

Barbershop, salon owners reopen with mixed emotions

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Russell Biellier had heard Tuesday that barbershops were being allowed to reopen since the state closed down businesses to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

“I just drove by hoping it was open,” Biellier said of The Barbershop Crescent City on 4th Street. “I was here at 9:02 and was number five. My last haircut was probably February. I was cutting it myself with clippers.”

Beillier was happy to get back in the chair an experienced barber like Angela Snyder, who’s been cutting hair for 33 years, the last four with shop owner Rudy Talbert.

“Shutting down was horrible. There was no warning,” Snyder said. “One day you suddenly have no job and no income. It took me eight weeks to start getting unemployment.”

Talbert, who has 35 years of experience himself as a barber, said The Barbershop’s clientele includes a lot of retired gentlemen and many correctional officers.

“We get a cross section of customers. We serve two-year-olds all the way up to 102-year-olds,” Talbert said. “You never know who’s coming to your chair.

After his shop closed, Talbert said he was one of the lucky ones to get a Paycheck Protection Program (PPE) loan through his credit card processor Square.

“Rather than having to go through a big bank like Chase Bank or Bank of America, it was rather easy. I’m a big fan of Square,” Talbert said. “It took about 10 days before money showed up in my account. Took care of personal rent, paid personal and shop bills. It kept me afloat for seven days or so.”

But when those funds ran out, Talbert was starting to tap into his personal savings and even had to apply for unemployment himself a couple weeks ago.

“Between stimulus check and PPE, I wasn’t as stressed. Without those, I don’t know if would have been able to reopen,” Talbert said. “I was worried letting us reopen wasn’t going to be for another couple months. Do I have the finances to last that long? I was fortunate that the company I lease the building from, TAD Inc., were understanding about rent during crisis. That was really nice.”

Tolbert said the list of requirements to reopen was extensive. Masks are required for both stylists and customers. He and Snyder have to start the morning by taking their own temperature, “so we know whether to show up for work.”

“We’re taking appointments now, too. Taking names and telephone numbers in case the local health department has to do contact tracing,” Tolbert said.

He added they’re only servicing haircuts at this time – no beard trims, shampoos or any work on faces.

“That’s really simplified things for us,” Talbert said. “Quite a few beard wearers won’t be happy with us. I’ve let my beard grow out. I’m sure customers have let theirs grow, waiting to come in and we’ll be saying, sorry those services aren’t available. Still interested to see what negative feedback will be.”

Other safety measures include no longer using a neck brush and capes can’t be reused until they’ve been cleaned in a storage cabinet Talbert had installed that uses UV light at 166 degrees to disinfect.

Talbert said most of the customers have been coming in with their own mask, but if they don’t, he made sure to order masks early in the process. He has about 750 in stock that should last a while.

Tolbert said it was nice to be finally back to work after 75 days, adding it was like being on a long vacation you can’t afford nor want.

“But it seems like it’s taken 75 days to figure out what it should have been in two weeks. It shouldn’t have taken this long to figure out to wear a mask. In our industry cosmetology, barbers, they don’t necessarily teach you how to cut hair, the techniques. The main emphasis is protecting the customer, not harming the customer, through injury or transmission of disease or infection. It’s something that we’ve already had, sanitization practices,” Tolbert explained.

A few blocks away on 9th Street, Jena Doering was the lone stylist, and owner, at the reopening of Embrace Salon & Spa.

While happy to be back open, Doering said the restrictions severely limit was her salon can offer her customers. She said of the six on staff, only two can work at a time and they’re limited to haircuts only, which eliminates about 75% of their business - no waxes, massages, permanent makeup, manicures or pedicures or facials.

“So reopening was hard just because we’re renters. So, booth renters can’t work a third of the work allowed to do,” Doering said.

Haircuts are by appointments only, with one customer at a time. Others have to wait in the car for cleanup and disinfecting is completed before being called inside.

Doering said after Embrace was open for three years, she was pretty financially stable. But she lost money every month closed. Financially, she started going in the negative. And when others said to just apply for a loan, Doering reminded them you do have to eventually pay those back.

“I did apply for a PPE, although I didn’t get approved for anything. Recently I was approved for an SBA (Small Business Administration) loan through the city. Literally the day I was preparing to open, was the day they told me to come down and sign. It took me that much time to get approved,” Doering said.

She added she was actually shocked when the state announced barbershops and salons could reopen with limited services.

“The thing with the media, though, they say, hey you can open tomorrow. But the reality is here’s a list of everything you have to do for OSHA and public health and here’s a list from state Board of barbering and Cosmetology,” she said. “You have two different lists you’re supposed to follow and they don’t match, with some similarities. It’s not that easy to open. You have to write out a plan. Get it approved by the city. So, there’s all these steps you have to go through to open.”

For reopening day, Doering called her regular customers first that had already scheduled appointments before the shutdown, which equates to about a three-week backlog. No new customers yet.

“As a business owner, I’m going to make about a third of what we were making before we closed. Most of us just started to get unemployment, but now we’re going back to work with about a third of our income,” Doering said, implying they’re making more on unemployment than they would back at work. “It’s a little frustrating.”

Her second customer of the day, Crescent City resident Sharon (who withheld her last name), was getting her first cut and coloring since March.

“I was not necessarily surprised, but ecstatic when she called me,” she said. “I was hysterically happy to be back in. She’s on top of everything with the safety precautions. Makes me feel very safe.”

Even with all the safety precautions she’s taken, Doering can’t feel some trepidation upon reopening still in the midst of a pandemic.

“I’m more nervous than happy. Because you don’t want to be the person to spread something and it spreads somewhere from that,” Doering said. “That’s a lot of pressure from the city and county.”