a woman who came in recently. She asked him to shave her head because chemotherapy was causing her hair to fall out.

Salvador and Austin both started learning barbering when they were at the Oregon Youth Authority’s Hillcrest Youth Correctional Facility in Salem. As he continued studying and reading about the profession, Salvador saw stories online about barbers using their skills to help those in need. When he arrived at Camp Florence, where youth have a long tradition of volunteering in the community, he knew how he wanted to help.

“There are a lot of homeless people here, and we see them around town,” he says. “I called a local shelter to ask if they could use people to cut hair, and they told me about the Helping Hands Coalition. I think they were pretty surprised when I called, because they know what Camp Florence is.”

He recruited several other youth to volunteer with him, including Austin.

“When we first came, the people were skeptical of whether we could cut hair or not,” Austin says. “They were nervous to get in the chair.”

The young men soon developed a reputation for their skill, particularly in an environment not typically suited to barbering. They bring their own tools and plastic chairs from camp — no adjustable salon seats here — and set them down in the coalition’s front room atop a plastic tarp. There’s no place to shampoo hair before they start, so the youth take extra care as they clean and sterilize their tools between cuts.

It may seem like a luxury, not a necessity, to get a neat trim. But the youth have found that a simple haircut can take on new proportions to people who don’t have the tools or the money to get it done themselves.

“Last time we came, a woman asked if we could cut her son’s hair,” Austin recalls. “They’re homeless, and he had a job interview. I cut his hair, and they were so thankful. She was crying. It was nice that we could help in just a little way.”

After the Siuslaw News in Florence featured them on the front page, the young barbers felt even more committed to their work.

“When other kids see us in the newspaper doing stuff like this, hopefully it will inspire them to do something, too,” Austin says. “If I’d seen something like that when I was out, it might have influenced me to do better.”

Salvador, who hopes to expand the program when he leaves custody, says the experience has upended his perceptions about his own situation. He recalls another story of a family who came in with a young son. When asked if he wanted a haircut, the tyke responded, “No, I want to eat.”



Austin waits for a customer. The youth bring their own tools and set up a plastic bin with sanitizer for cleaning



items between haircuts. A man with overgrown, unkempt hair and beard told Austin, “Just a trim is fine.” Austin ultimately gave the man a full haircut and shaped his beard, too.

“They were in a bad position,” Salvador says. “We get three meals and a bed at camp. The least we can do is give someone a haircut to brighten their day.”

(Author’s note: The youths’ barbering program currently is on hiatus while Helping Hands Coalition searches for a new location, but the young men hope to re-start it in the future.)