Where diversity takes a seat

Barbershops

Black-owned barbershops create community

*Marina Affo* Sheboygan Press | USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

It’s a Wednesday morning in Green Bay, and 10-year-old Kareem Nardi and his dad are getting haircuts.

Owners and barbers Albert Walker and Jason Williams chat with the pair, who sit side by side wearing matching black smocks inside Imago Dei The Barber Lounge. Their clippers buzz and vibrate as they shape and trim away.

Nardi’s father, Antoine Harand Harris, catches up and jokes as ESPN plays in the background.

Rich Mitchell, owner of barbershops in Appleton and Oshkosh

“My barbershop is based on bringing people together.”

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“I come in here and feel at home,” Harris said. “I come in here, and we talk about whatever’s going on in life.”

This makes Williams grin. It’s the exact feeling the pair of barbers hoped to inspire when they opened the shop in the summer of 2017.

For Harris, the shop is a safe space for black men. This is a common sentiment among patrons of Imago Dei and other barbershops around the South Side behind him. The cultural landscape in Wisconsin was drastically different, and Walker said it took some getting used to.

“My mom told me: ‘Boy, wherever you go you take you with you,’” he said. “I had to come and learn to live differently and acclimate to this community.”

Once he was able to get his bearings on how things worked in a less-diverse area, he wanted to help others adjust in a couple ways.

First, he wanted to offer a space where black people could visit with their peers and be comfortable enough to unwind and talk about their lives, struggles and joys.

Second, he wanted to connect

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Wisconsin. In cities like Green Bay, Appleton, Oshkosh and Sheboygan, black-owned barbershops offer much more than haircuts.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin’s largest city, where people of color make up 54.2 percent of the population and 38.9 percent of the population is black, there are plenty of black-owned businesses.

In small- and medium-sized communities, however, where diversity is on the rise but people of color are still a distinct minority, barbershops like Imago Dei serve as informal meeting places for communities of color. They allow individuals to forge bonds and build relationships with other people who look like them and share their cultural roots.

This Black History Month, USA TODAY NETWORKWisconsin took a closer look at three barbershops owned by people of color and the roles they play in our communities. The black-owned barbershops in Wisconsin can trace roots back to the earliest days of African-American community building.

**Barbers have fostered black communities since the Reconstruction Era**

Barbering as a means of building community dates back to the late-19th century, says Quincy Mills, an associate professor at Vassar College.

Mills’ book, “Cutting Along the Color Line: Black Barbers and Barber Shops in America,” details the history of barbershops from the pre-Civil War era to today.

Before the Civil War, barbering was a servile profession typically relegated to slaves, Mills start of Jim Crow laws that segregated black and white people in America.

During the Great Migration, African-Americans visited barbershops to get a better understanding of what was happening around the country. In the South, African-Americans would go to the barbershop and share letters from family or friends who’d moved north. They also read black newspapers like The Chicago Defender and The Pittsburgh Courier, Mills said.

“Barbershops, much like churches, provided a community space for folks to come together and to gather and talk and understand the world,” Mills said.

But these weren’t just community centers, Mills emphasized. To this day, black barbers are entrepreneurs selling two products: haircuts and social venues.

**Barbershops are a ‘central space where you can deal with life issues’**

Growing up on the South Side of Chicago in an area known as the wild 100s, Walker said there were always lots of other black people around.

That changed, however, after his sister married a Wisconsinite and his mom decided to relocate here as well. She encouraged him to join them. She wanted her son to leave Chicago before he was killed or thrown in jail forever.

“I was in the streets pretty hard,” he said.

So in 2002, he moved to Green Bay and left different people who might not otherwise have found each other.

Walker told a story about a young customer who had been struggling legally and was trying to get custody of his daughter from the child’s grandmother. Walker said the young man seemed distraught.

Out of sheer coincidence, there was a child psychologist getting his hair cut in the next seat. As he heard the young man’s story, the two connected. The doctor later agreed to be a character witness for the man in his fight to get his daughter back.

Walker said he’s witnessed many similar events at barbershops over the years.

“It’s that central space where you can deal with life issues and you can come in alone and you can hear others’ opinions,” Walker said.

Over the years he’s worked with clients of all races and walks of life.

More than 10 years ago, Walker started cutting the hair of a player for the Green Bay Packers. Since then, he’s become the team’s de facto barber, with clients including former Packers C.J. Wilson and B.J. Raji, and current players Randall Cobb, Davante Adams, Brad See BARBERSHOPS, Page 9A
Barbershops create opportunity for black businesses to flourish

Daniel Greer grew up in Milwaukee but moved to Sheboygan in 2009. He opened Elite Barbershop over two years ago in downtown Sheboygan. Like Walker, he set out to create a space where everyone, particularly people of color, can feel at home.

On a quiet Tuesday morning, he was cutting the hair of Andy Castro, a 20-year-old from Colombia. Castro told Greer about his interest in film and photography. Greer offered to connect his young customer with a relative in California who recently worked on the Marvel film “Avengers: Infinity War.”

Greer, a passionate entrepreneur, is working to launch an informal weekly meeting where he can give advice to anyone — particularly people of color — thinking of starting a business in the area.

In 2017, it became easier for entrepreneurial barbers like Greer to own and operate their shops after the Wisconsin Legislature passed a bill that eased restrictions on new barbershops.

Under the old law, barbers could not open their own shops without completing 4,000 hours of work in another licensed barbershop and going back to school to get a managerial license.

Under the new law, barbers no longer need a managerial license to own and operate their own stores, and their credentials from other states are now accepted in Wisconsin. This allowed a new generation of black barbers, like Greer, to create community spaces in their towns.

Barbershops build community

In Appleton and Oshkosh, Rich Mitchell — known as “Barber Rich” to friends and community members — owns barbershops where similar phenomenons are taking place.

Mitchell, who is Latino, said that when he set about opening his first barbershop about two years ago, he also had the desire to embrace the diversity of his community.

“My barbershop is based on bringing people together,” he said.

Every summer, Barber Rich and his business put together a massive picnic for people in the Oshkosh community called Party in the Park with Rich’s Barber Shop.

“Everybody’s able to be there for free. We got DJs, bouncy house, sports,” he said. “It’s just to bring everybody together to have a good time.”

Mitchell says his barbershops are good meeting spaces for people because everybody comes in.

“You get community leaders in the barbershop. You get pastors, you get priests. You get judges and lawyers,” he said. “You get a lot of people, so if you have one person that has an issue with someone, you can get the people together and you can connect them.”

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Jones, Mike Daniels and Ha Ha Clinton-Dix.

Before opening his barbershop, Walker cut hair out of his home. Many players would come and get their trims while discussing their lives, struggles, goals and identities. He knows many of their families, and they know him because of the trust they’ve built over the years.

One of Walker’s strongest relationships is with defensive end Mike Daniels. It started when Daniels first moved to Green Bay. He asked a teammate to recommend a barber and received Walker’s number in return. After Walker cut his hair for the first time, the duo bonded over their faith.

“God has been a very strong focal point of our friendship,” Daniels said. “When you come in here, you’re going to hear the Word.”

The pair have become such good friends that Walker even officiated Daniels’ 2014 wedding.

Daniels says Imago Dei is now a place where Packers players and their families feel welcome. There is a private room where players can get their hair cut, but many, including Daniels, prefer the traditional barbershop feel of the front room.

“You want to be in the atmosphere of the barbershop because it makes you feel at home,” he said. “It’s really cool to get somewhere we can feel part of the community and
we feel accepted by the community.”