



BALTIMORE NEWS

Rob's Barbershop: Community Changing Lives



by **Alexis Taylor**
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Robert W. Cradle has spent his professional life transforming customers one cut, one shave and one spin in the barber chair at a time. Being therapist and friend to those who come into his shop on what could arguably be their worst day is all he knows and has ever desired to do.

Representing all walks of life—Black, White, Latino, and everything in between—patrons from all over the country can be found in Cradle's shop. But this is no ordinary place to get a fade or a buzz cut.

Every customer, male, female, regardless of age, has no home to go to when the clippers and the scissors stop.

"I wanted a job with purpose," said Cradle, founder and owner of Rob's Barbershop Community Foundation (RBCF). "If I had to wrap all of my wants and needs into one thing it would come out to be this job."

Whether the result of an addiction, a mental illness, or a leasing agreement with a roommate gone bad, no judgment comes with the services provided by the RBCF, which has been in existence since March 2000.

A graduate of Millford Mill High School, Cradle began cutting hair in West Baltimore shortly after completing a certification program at Avara's Academy of Hair Design in May of 1986.

"My brother was working in a pizza shop, managing, and he told me if I came out to Odenton I'd be the only Black person. I did it, and he was right," said Cradle, of the shop that was in operation from 1991 to 2003.

It was there that Cradle would find his next passion-philanthropic work for the community.

After learning that a nearby shelter, Sarah's House, had trouble finding jobs for their clients due to improper grooming, Cradle took action.

He placed a bucket at the front of his shop, labeled "Haircuts for the Homeless," and was soon able to gather enough donations to send barbers from his shop to nearby shelters to provide grooming services free of charge.

That initiative grew into RBCF, which provides all the materials needed to help shelter residents.

"He's a selfless person, very giving and really committed," said Pam Siemer, director of development for the Light House, the site of RBCF since 2009.

For a year at a time, shelters will house one of Cradle's grooming operations. Previous locations of RBCF have included Baltimore's Helping Up Mission and Franklin Square Elementary–Middle School.

"He provides a great service to our clients who are getting ready for an interview or those who just haven't had a cut or a style in a while," said Siemer.

Striving forward to give his daughter, now 9, a positive image to look up to, Cradle has racked up numerous awards in the past few years locally, regionally and nationally.

"Hero" is often associated with his name. Earlier this year, his name was added to the list of recipients for Allstate's "Give Back Day Hero." In 2011 Cradle was honored by the American Red Cross with the "Hometown Hero" award and prior to that, in 2007, the company made the Top 100 Minority Business Entrepreneurs list. Though the accolades continue to roll in, it's the customer satisfaction that seems to put the biggest smile on Cradle's face.

"I've never had a haircut like this even when I paid \$10 or \$15 dollars for it," said Derian Jordan, 29, of Pittsburgh, Pa., looking wide-eyed into a mirror. "I'm clean cut and it gives me a better self-image."

He ran his hands over his first haircut from Cradle. "It'll help with the heat because I don't have to walk around with all that hair on my head," he said. "You can't get this back in a hole somewhere."

Residents of Light House, which provides supportive housing and helps victims of homelessness get back on their feet, say Cradle not only never looks down on them, but takes the time to craft a personal connection with each customer.

“It makes me feel good when my hair looks good,” said Ronald McComas, 45, from the Dundalk-Essex, Md. area. “I think Rob does a great job and no good deed goes un.”

Project results from 2011 show that RBCF provided 1,431 persons with 3,128 haircuts.

Of that number 392 attended job interviews, 333 went to work and 353 went to school “neat and clean” with no outward clues of their living situation, making for what Cradle says is the perfect “win-win situation for everybody.”