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Nineteen years of haircuts and wisdom from Lou the barber

By Elliot Levy

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Three weeks into my freshman year at Boston University, something very scary happened — something that no amount of back-to-school shopping could have prepared me for.

I needed a haircut.

That first haircut away from home can be a traumatic experience. Before coming to BU, I'd been going to the same barber for 11 years. I wasn't ready to let some stranger wield scissors close to my head. But with a mullet creeping in, I had no choice but to find myself a barber in Boston.

But where would I go? Could I trust my locks to the barber school dropouts at SuperCuts? Should I shell out \$50 for a trim on Newbury Street? And then, just a few steps outside the doors of Warren Towers, I found my answer. I walked into Louie's Haircuts, and plopped down in Lou Fenerlis' chair.

From the longtime customer to the BU freshman, everyone who comes into Louie's Haircuts is greeted with a smile and "Hello, how are you?" as they walk through the door.

Lou has been practicing his people skills for 19 years now, since buying his first pair of clippers in November 1982. The son of Greek immigrants, Lou grew up in the Central Square (that's "Squaeh," by the way) area of Cambridge. After an unsuccessful first year at Boston State College, Lou's father and uncle, both barbers, suggested he try his hand at the family trade. He signed up for classes at the Massachusetts School of Barbering, but it took some time getting used to his classmates.

"The majority of people that go to barber schools are freshly out of prison," explains Lou with a grin. "The government would subsidize them

to go to school, and then as soon as they'd get the check they'd run with the money."

Unlike the ex-cons, Lou finished school and began cutting hair at his uncle's Custom Barber Shop in Harvard Square at the age of 21. There, he was able to refine his skills as a barber and, more importantly, master the art of making people happy — a skill that would keep his clients coming back for many years.

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"I got myself an education in Harvard Square," says Lou, as he sweeps up the scraps of hair from the floor. "I learned a lot ... not just how to cut hair, but also how to be a good person."

Lou visits his customers in the hospital when they get sick and swaps stories and messages between his regulars. A visit to Lou's might even boost your IQ. His haircuts have attracted such notables as Robert Reich, John Kenneth Galbraith, Saul Bellow and Michael Dukakis.

Lou does not take appointments — customers are taken first come, first served — except for former presidential candidate Dukakis, who once had Secret Service agents clear the shop so he could come in for a quick trim.

Saturday afternoons are standing room only, with all nine chairs in his waiting area occupied and customers waiting by the door. It is a jovial atmosphere. Children are given lollipops while parents and students gossip with Lou and the other barbers about politics, love lives, and Lou's favorite subject, hockey.

A diehard fan of the sport, Lou counts Chris Drury, Colorado Avalanche center and former BU star, among his loyal clients. "He was here a couple of times this summer. He's got his first Stanley Cup, so it's nice to know Chris."

While Lou's love for the sport may be unwavering, his loyalty to local college teams is not. Once an ardent fan (and barber) of the Harvard Crimson, Lou changed his allegiance when he moved across the Charles to his Commonwealth Avenue shop in 1993. Now that he's in Terrier territory, he jokes, "Oh, hey, I gotta go where the money is. I'm a BU fan all the way!"

In fact, Lou's love of the Terriers is so strong that he claims to have contributed to their 1995 NCAA Championship title.

"I inspired these guys," he boasts. "I brought this picture over here of the Harvard championship," referring to a photo of the 1989 Harvard champions that still hangs on his wall. "The first year I was here, I got so much grief about it from the BU players. I was like 'Listen, you guys. Win one, I'll hang [a picture of the BU team] up.' There it is right there. They won it the year later, and I'm the reason why!"

His inspirational hockey abilities aside, Lou says he's happy to continue barbering until it becomes time to retire.

"It's almost [superstitiously knocking on his counter] recession proof," he says. His hard work has earned him a happy life with his wife and three children at their home in Winchester.

As for the possibility of future barbers in the Fenerlis family? "I hope not," he sighs.

It's the sigh of a man who has stood on his feet for 12 hours a day, five days a week for the last 19 years. A man who's proud of what he does, but who's worked hard to provide for his family. A man who, in a business where many are content to just cut hair, has realized how far a smile and a kind word can take you. With the many complexities and uncertainties in our world today, it's nice to know that \$14 can still buy you a haircut and a conversation with Lou the Barber — as long as you don't mind waiting in line.