

Still Cutting After All These Years

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Barber Jim O'Neill Has Been Open Since 1968

FORT THOMAS - As a kid growing up in Bellevue, Jim O'Neill watched his mother Maureen style hair in their Division Street home and thought, "This might be a nice way to make a living."

He's not only made a living for himself, he's made going to the barbershop an experience for his customers since he opened on Memorial Parkway in 1968.

The first thing you notice when walking up to O'Neill's Barber Shop is a fish-net stocking leg lamp displayed prominently in the front window and always lit. It's O'Neill's homage to the 1983 film "A Christmas Story." Inside, mounted above the lamp, is the Red Ryder B.B. gun with a compass in the stock made famous in the movie. And no, he's not afraid he'll shoot his eye out. At Christmas time, statues of the film's characters-Ralphie, Randy, Flick and Schwartz-are displayed.

Clients walking into the shop are greeted by a formidable looking 5-foot wooden Indian. One of O'Neill's clients, who is a member of the clergy, dubbed the statue Chief Seattle after the first Indian Chief to convert to Christianity.

"Cincinnati Magazine" dubbed Jim O'Neill "Best Cut-Up" because he was a colorful character, but the characters that he likes the most are in black and white. While getting a trim, clients can look over the 80-plus pieces of Laurel and Hardy memorabilia on display. It began with a gift of Laurel and Hardy statues from his mother-in-law in the early 1970s, followed by a Laurel and Hardy mirror given by his wife, Peggy. Now the statues, pictures, dolls and assorted kitsch of Laurel and Hardy fill an entire section of the shop.

Clients Trust His Work

"There's nobody else I'd rather touch my hair," said Matt Reed, an O'Neill client since 1992. Reed, a staff attorney and Magistrate for Butler County, Ohio, proves it every other week by driving from his home in Hamilton, Ohio to Fort Thomas for a haircut. "Heck, I'd make trips from Columbus during law school just to get it cut."

Nancy Haas, a 15-year client from Cold Spring not only has O'Neill cut her hair, but also do perms and colors.

"He cut my late father's hair, he cuts my brother's hair, my sister's hair and my nephew's hair. Jim makes you feel comfortable and he makes you feel good about your hair. Not all women can say that about who cuts their hair. He doesn't make you feel insecure," she stated. "I don't trust anybody else."

O'Neill doesn't just cut his customers' hair. He provides practical advice on care, style and not looking bad.

"When going into a new barber shop with two chairs, always pick the barber with the bad haircut-because you know the other guy gave it to him," he stated with a wry grin and an insider's knowledge of the business. When asked what is the one thing people can do to have better-looking hair, his answer isn't to come to him.

"A quality conditioner this time of year can solve 90 percent of your problems," O'Neill said.

As for those whose problem isn't better-looking hair but not having enough, O'Neill has two suggestions.

First, don't wear a hat all the time.

"You're not fooling anybody and the hat just cuts off circulation to the scalp and makes the hair loss problems even worse," he said.

The second bit of advice is don't try a comb-over to cover balding areas.



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JOIN THE CROWD: A collection of Laurel and Hardy memorabilia decorates Jim O'Neill's Fort Thomas barber shop.

"I've convinced dozens of guys to cut it off and no one has ever grown it back. In fact, on the next visit they come in and thank me."

'All Sticking Up and Messy'

When times change, so does O'Neill, although he doesn't always like it.

"I like today's hair style: all sticking up and messy. That's fun to cut and it looks good."
He has to think back a few years for styles he didn't like.

"In the late 70s everybody had to have feathered hair. Day after day, it was part down the middle, comb back, just above the earlobe. It was easy but boring."

O'Neill and his barbershop have served a lot of people over the last 37 years. Many clients who were brought by their fathers as children have now become clients and bring in their own children. He's watched them grow up along with his own daughters, Michelle and Heather, and have kids of their own, along with his granddaughter, Hannah. He still strives to make his shop a pleasant experience-with a good haircut.

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