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Lifestyle

# How a Baltimore barber goes beyond the shop and gives life advice to people in need

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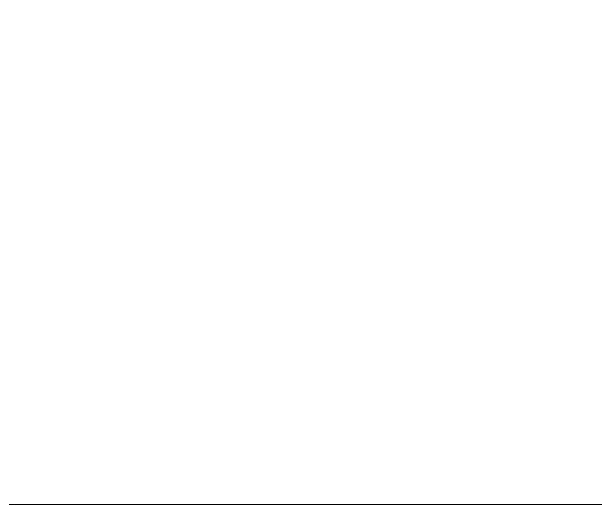
Juan Batty gets his beard trimmed by barber Derel Owens inside the TIME Organization's barbershop on July 11, 2023. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

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In a small room — large enough to fit a barber’s chair, a table adorned with hair products and a beautician’s sink — barber Derel Owens and Juan Batty were engaged in deep conversation that went beyond typical small talk.

The two talked about losing their parents, as well as cannabis and alcohol use.



“Everyday I smoke, the same butterfly comes out to see me and sit by me,” Batty said during the haircut at the Time Organization, a nonprofit outpatient mental health center and shelter. “I sit there and wonder if that’s my mom.”



Juan Batty wears a photo of his mother and a capsule of her ashes around his neck every day, which he shows off before getting a haircut inside the TIME Organization's barbershop on July 11, 2023. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

Batty even opened up about how he used to have long hair and how empowering a haircut can be.

For Owens, a barber of nearly 20 years and owner of Top Notch Barbershop in Southwest Baltimore, the conversation between him and his customers is as important as the haircut itself.

For Black men, a visit to the barbershop often serves as a therapy session, a chance to escape the burdens of everyday life. It gives customers a chance to speak about issues on their minds, without fear of being judged or ridiculed. For Black Americans — a population less likely to seek therapy — interactions like this are imperative.

Owens understands the power that the barbershop holds. After he volunteered at TIME, which stands for Teach, Inspire, Mentor and Empower, the nonprofit approached Owens about joining an outreach partnership focused on cutting hair while also counseling clients so they feel their best physically and mentally.

He obtained his Psychiatric Rehabilitation Program license in September, and now provides free haircuts a couple days each week to those who can't make it to the shop themselves.





Barber Derel Owens uses a straight razor to line up his client, Juan Batty, while giving him a haircut inside the TIME Organization's barbershop on July 11, 2023. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

"Myself and a whole bunch of other barbers and organizations have been trained on trauma-informed care and how to deescalate situations in our barbershops and in our community," Owens said.

Clients like Batty, 48, look forward to their appointments with Owens.

Batty mentioned that his time there brings him a feeling he doesn't often experience: "Peace." It's also like an escape, he said.



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“It takes me away from a lot,” Batty added. “I used to get peace and boredom mixed up.”



Juan Batty closes his eyes and takes a moment to himself while barber Derel Owens cleans off his clippers inside the TIME Organization’s barbershop on July 11, 2023. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

Owens sets aside some time to talk with his clients about their lives before their haircuts, to gauge their mental status.

Owens’ warm and charismatic energy makes his barbershop a safe haven for those who come by, a home away from home.

“I’m grateful to just be able to be a part of that team and be someone who can provide people with some resources that they might not be able to receive without someone being a liaison for them,” Owens said.

The distrust between Black Americans and clinical professionals is well documented.

“Initially, it was assumed that African Americans could not be mentally ill,” Patricia Bethea Whitfield, a professor at North Carolina A&T State University, wrote in a 2021 article for [Counseling Today](#). “The general notion was that a person had to own property and actively engage in business and civic affairs to experience mental illness, and because African American slaves ‘had nothing and nothing to worry about,’ they could not be mentally ill.”

Invalidation of Black health in historical events such as the [Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis](#) helped lead to the fractured relationship that exists today, experts say. Access to therapy is also an issue. In 2021, 12.7% of Black working-age adults lacked health insurance, according to [U.S. Census figures](#).

Shareese Kess-Lewis, director of clinical services and community engagement for the TIME Organization, worked closely with Owens and Rob Cradle of Rob’s Barbershop Community Foundation to make this partnership happen.

“When clients find out that we have a beauty and barber salon, they’re so excited. We are changing the way behavioral health looks, we’re normalizing it,” said Kess-Lewis, a licensed clinical social worker.

“Derel’s kind spirit and eagerness to help is just perfect for what we were looking for,” she added.



Juan Batty gets his hair cut by barber Derel Owens inside the TIME Organization's barbershop on July 11, 2023. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

Since becoming PRP-licensed, Owens has seen his workload with the nonprofit grow exponentially, but he doesn't mind. He said his only focus when he steps in the door is that his clients leave feeling better about themselves.

"I get around five to 10 clients at TIME versus 20 at my barbershop, but I focus on quality over quantity here," said Owens. "Not just quality of the haircuts, but quality of their minds as well."

As Owens began to finish his cut, Batty spoke about trying to rebuild his foundation in life. He currently works for ServiceMaster Clean, a commercial cleaning company, and is studying to get his GED.

"None of my mother's children have a high school diploma, and as the eldest I have to take initiative to break that chain," Batty said.



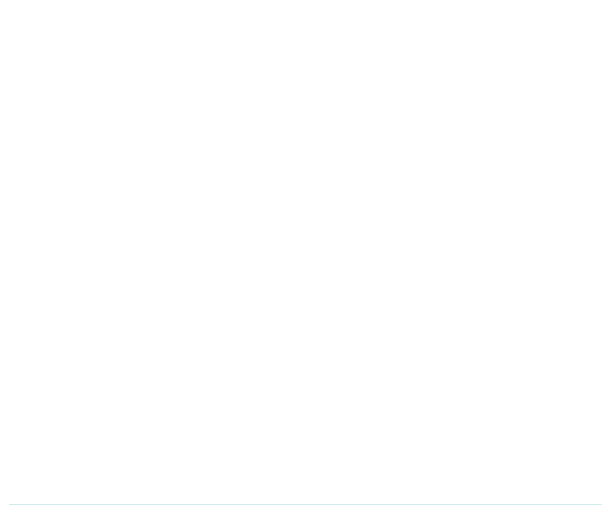


Juan Batty, left, speaks with barber Derel Owens after getting his haircut inside the TIME Organization's barbershop on July 11, 2023. (Ulysses Muñoz/The Baltimore Banner)

The work he does now leaves him feeling fulfilled, he's proud of what he has accomplished in life.

"No regrets in my life," Batty said. "No regrets."

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