

Inspired Life

This D.C. barbershop and art gallery offers insight into the LGBTQ community alongside free haircuts

In August, CulturalDC's Mobile Art Gallery is hosting the Barbershop Project, an art exhibit that aims to promote LGBTQ tolerance through free haircuts. (Video: Michelle Hanks/Photo: Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

By [Hannah Natanson](#)

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Seven-year-old Nasir Blake wanted to know: Why was his barber taking medicine to “become a boy?”

“I don’t get it,” Nasir said last week, spinning in his chair to stare at Brixton Millner, the transgender, motorcycle-loving barber cutting his hair. “You already look like a boy.”

Millner, 32, who is five months into a regimen of weekly testosterone shots, laughed and gave Nasir a fist-bump. “Good one, man,” he said. “I am a boy.”

Nasir settled back in his chair, allowing the haircut — provided for free in a storage container recently converted into a combination barbershop/art gallery — to proceed. Millner’s explanation, delivered between scissor snips, had been simple: I was born a girl, but I’m actually a boy. Now, I’m taking “medicine” to become one.

Moments later, the duo were debating the merits of Swedish Fish-flavored Oreos.

“Kids are simpler than adults — you can just give them, ‘Hey, I’m a boy,’ and they’re like, ‘Okay, I take your word for it,’ ” Millner said later. “Adults, I have to feel them out a little bit more, figure out a way to say it. Still, they usually get it.”

By now, he is familiar with the range of reactions his transgender status and physical transition provoke in this corner of the District — mostly positive, he said. Millner has given haircuts and answered questions like these for three months as part of “Mighty Mighty,” the centerpiece of “[The Barbershop Project](#),” an initiative, led by nonprofit visual and performing arts group CulturalDC, that asks artists to reinterpret what barbershops can and should look like.

Mighty Mighty, which opened on a parking lot in Southeast in early May and will close in late August, offers free haircuts to all comers in a space decorated “like a fantasy,” said [Devan Shimoyama](#), the artist who designed it. Flowers festoon mirrors, table legs boast dazzling jewels and brightly colored paintings line the walls.

Shimoyama said the decor is meant to welcome those who identify as LGBTQ. That’s also the reason he asked that any barbers for Mighty Mighty identify as LGBTQ or be allies, Shimoyama said.



Nasir Blake, 7, questions transgender barber Brixton Millner about why Millner takes medicine as Nasir's brother Zyshaun Knox, 10, looks on. Millner responded that he takes medicine "so I can become a boy." (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

The mission to create a barbershop open to “all different types of people” — staffed by employees who can model and explain what it means to be LGBTQ — stems from the artist’s memories of black barbershops in Philadelphia, where he grew up. He now maintains a studio in Pittsburgh. Often, the shops were sites of “heterosexual fraternal bonding” that excluded other identities, he said.

“I immediately felt uncomfortable in them as a child,” said Shimoyama, who is African American and gay. “There was this heteronormative conversation and dialogue that sometimes could be misogynistic and homophobic in tone.”

Joel Miles, 40, a Southeast resident and frequent patron of the barbershop who is also African American and gay, said last week that’s also how he remembers black barbershops. Pausing before a mirror inside Mighty Mighty, he examined his brand-new “do” and searched for the right words. “It’s just all vagina, all the time in there,” he said. “So this place is a godsend.”

It’s a blessing for other reasons, too: Natashia Turner, 30, an unemployed Southeast resident who brought her children to receive free cuts last week, called Mighty Mighty “a huge help, financially.”

Kristi Maiselman, the executive director of CulturalDC, came up with the idea for “The Barbershop Project” last fall during a brainstorming session with one of the nonprofit’s board members, she said. In addition to Mighty Mighty, other programs within the project to date have included a barber-themed pop-up opera and portrait workshops.

Shimoyama signed on to the project as the lead artist in December, after other artists recommended him to CulturalDC. Soon after that — in part following discussions with people who live and work in Ward 8 about what they needed most — CulturalDC and Shimoyama began working on Mighty Mighty.

“The idea of a barbershop already fit so well into what we’re trying to achieve with the mobile art gallery in that it can build community,” Maiselman said. Shimoyama’s emphasis on LGBTQ acceptance “added another layer for us, and that’s great,” she added.



Brothers Zyshaun Knox, 10, and Nasir Blake, 7, point to their choices of haircut styles, debating the merits of each with barber Brixton Millner. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

CulturalDC worked closely with local businesses and nonprofits to bring Mighty Mighty to completion. The barbershop cost a total of about \$40,000, including construction fees and a stipend for Shimoyama, and was funded entirely by donations from individuals and companies such as Mars Inc., Maiselman said.

Some things were free. Space in the Ward 8 parking lot was donated by the nonprofit Building Bridges Across the River, which owns the lot. Caleb Woodard, a former D.C. resident who now runs a Tennessee-based [furniture company](#), chipped in by crafting tables and chairs for the space, among other items, all tailored to fit with Shimoyama’s aesthetic.

Kelly Gorsuch, the owner of upscale D.C. barbershop chain [Barber of Hell’s Bottom](#), may have made the most vital contribution: Millner.

An employee of Hell’s Bottom, Millner still receives his normal wages though he’s spending almost all of his time at the Mighty Mighty barbershop. He cuts hair in the parking lot starting at 1 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, often commuting to the parking lot on his beloved, jet-black motorcycle. (Though Mighty Mighty has worked with a few other barbers this summer, Millner is the longest-serving and most regular hair cutter.)

Millner’s passion for motorcycles is what set him on the path to barbering — and convinced him to physically transition from female to male. After suffering grave injuries in a motorcycle crash in 2015, Millner, who had long before realized he was transgender, decided he must lead the most authentic life possible.

“After surviving that, I decided I had to do whatever I loved,” he said.

He left his job as a preschool teacher and enrolled in barber school. He loves barbering because it reminds him of landscaping and the days when he helped his grandfather shear and shape lawns for his landscaping business.

Millner also came out as a transgender man, changing his name from Brittnee to Brixton. And he launched a one-man barbering service — “[Le Nomadic Barber](#),” which he still operates — catering to LGBTQ individuals.

When Millner heard about Mighty Mighty, he saw it as “an extension of what I was already doing.”

“And I’m so glad I did it,” he said. “This has become an intimate community. You just get to know people. I gave a lot of them my personal number, in case they want cuts after this ends.”



Brixton Millner loudly revs his motorcycle to the delight of Zyshaun Knox, 10, Nasir Blake, 7, Christopher Hubbard, 4, and Sincere Blake, 7, outside a pop-up art gallery-cum-barbershop that features the artwork of Devan Shimoyama. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

He has allowed them to know him, too, explaining time and again that he is transgender and what that entails.

“I really feel like the people have embraced this,” Millner said. “Everyone always says Southeast is over the bridge, different from the main D.C. and it can be problematic” — meaning inhospitable to LGBTQ individuals — “but all that I’ve had is a huge welcoming.”

Last week, dozens of locals strolled in and out of Mighty Mighty with easy familiarity, greeting Millner by name or by his nickname, “Brix.” They responded enthusiastically to Millner’s inquiries about their girlfriends, jobs and children.

Though Mighty Mighty is supposed to close at 7 p.m., Millner stayed an hour late to fit in more customers. It’s always like this, he said: The demand for free haircuts in the neighborhood is “massive.”

Lazaro Orellana, 55, an unemployed resident of Southeast, said he adores Millner’s “modern” hair styling.

“I see that he is transgender,” Orellana said of the barber. “But there’s no need to ask about it. I love and accept all people.”



Mason William, 6, looks pleased with the results of his haircut. Barber Brixton Millner is currently transitioning from female to male and doles out advice and answers questions as he cuts hair. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

Alexander Finch, 39, did ask. Sitting in the chair last week, he listened closely to Millner’s answer.

In an interview afterward, Finch said he still does not “agree with transgender” because of his Christian beliefs. Now, though, he understands “the importance” of Mighty Mighty as a place open to LGBTQ people, he said.

“I see it as an oasis space, and that’s something we all need,” Finch said. “I’m definitely coming back.”

Later that afternoon, he showed up with his wife and children.