

AMERICA WORKS

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

EPISODE 2: JEFF HAFLER: Hairstylist and Beauty Shop Owner. Wonder Valley, California.

Jeff Hafler: Hair burner! [Laughs] Sometimes they call us “hair burners,” “beauty operator”. I love “beauty operator” ...probably “hairstylist.” I probably have said stylist more over the years. I had a business card once that I wrote [that said] “Coiffure construction, maintenance and repair.” [laughs]

Announcer: From the Library of Congress in Washington DC

Theme Music: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce: Welcome to “America Works,” excerpts from interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project. This America Works episode features hair stylist Jeff Hafler, owner of The Beauty Bubble Hair Salon and Museum in Wonder Valley, California, who was interviewed on behalf of the American Folklife Center by scholar, researcher, and Archie Green Fellow Candacy Taylor.

Interview:

Jeff Hafler: I’m Jeffrey George Hafler, and I’ve been doing hair, a cosmetologist since 1991, I finished High School and really didn’t have any direction.

I took a year off, I moved out and I got in a lot of trouble and I realized that I couldn’t spend the rest of my life doing that. A friend of mine had gone to cosmetology school and he said that he thought I’d probably be pretty good at it and I should go and look into beauty school. You know, I’d messed around with friends’ hair, I’d cut my own hair and I’d cut my friend’s hair on the porch and stuff, so I thought, I could probably do that. So I went to the offices of The Ohio State School of Cosmetology in Columbus, Ohio, [Singing] The leader the largest in Ohio! [Laughing] That’s their jingle and it turned out that I qualified for two Pell Grants. That covered just about the entire tuition...

And so it turned out that I was really good at it. I finished at the top of my class. It’s been great. It’s been 20 years of being able to work anywhere and pretty much just always have a job, because people always need a haircut.

Well, hair is our crown and glory. I think that our hair is the first and foremost thing we think about when we think about our appearance. It defines us.

How you wear your hair can even change the way your face looks. Just a simple, you know, combing it forward as opposed to combing it back is going to change the way your face appears.

Eighty percent would probably prefer to have different hair. Nobody's happy with what they've got.

But I do think that ultimately everybody ends up with their go to look. Everyone has that style... regardless of the trends that come and go...that looks the best, is the easiest for them.

I told someone once.... that our hair holds energy. All the hair that's on your head is holding everything that happened in the period of time that it's taken to grow that hair. So imagine that at the very tips of your hair is whatever happened to you five years ago and so if you cut that off, you're going to let it go.

I don't know necessarily if it's necessarily true but it kind of makes sense [laughing].

I am a chatterbox, so I get to talk all day long.

Candacy Taylor: How much do you reveal about yourself?

Jeff Hafler: Oh everything! God. I'm an open book,

I do remember that they said you should not talk about religion, sex or politics in the first chapter of my cosmetology textbook which that's all we talk about!

All the time. All the time. Politics...everyday somebody's talking something about politics or religion or sex. All of it. All of it. Especially now for me being a gay married man which you know is a hotbed issue so I bring it up, too.

For some reason people confide in their hairdresser like a therapist and I've always been really good at that too. I don't know maybe because I'm a talker I'm also a really good listener. This business makes you a really good listener, sometimes your client just needs to talk the whole time and you may even just end up nodding your head and just throwing something in on occasion but they need to vent something. I enjoy that, really. In fact I have on my pricelist: "Therapy listed as Free" There's no charge for the therapy.

My therapy is free but in fact, one time I had a client pay me. He was a guy. He insisted on giving me money that he would have given to a therapist.

But yeah, I don't know what it is about the environment, it's probably because it's obviously very intimate and in my salon especially because most of the time it's one on one. It's just my chair and my client. Sometimes I'll have two clients going at the same time and that's fun because sometimes you get two clients talking about the same thing or you know they might be able to talk about each other's problems and have something to weigh in on.

...but people love to gossip. And for some reason this is just part of my nature to keep up on current affairs and what's going on in town and who's doing what to who [laughing] so, you know, people want to know! A lot of people sit down and say, "Ok, what's going on in Twentynine Palms? What's the latest?"

Yeah, you are an entertainer when you're a hairdresser because you're entertaining your client while you're doing their hair. You have to interact and make it fun.

I think the relationship you develop with your clients too...because you develop a friendship with people and they stay in your life for years with the loyalty that comes along with it

It is one of those industries where it doesn't get the level of respect that it should. Because it's not easy work and you can make good money but ...why there is stigma about a hairdresser being second-class. Probably again, because it's a service industry job, you're serving people. I don't know, too maybe it's because it's a vocation. When I was in high school, the vocational school in Columbus offered cosmetology and I wish that I had done it. I would have been two years ahead of the game. They'd only let people go to vocational school if they didn't have great grades. And mine weren't great, but they said I was smarter than that.

A college degree is not a guarantee that you'll have a job but a vocation, however, is.

More people think that it's not a high paying job, that you're a servant of some sort, which is true. In fact when I told my mother I was going to go to cosmetology school she was like "Ugh, why do you want to do that?" I said, "What are you talking about? I think I'll be good at it."

This has been an amazing career. All kinds of opportunity and interesting things I've seen and done. And you know that was another reason, I felt like it was the right choice of occupation because I like I said...

...you just get to meet a lot of people, have a lot of friends and talk a lot. [Laughs]

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce: You've been listening to hair stylist Jeff Hafler, owner of The Beauty Bubble Hair Salon and Museum in Wonder Valley, near Twentynine Palms, California, who was interviewed on behalf of the American Folklife Center by scholar, researcher, and Archie Green Fellow Candacy Taylor.

To hear the complete interview with Jeff Hafler, please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife.

On behalf of the Library's American Folklife Center, this is Folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to America Works.

Announcer: From the Library of Congress, in Washington, DC.