

MASTERS OF THEIR CRAFT

JONATHAN LEITZEL // THE BLACK COMB

Some people in the world know from an early age the work their hands were made to perform. The route is bright, clear, and direct. Yet, seemingly more common is a long, bumpy, sometimes dark and frustrating journey of discovering our life work. Jonathan Leitzel, the entrepreneur behind The Black Comb Barbers of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, can relate to the scenic road of finding his life passion.

Jonathan Leitzel had little interest in barbering as a child. The fact that he operates a business in downtown Lancaster, PA; oversees a talented, growing team of barbers; and welcomes a myriad of clients from the tri-state area comes as a surprise to him. He spent his entire life in central PA, relocated to Lancaster for college to study art education, and entered the teaching profession in Lancaster and Japan. Though enjoying his time interacting with students, he felt passion for his work lacking. For a time, he plowed through thinking, "This is what having a job and being a grown up is supposed to feel like." Yet, he felt unrest.

A trip to southern California in 2007 would prove monumental for Jonathan. After encountering a barbershop with hotrods parked outside and young guys in shirts and ties and tattoos working inside cutting hair, he returned to Lancaster in search of barbering schools. In 2013, after finishing school, saving money, and planning his business, he opened The Black Comb.

The Black Comb quickly grew from a team of two to three to currently six barbers. The shop has moved from its original Duke Street location to a building five times larger on Orange Street to suit its ever-expanding client base. Known for its precise cuts, straight razor shaves, beard butter, and a quip or two, in just two years, The Black Comb has emerged as a Lancaster City staple.

“ I felt the need to create a solution to a problem. ”



Jonathan Leitzel of The Black Comb

Written by Karen McGrady
A production of Char Co

HOW DID YOUR INTEREST IN BEING A BARBER IGNITE?

I never pictured myself being a barber, ever. It really all ended up happening because I felt the need to create a solution to a problem. My problem was getting terrible haircuts. When I was growing up, I went to a barbershop and got haircuts pretty regularly. He was an older man named Stan, and he was very traditional in the sense that he had been doing this for years and there was no changing his ways. He did only men's haircuts. He was quick and efficient, and he started shaving my neck with a straight razor when I was probably 10. I was very accustomed to this ritual. When I moved to Lancaster, I had to find a new barber. I remember going into a shop and explaining what I wanted. They didn't seem to care much, and they totally rushed my haircut. At the end, he brushed me off and removed the cape. I asked if he was going to shave my neck, and he laughed and said nobody does that anymore. I ended up cutting my own hair thru most of my college stay because I didn't want someone else to do. It was even worse when I went to Japan and couldn't communicate fluently. So I continued to cut my own hair even then. I was visiting a friend in Southern California in 2007, and I remember walking by this particular barbershop. I was blown away. There were vintage hot rods parked outside; inside there were guys my age wearing shirts and ties covered in tattoos. They were cutting hair and shaving people the way Stan used to do everyday at his shop. I couldn't stop thinking about that shop. As soon as I got home, I started researching barber schools.



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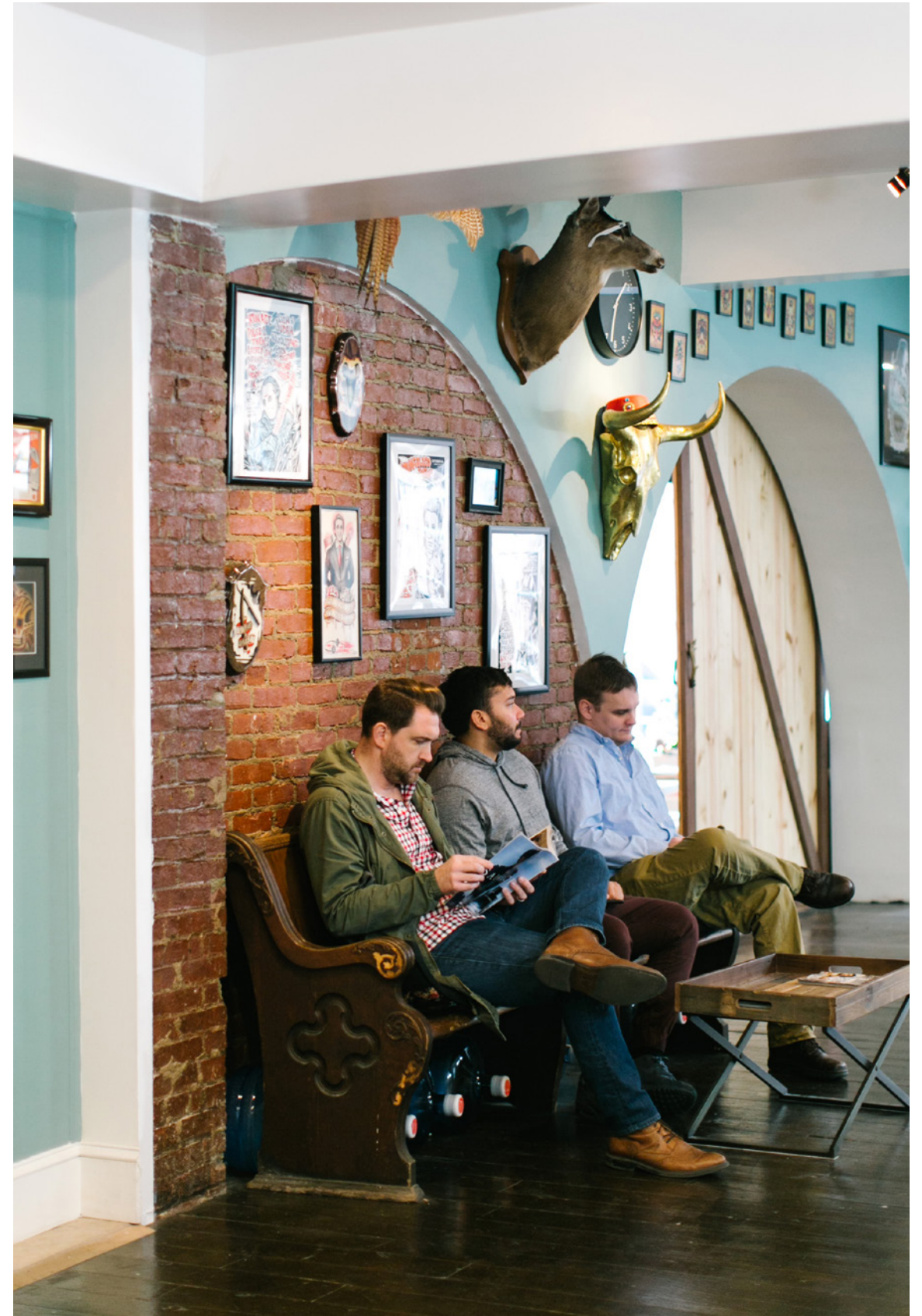








“I’ve seen people thru college and watch them get their dream job. I’ve seen girlfriends turn into wives, and men turn into fathers. I’ve seen guys go thru hardships and things life throws at them. That’s when it becomes a real trade: when my client isn’t someone who gives me money every two weeks but someone I keep tabs on and genuinely care about.”







WHAT TYPE OF TRAINING DID YOU NEED TO OBTAIN FOR YOUR TRADE?

Schooling varies from state to state. In Pennsylvania, you're required 1250 hours in school. You do hands on training cutting people's hair, shaving, and theory class.

WHAT MADE YOU CHOOSE LANCASTER AS THE PLACE TO OPEN THE BLACK COMB?

Lancaster had become my home by this time, and it had changed so much in the time since my college days. Lancaster has become a hub for art, culture, amazing restaurants and bars, boutiques, and the central market. Baby boomers are selling their \$500,000 houses in the suburbs and moving back into the city to enjoy what it has to offer. As I mentioned, I felt like this is where the problem started so I wanted to apply my solution.

DID YOU EVER HAVE ANY SETBACKS OR DOUBTS AS TO PURSUING A CAREER IN BARBERING?

I never doubted my passion for barbering but there were people who doubted what I envisioned and me. The Black Comb would never have happened without the support of my wife (a.k.a. The Pink Lady).

WILL YOU SHARE ANY OF THE MOST REWARDING SUCCESSES YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED THUS FAR WITH THE BLACK COMB?

I would say the relationships I've developed with various people had been very rewarding. I've made friends and developed relationships with so many over the last two and a half years. The guys who work for me have become my brothers. I've had clients turn into friends. I was invited to a client's wedding last year in California, and he requested that I cut all the groomsmen. I owe a lot of friends and relationships to barbering.

HOW DID YOUR TEAM OF FOUR COME TOGETHER? AND DO YOU SPEND TIME TOGETHER OUTSIDE OF WORK?

Basically it was a gradual process. Patrick and I had mutual friends and finally connected and realized we had the same philosophy when it came to barbering. He worked with me for about a year and by this time we were both booked out 5 weeks. Patrick went to barber school with this kid Paul and kept saying I should meet him. I was a little skeptical at first, but only because he was 20 years old. Hiring Paul was the right move, and he also quickly developed a strong following. After a few months, Paul was also booked for a solid month. Evan joining me came as a total surprise and wasn't planned. He randomly came into the shop one day and said he and his girlfriend moved here from Philly and he was looking for a job. I said I wasn't interested but I would keep him in mind. A few weeks later, I asked him if he wanted to fill in for Pat while he was on vacation. By the end of that week Paul and I liked Evan so much we called Pat and said I wanted to hire him.

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WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR IN THE PEOPLE YOU HIRE?

Anyone can learn to cut hair, but not everyone can be passionate about it. Most barbers are taught that to be a good barber you need to be fast because the more haircuts you do the more money you make. I only hire people who are passionate about their trade and want to take their time. I always say here we treat all clients like this is their “wedding haircut” since that’s when most guys want to typically look their best.

YOU WORK IN A BUSINESS WHERE PEOPLE FROM ALL TYPES OF BACKGROUNDS ENTER YOUR DOORS. HOW DO YOU LEARN TO INTERACT WITH AND RELATE TO SUCH A LARGE VARIETY OF PEOPLE?

With new clients we usually talk about surface subjects like movies, music and food. We tend to stay away from subjects such as religion and politics. The real fun is when you develop regular clientele; it becomes easy to maintain dialogue. We learn about their girlfriends, their wives, their families, their schools and their careers. I’ve seen people thru college and watch them get their dream job. I’ve seen girlfriends turn into wives, and men turn into fathers. I’ve seen guys go thru hardships and things life throws at them. You become invested in these clients. That’s when it becomes a real trade: when my client isn’t someone who gives me money every two weeks but someone I keep tabs on and genuinely care about.

HOW DID YOU LEARN THE BUSINESS SKILLS NEEDED TO OPERATE THE BLACK COMB?

My grandfather and father both had small businesses, and I learned a lot just growing up watching them and how they interacted with people in the community and people who were customers. Personality is key, especially in the service industry. I also learned a lot while working in other barbershops; mostly, I learned a lot about what not to do.

ON THAT NOTE, WHAT ARE THREE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT BUSINESS SKILLS YOU HAVE TO SHARE WITH FELLOW OR ASPIRING ENTREPRENEURS?

Save money is one of the biggest. I wouldn’t have been able to build what I have today if it wasn’t for saving. Banks won’t give you money for business start up. And you can’t even get a business loan unless you’ve been established for at least two years. Building relationships and networking is also key. I’ve made a lot of friends and built a lot of business relationships by barbering. Being nice to people also helps. It sounds simple enough, but it can be difficult sometimes.

HOW DID YOU LEARN YOUR ARTISTIC SKILLS? DO YOU FIND THEM TO BE INNATE OR TO RESULT FROM TRAINING, OR BOTH?

Cutting hair is definitely an art. You have to envision the end result and a lot of what we do is similar to sculpting. A lot of these techniques we do are very traditional, and it’s what allows us to create a custom fit haircut.

DID YOU EVER MESS UP SOMEONE’S HAIR OR ACCIDENTALLY CUT SOMEONE YOU WERE SHAVING?

I’ve never messed up anyone’s hair that bad. Basically all you learn in barber school is how to fix mistakes. If you’re taking your time there’s less margin for error. Most mistakes are made simply because you’re rushing or not focused. Shaving can be difficult at times because you have a lot to factor in. The biggest is the person not trying to have a conversation while you’re holding a razor to their neck. Cuts are extremely rare and as long as you’re careful it’s harder to cut someone more than you may think.

ANY GROOMING TIPS YOU’D LIKE TO PASS ON TO OUR MALE AUDIENCE?

My biggest grooming tip would be don’t try to cut your own hair or have your wife do it. You’d be amazed how many “surgeries” we have done over the years.

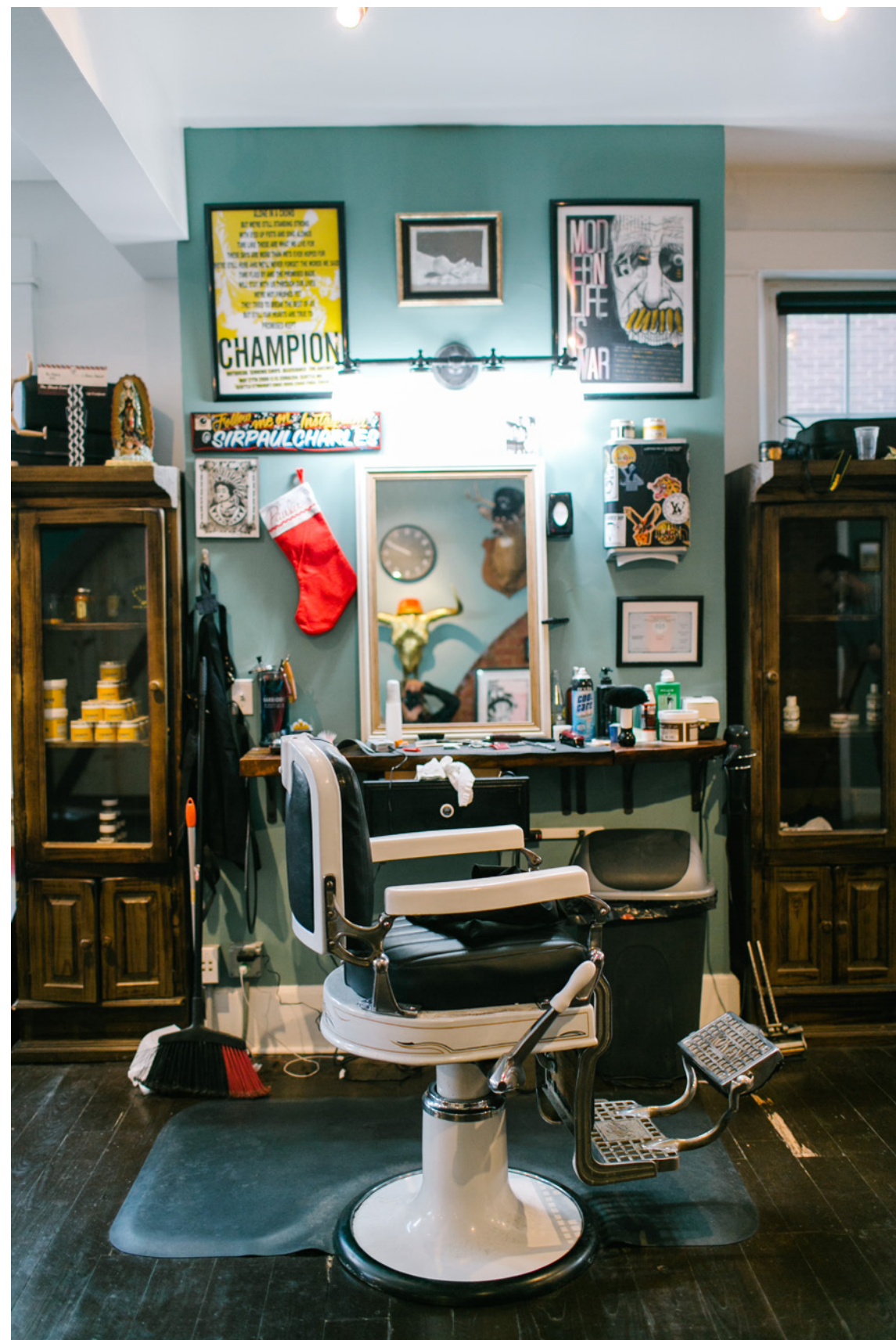
ARE YOU ABLE TO USE THE BLACK COMB TO PARTNER WITH OR SUPPORT OTHER SMALL BUSINESSES IN LANCASTER?

As stated before I’ve developed some incredible relationships. We are all constantly cross advertising with each other. I’ve partnered with local breweries such as Wacker & Lancaster Brewing Company (I offer a drink with your haircut), and I’ve even done “pop up shops” with local retailers.

YOU RECENTLY MOVED YOUR SHOP TO 31 EAST ORANGE STREET. WHAT MADE YOU PICK THIS SPOT AND HOW DO YOU SEE THIS LOCATION BEING MORE ADVANTAGEOUS?

The original Black Comb location was only 300 square feet, and it was just time to move on and find space to grow. I was fortunate to find this spot right around the corner, and it offers us room to grow as well as an amazing downtown location.







WHAT DO YOU DO TO CONTINUE TO ADVANCE IN YOUR SKILL AS A BARBER?

I learn from my fellow barbers everyday. Patrick, Paul and Evan are incredibly talented, and I'm always learning just from watching them grow. We use Instagram a lot to promote ourselves, and we are constantly checking out other barbers and their work. We travel together to conventions, barber expos and classes. We love what we do so we are always excited to learn.

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE THE BLACK COMB GROW IN FUTURE YEARS?

These guys are my family. I want to see them grow as barbers and continue to provide impeccable service to our growing client list.

WHAT DOES LIFE LOOK LIKE FOR YOU OUTSIDE OF WORK?

I'm always the first to arrive to work and sometimes the last to leave. I pretty much run the business 24/7 even when I'm not in the shop. We have a website where you can book appointments. I'm constantly managing clients and social media. When I'm not at work, I enjoy spending quality time with my wife and our friends and family.

