

Foundation's work is a cut above

BY LISA R. RHODES
Staff Writer

When Narcisse Aspilaire gets his hair cut, he feels refreshed and clean.

"It's super important," the 13-year old said about being well groomed. "Some people don't get that chance. I hope others can have that chance at some point"

Narcisse, an eighth-grader at MacArthur Middle School, is among nine students who are being groomed at no charge at the MacArthur IB Cuttery, a new barber and beauty shop that opened at the school in November.

Robert Cradle, a licensed barber, established the barber/beautyshop through the Rob's Barbershop Community Foundation, a public charity he started in 2000.

The foundation receives donations and grants to provide grooming for clients in public schools, shelters and colleges.

The Meltzer Group Employee Giving Fund, a diversified comprehensive insurance brokerage and advisory practice in Bethesda, donated \$10,000 to the foundation two years ago to fund a barbershop in a public school.

To establish a barbershop, the foundation invited public schools where students had little or no access to grooming.

Melissa Johnsonwarner, a special educator at MacArthur, applied for the opportunity through the foundation's website because she recognized a need to help some students with their grooming.

About 20 percent of students have no or little access to regular grooming services.



LISA RHODES/STAFF WRITER

(From left:) Meade Middle School counselor Augustus Dickens, special education teacher Melissa Johnsonwarner and Robert Cradle, a licensed barber, work together to provide students with free grooming services through the MacArthur IB Cuttery.



COURTESY ROBERT CRADLE

Barber Robert Cradle, founder of Rob's Barbershop Community Foundation, cuts a student's hair at the new MacArthur IB Cuttery, which opened in November at MacArthur Middle School.

Caring for the Whole Child

“Proper grooming is important to the students. But, unfortunately, some of them cannot afford to get their hair groomed professionally,” Johnsonwarner said. “This is where our barbershop comes in.

“MacArthur is about caring for the whole child. We want our students to know that we care about them beyond the classroom and we are willing to expand our expertise to make sure that they are confident young men and women.”

Cradle and the board of directors assess the needs of the prospective client and visit the site to see if space is available to establish a barbershop in-house.

MacArthur was selected as the recipient of an onsite barbershop for one year. The school provided the space, and the equipment was installed in September. The installation was completed the following month.

MacArthur IB Cuttery officially opened on Nov. 7. The barber/beauty shop is staffed by professional barbers and hairstylists who are selected by Cradle and volunteer their expertise to work with the students.

Students who are served at the barbershop must have an 80% academic average and a signed parental permission slip.

The shop is open at the end of the school day on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 2:40 to 3:40 p.m.

Augustus Dickens, the sixth grade school counselor, helps to identify students for the program. He said he knows of similar programs in high schools, but not in a middle school.

“I love to see the community and the school interacting as one,” Dickens said. “You often see the community and school interacting through sports. But this program is one of a kind.”

The students who are groomed are part of a caseload. They are assigned to a barber or hairstylist who will work with them for the year.

Cradle said he foresees at least a 10% improvement in grooming access by the end of the year.

After operating for a year, the shop will become a permanent fixture at the school, said Cradle, who provides each client with a handbook for future operations.

“My agreement is to assist them in managing the barber/beauty salon only for one school year,” he said. “[However,] I will help them create a succession plan for it to continue to operate.”

A Baltimore native who resides in

Odenton, Cradle operated his own barbershop in Odenton from 1991 to 2003. Cradle said he came up with the idea of a community foundation after he met Bruce Clopein, the volunteer coordinator at Sarah’s House, the transitional housing program for women and children on Fort Meade.

Clopein was one of Cradle’s clients, and the men talked about the grooming needs of some of the clients at Sarah’s House. Cradle put a collection box in his barbershop and used the donations to provide barbers and hairstylists at Sarah’s House.

Community Need

The opportunity helped Cradle realize a need in the larger community for free or low-cost grooming services.

Cradle sold his barbershop in 2003 and then devoted his time to the community foundation. His clients include the Anne Arundel County Department of Social Services, The Lighthouse in Annapolis and Baltimore, Agape House, St. Vincent’s Villa and Helping Up Mission.

A licensed hairstylist, Johnsonwarner worked as a professional in Trinidad and Tobago for 15 years before immigrating to the U.S. She later decided upon a career in education.

Johnsonwarner said she remembers becoming aware of her personal appearance when she was just a teen.

“Being well groomed is a big part of a teenager’s life,” she said. “When a person can look in the mirror and feel good about

what they see, then they are inclined to do their best. This is what I want for our students.”

Sixth-grader Isaiah Hall said he likes getting a haircut at the IB Cuttery because of his relationship with his barber.

“We have conversations about football,” Isaiah said. “We’ve got a connection. When I get my hair cut, I feel special. Other students see me and want to get their hair done.”

Teisha Hall, a licensed senior cosmetologist and military spouse selected for the project, said she looks forward to providing grooming services.

“My heart is really for the young girls,” she said.

Hall said her mother made sure her hair was properly styled when she was a child.

“My mother made sure my hair looked good,” Hall recalled. “Some mothers don’t know how to do hair, or don’t have the time. I want to share the blessings [in hair care] that were poured on to me.”

Hall said the barbers and hairstylists have the opportunity to “encourage and uplift” the youngsters.

MacArthur Middle School Principal Eugene Whiting said Cradle’s work “has been an invaluable asset to MacArthur.”

“Not only is [Cradle] providing a necessary service, he is an example of the care and civic responsibility that we uphold for all students at MacArthur,” Whiting said. “Our students are not only receiving a haircut, they are also being given the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with positive adult mentors.”