

A close-up photograph of a young boy with light brown hair and blue eyes, looking directly at the camera. He has several freckles on his face. A hand is visible at the top of the frame, touching his hair. In the background, a blurred figure of a person in a blue shirt is visible, suggesting a barbershop or haircut setting. The boy is wearing a dark grey or black barber's cape.

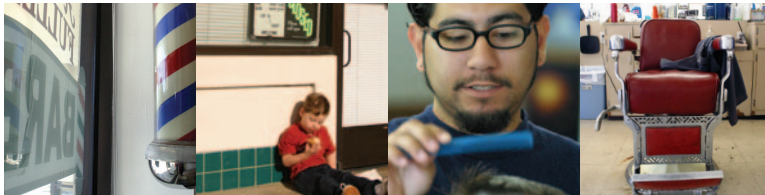
small wonders

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No 5

Barbershop



Four decades later, Robert Martinez can still see the shine. The lustrous black leather reflected the smiling faces of his clients and mirrored his own dedication to quality. At 10, Martinez was the shoeshine king of Paramount, California, working at the back of his father's barbershop. The sound of his dad's electric clippers echoed in his ears as the aroma of bootblack mingled with that of aftershave. He watched his dad skillfully trim until customers walked out new men, tonic in their hair and starch in their step. It seemed like the whole neighborhood passed through that shop, from the old men who swapped bluster-filled stories to the salesmen who placed their wing tips and their pocket change in Robert's hands. To a young boy, the barbershop was happiness, it was home. Still is.



In

A barbershop is a wonderfully timeless place. The pole still spirals outside, coats still hang on a metal rack in the corner, and sturdy barber chairs still sport more chrome than a '59 Coupe DeVille. Ah, those chairs. The vinyl seats shine bright red, buffed by the denim and gabardine of countless customers. Robert Martinez first moved behind one of those chairs in 1968. A stint in real estate only made him realize how much he missed the cutting and the conversation. When a shop in Fullerton came up for sale in 1998, Robert jumped at the chance to buy it. At first, he was his only barber, but now at peak times all five chairs are staffed, and the customers stream in. Robert greets most by name and all with a smile. "In here," he says, "everyone's family."

here

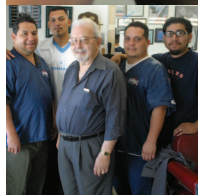
everyone's family





13

family members
generations



Robert knows a thing or two about working with family. His son, Robert Martinez Jr., and his nephew, Erick Martinez, are barbers in his shop, as is his son-in-law, Adrian Rosa. Even Robert Sr.'s sister, Debbie Martinez, is a licensed cosmetologist and occasionally works at the shop. Then there's Max Martinez, Robert Sr.'s father and the patriarch of the family barbershop dynasty. At 83, he's more than an inspiration to the 13 family members who are barbers or beauticians. He's an active member of the team. "My grandpa shows me," says Robert Martinez Jr., "that you never stop learning." A key lesson is to leave familial disagreements at the doorstep. "Whatever we say at the barbershop stays at the barbershop," Robert Jr. says. "When we leave, we always leave as a family."



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As dynasties go, the Martinez's is short on intrigue and long on commitment. It was born during the Great Depression, in the fertile fields of the Midwest. At 18, Max Martinez followed the harvest, cutting the hair of migrant workers. He made an occasional quarter but mostly gained skills that lifted him from an itinerant life to small-business success. "When you come to like this business, you can't do without it," Max says. "Talking with people, the laughing, the jokes – it gets in your veins." And now the barbershop life courses through a third generation of family members, with a fourth in waiting. Robert Martinez doesn't need the mirrored wall behind his chairs to reflect on his and his family's attainment. He still sees it in the faces of his customers. "I see them leave feeling better about themselves than when they came in," he says. "That's a job we can feel proud of."



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Barbershop 2003

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