

# 5 SHOPS AND COUNTING

## Justin's Barbershop has grown rapidly

By **Gretchen C. Van Benthuyzen**

Special to the Asbury Park Press

Eight years ago, Justin D'Esposito was cutting hair out of his parents' garage, getting ready to open his first shop. Now, he and his brother Tim have five shops in Monmouth and Ocean counties and are scouting a location near Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

"We've had people say to us, 'It's hard enough to open one business and you opened five,'" Tim D'Esposito said. "That kind of opened our eyes a bit."

Justin D'Esposito, 32, of Howell opened Justin's Barbershop in Jackson in 2005. The brothers opened a second in Manalapan two years later, and between 2011 and 2013 they opened shops in Brick, Colts Neck and Marlboro. They are open seven days a week, have flat-screen TVs, thumping music, a waiting area and receptionist to greet customers.

The small chain has a loyal following, including Mike "The Situation" Sorrentino from TV's "The Jersey Shore," which filmed a few scenes at the Manalapan shop (Sorrentino's hometown).

Tape-ups, faux hawks, Mohawks, bald fades, straight edge cuts are available along with gentlemen's hair cuts ranging from \$18 to \$25. Line art styles, including tribal symbols, names and numbers, are a spe-

cialty. Women are welcome for cuts (\$35), color (\$75), eyebrow (\$10) and lip (\$8) waxing. Clients range from children to young adults to a man in his 80s who visits once a week for a hot towel razor shave (\$20).

### 'City style'

"We work with scissors and we work with the clippers," Justin D'Esposito said. "Some shops do one or the other."

"We offer city style and gentleman's haircuts that a lot of barber-shops can't do," D'Esposito said. "We bring that to the table in a nice area. Many times if you want a city-style cut you have to go to an inner city area or drive to Staten Island. We brought the same style of hair-cutting into the suburbs."

It began in his parent's garage on Stiles Place in Freehold Township when he was 13 and a friend complained about his lousy hair cut.

*The small chain has a loyal following, including Mike "The Situation" Sorrentino from TV's "The Jersey Shore."*

"I had these old beat-up clippers I used to shave the side of my head with, and he asked if I could fix his cut," D'Esposito explained. "I said, 'I don't know how to cut hair but I could try.'"

"So I started, I adjusted the clippers and created a fade and he really liked it ... said I was a natural at it," D'Esposito said, adding he practiced on his younger brother, Tim who is now his business partner.

"Yeah, I had a lot of funny

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## Small business



Barber Mike Sosna of Manalapan (left) cuts the hair of Joe LaRocque of Freehold Township, while barber Lena Piccininni of Jackson (right) cuts the hair of Anthony Mujica of Manalapan at Justin's Barbershop in Manalapan. JODY SOMERS/SPECIAL TO THE ASBURY PARK PRESS



haircuts with lots of designs on my head," said Tim D'Esposito, who still lives in Freehold Township.

Justin D'Esposito continued to cut hair for classmates through high school, charging \$4 a cut. He graduated and worked several dead-end jobs. Not fond of school, college was never an option. After quitting a tree service job he despised, his mother asked him what he really liked to do and "I said, 'I like to cut hair.' "

'She literally dragged me to the (cosmetology) school," D'Esposito said. "Even that school I wasn't fond of, but I got through it."

After school he worked at Joe's Barber Shop on Clifton Avenue in Lakewood.

"I went in there with one set of clippers thinking I knew what I was doing," Justin D'Esposito said. "That shop honed my skills. There was an older guy and a couple of more experienced guys and they got me to the level I needed to get to."

Five years later he lost the job. Although he had passed the hands-on part of the cosmetology test, he failed the written part. He had no license.

## Back to the garage

He returned to the family garage to set up shop. He charged \$12 to \$15 and students, doctors and lawyers waited in the driveway to get in. He retook and passed his cosmetology test. Business was great and he bought a Mercedes. He was 24. Life was good. Then his dad said it was time to get out of the garage.

His old-school Italian father told his son he had proved him wrong — he could make a living as a barber. He took out a \$60,000 home equity loan to help his son buy his first shop in Romeo's Plaza in Jackson. He paid his father back and two years later opened the Manalapan location with his brother Tim, who handles the business side and marketing.

"He really helped me take this to the next level," Justin D'Esposito said. "My creativeness and knowing the industry and his brain for business made this thing what it is today ... this empire."

He got married and said his wife, Anna, and 3-year-old son Vittorio keep him grounded. "Anna has a strong influence over me," he said. "She motivated me to move forward."