

# Kay's Barber Shop in Worcester cuts a neighborhood legacy for more than 70 years

*Whether its a flattop, pompadour or any hairstyle that's popular at any given time, this barbershop on Park Avenue has been a source of neighborhood pride for decades.*



**Henry Schwan**

Telegram & Gazette

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*Editor's note: This story is the latest in a series on neighborhood life in Worcester, places where people meet to swap stories and hang out. If you have a favorite neighborhood spot, email reporter Henry Schwan at [henry.schwan@telegram.com](mailto:henry.schwan@telegram.com).*

WORCESTER — Seventy-three years of building relationships with customers. Knowing their names, those of their children and those of their children's children.

That is the living legacy of Kay's Barber Shop.

Laurie Demers owns the shop located at 434 Park Ave., and her journey started when she walked through the front doors of the business when she was 18, looking for an “easy way to make money” to help pay for college.

Then the unexpected happened. Demers loved cutting hair so much that she never left.

That was 44 years ago.

“It’s a nice family atmosphere, always,” said Demers while cutting the hair of Margos Stone, a Kay’s customer for the past 60 years.



“I like the shop, the people, they give a good haircut,” said Stone as Demers worked the clippers, snipping a little of Stone’s hair here and a little more there. “Plus, it’s a reasonable price.”

## 'Flattop King'

When Demers arrived on the scene all those years ago, it was the late Kasper “Kay” Saffer who owned the business.

Saffer was known as the “The Flattop King of Worcester,” recalled Demers, and was the man you had to see if you needed a flattop. It was a popular hairstyle for men in the 1950s, with short-cropped hair on top that stood up, creating the look of a flat pad.



Not only did Saffer teach Demers how to cut, shape and style the flattop, he also passed along all of his cosmetology knowledge.

“He taught me how to cut hair,” Demers said.

Saffer sold the business to Pam Morabito — who also taught Demers a thing or two about cutting hair — and when Morabito retired, she sold Kay's to Demers in 2016.

That's a total of three owners since the shop opened way back in 1949.

## Loyal customer

For a big chunk of those 73 years, Tom Incutto has been what he described as an "off- and-on" customer.

Incutto grew up on Enfield Street, the next block from Kay's front door, and he's been coming to the shop for 63 years.



Sitting in a vintage barber chair with its old-style metal hand crank for raising and lowering the seat's height, Incutto got a haircut from Donna Brown, who has worked at Kay's for 37 years.

“I started in 1986, I walked in, and was shocked that I was hired,” Brown said. “It’s a family-oriented business. Lots of people from the area. College students, firefighters, police officers. We’ve watched their kids grow up.”

## **Pompadour and a wax**

When Incutto was a student at the former St. Peter-Marian High School, he and a lot of his buddies came to Kay's for a “pompadour and a wax.” That’s a style with a lot of slicked-back hair on top — courtesy of the wax — with the sides cut short.

Besides the pompadour, another big draw for the high school crowd was Saffer's love of high school sports. His walls were packed with photos of the city's high school athletes and the teams they starred on.



“I saw all my friends here (at Kay's),” said Incutto, a 1967 St. Peter’s graduate, who owned the former Gilrein's, a Worcester blues nightclub.

"(Gilrein's) brought us a lot of business. Those were the good old days," Demers said.

The late Ralph Moberly, owner of Ralph's Chadwick Square Diner, also brought Kay's a ton of business. A "trendsetter" is how Demers remembers Moberly, because whatever hairstyle Moberly had, everyone wanted to copy it.

Whether it was a butch, mullet or any cut Ralph sported, "Everyone copied everything Ralph did. He was a trendsetter," Demers said.

## Long gone

The photos of athletes who brought the high school crowd to Kay's are long gone, replaced today by college pennants. They come from customers who grew up with Demers cutting their hair. When they go off to college, Demers asks them to send her a pennant, and many oblige.

Demers tried to display them all, but she ran out of wall space, so now she only displays pennants from customers who attend Worcester's colleges and universities.



"I like local. I'm proud of my shop, and I love Worcester," Demers said.

Besides pennants, other interior features have been around for a while, including the tan-colored wall paneling added during a 1990 remodeling job.

Another old-time feature is how transactions are conducted. It's a cash-only business, no credit cards accepted.

## **One modern feature**

Demers bought a computer because of the coronavirus pandemic. The state required all appointments be booked in advance in case of a viral outbreak that necessitates contact tracing, so it was time to get the computer.

It's worked out, because Demers acknowledged that "overall, business is just as good," compared to the days before COVID-19, when Kay's was primarily a walk-in business.

Demers also joined the social media world, adding a business Facebook page and a website, with the help of her husband, Michael Demers, their son, Mike, and daughter, Lauren Caparso.

Caparso, an engineer by day, also owns Fit FRIENDzy Studios in Shrewsbury, where Demers teaches a few fitness classes at night to stay fit.

"So, I can cut hair for another 20 years," Demers said, somewhat in jest.

## **Retirement plans?**

Twenty more years may be a lot to ask. It is for Brown, who plans to retire in April 2023.

That decision may not push Demers to give up her clippers, because she said, "I don't feel I'm ever going to retire. It's a really fun job."

But a few minutes later, Demers revealed that a "younger girl" who works in the shop may be a candidate to take over the business.

Whoever it is that becomes the next owner, that person has to be comfortable cutting men's hair, because Demers estimated that less than 1% of her customers are women.

"It has to be someone who loves the guys like we do. We really care (about the business). It's how we work," Demers said. "It's a friendly neighborhood shop."

Kay's is open 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, noon to 7 p.m. Thursday, 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. Friday, and 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday.

The business is closed on Sunday and Monday.

Contact Henry Schwan at [henry.schwan@telegram.com](mailto:henry.schwan@telegram.com). Follow him on Twitter @henrytelegram



**Service and price keep 'em coming to Kay's Barber Shop**

LOCAL, 3A



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# LOCAL

## Keepin' em sharp



Barber Donna Brown laughs with West Boylston resident Tim Parslow as she gives him a haircut at Kay's Barber Shop in Worcester. ALLAN JUNG/TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

**Kay's  
Barber  
Shop cuts  
legacy  
of local  
spirit in  
Worcester**

**Henry Schwan** Worcester Telegram & Gazette | USA TODAY NETWORK

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## Kay's

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