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Cosmetology: A Beautiful Career

by Marisa Fernbach

(English 1102)

From films such as *Grease* to *Legally Blonde*, the career as a cosmetologist is portrayed as something to be pursued by those who aren't smart enough to pursue any other career path. Cosmetology is the option that the pretty and dumb girls are given, creating a stereotype within the industry. However, these assumptions couldn't be farther from the truth. Being a hair stylist takes years of education, dedication, and even more education. It can be just as rewarding as any other career, and it's time for others to start seeing it as a true profession.

I. Cosmetology: A Beautiful Career

When someone chooses to pursue a career in cosmetology, they may be responsible to perform services such as skin care, makeup application, and hairstyling. My main focus is being a hairstylist. Hairstyling is defined by the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* as a career that may “offer a wide range of hair services, such as shampooing, cutting, coloring, and styling” and “advise clients, both male and female, on how to care for their hair at home” (United States). Hairstylists can perform many tasks in salons such as working as a color specialist, a shampoo assistant, or hairstyling such as updos for special occasions.

When considering going into this career field, you have to make sure that you have a wide skill-set, and that you will be able to use many different tools within the workplace. In cosmetology school, author Bridget Heos, who has been in the cosmetology industry for decades discusses in her book that “[you] learn how to listen to customers and how to practice safety and sanitation” (13). Another skill you need to have to succeed in this career is that you will have to be able to communicate well with others since you will deal with clients on a daily basis. There are four basic personality types, and “[students] learn how to relate to each. The fun-loving client craves friendly conversation” (13). It is important that all students know how to handle different personalities.

II. The History of Hairstyling

The art of hairstyling dates back to ancient Roman times, as early as 116 B.C. Janet Stephens, a hair archaeologist, found that through multiple sources over thousands of years, that the Romans were some of the first to assign Latin words to hair tools. One of the first sources she found was that “Marcus Terentius Varro [gave] etymologies for the names of objects...[including] the curling iron, comb, mirror, and the hair bodkin” (Stephens 113). During her research, she found that the hair bodkins (the name for hair tools such as pins and needles) to have more uses than just keeping hairs in place. Stephens uncovered the fact that “[h]air bodkins also made convenient and uniquely feminine weapons” (117). Many hairstyles from ancient Roman times were up in a way that the woman whose hair it was wouldn't have been able to do it themselves. This leads us to know that many women had hair stylists to help them. Therefore, the build of the bodkins needed to be strong. The bodkins were very multi purposeful, and when using them in the hair, Romans were able to keep their hair tight without the use of many pins.

As time evolved, so did the names of hair tools. Historian J. Stevens Cox “traced ‘the double pointed hairpin’ back to Boston in 1775” (Stephens 120). The use for these types of pins were for women in the Americas who had to put-up and take-down their own hair. These types of tools are even more common today, because women don't go to the salon on a weekly basis anymore, so they are in charge of their own styles on a daily basis.

III. The Layers of Hairstyling

Many different tasks go into the overall aspect of this career, and hairstylists also have to “inspect and analyze hair, skin, and scalp to recommend treatment; discuss hairstyle options; wash, color, lighten, and condition hair; chemically change hair textures; cut, dry, and style hair; receive payments from clients; [and] clean and disinfect all tools and work areas” (United States). The stylists need to have clean work areas and clean tools to prevent any spread of different germs or any skin/scalp issues that a client might have. If a stylist isn’t knowledgeable enough on the different types of chemicals being used, they risk injuring the scalp and the hair of the client.

Not only do they have to have the proper skills to deal with hair, but they also need skills to deal with the clients. Becoming a hairstylist means you are becoming a part-time therapist as well. The clients confide in you about happenings in their life, and look to you for comfort. Gina Broughton, a stylist for 25 years says that one of the best parts of being a hairstylist is “making people feel good about themselves.” This might be one of the most appealing aspects of the profession, and is what attracts so many outgoing personalities.

IV. Education Upsweep

Many people may think that becoming a hairstylist isn’t hard work due to the way it’s portrayed in films, but that is very wrong. Becoming a hairstylist takes special schooling with a lot of criteria. There are even programs now where high-school students can attend a program on a different campus where they can get their certificate in cosmetology. Students must receive their licenses and certificates from the state in which they attended school. A professional in the field, Bridget Heos writes about how easy it is “to find a cosmetology or barber school in state” because all you need to do is “go to the Web site of the state’s cosmetology or barber board” (10). Along with teaching hair techniques, Heos discusses how “[c]osmetology programs also teach manicuring, facials, makeup art, and waxing.”

For people who want to join the workforce quickly, beauty school doesn’t take as long as receiving a bachelor’s degree would. If completed full-time, students will finish the program in about nine-months. Cosmetology school is a lot like being in the workforce as it is “a full-time program, you attend school from about 9am to 5pm” (Heos 11). Along with attending a program at school, students also have a certain amount of credit hours to complete, and “[t]he total credit hours needed vary by state. Usually, it’s between 1,000 and 1,600 hours” (Heos 13). Rather than having a lecture-based class, cosmetology school is in a lab, working on different types of mannequins and real-life clients. Heos explains that “students learn how to listen to customers and how to practice safety and sanitation....They also learn people skills...[and] to some degree, they learn business skills, too”(13). Cosmetology school makes sure all students get a well-rounded education, with knowledge on more than just hair.

V. Making the Cut

Once you have completed all of your credit hours and received your certification, it’s time to get to work in a salon. But even though you have all of the qualifications, it takes time to work your way up to being a full time stylist at a salon. Cosmetology only gives you the foundation of the necessary knowledge, so that’s why, according to author Lorraine Korman, “A growing number of salons have devised their own apprenticeship programs or assistant programs” (130). Once hired by a salon, you will have to complete one of the programs in order to be considered a full-time employee. Usually people in those programs are referred to as “junior-stylists” or “apprentices.” These programs are really important for any new stylist because it helps them transition into the new environment of a salon and how different it may be from doing hair in cosmetology school.

While you are an assistant, Korman states that “you will be asked to perform basic salon duties like sweeping or shampooing” (131). This teaches you responsibility within the salon, and allows you to observe other stylists as well. After a period of time, you will be promoted from assistant to junior-stylist. This new title means “you may assist with the hair design--blowing-drying,

hair color, simple tints, and chemical process.” You will have more responsibility and a larger role within the salon now, and after proving yourself, you will become a full-time stylist.

A different approach to becoming a full-time stylist would be participating in an apprenticeship program. Here “you would work under the guidance of one stylist or salon professional before becoming a full stylist yourself”(Korman 131). This allows you to start having relationships with the clients sooner than if you were to follow down the assistant path. An apprenticeship would be you working hand-in-hand with another stylist, and learning from them. You still have to work your way up to becoming a full stylist, but being an apprentice takes a more personal approach.

VI. Extending Your Income

There is a negative stigma about salary as a hairstylist. According to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, the median pay in 2015 was only \$23,710. While this income may be true for assistants, apprentices, or junior-stylists, the income is not that low if you put time and energy into your work. When asked about if the wage for hairstyling is livable, Broughton mentioned that “I had friends that went to a four-year college and I went to cosmetology school, and I make more money than they do.” It all has to do with how large of a clientele you have, and the better you become at your job, the more you can increase the prices of your services. Broughton also mentioned that “there are times you can make six-figures.” She really emphasized on how when she first was starting out, she lived at home making minimum wage, but the better she got at her job, the more money she started to make. Hard work is the key to success in this industry. You can’t expect a large clientele and a large salary by not putting forth the effort to earn those outcomes.

In this industry you have to make sure that to earn a profit you never sell yourself short. You are performing a service for the client, and deserve pay that reflects that service. Alan Daniels, who is a professional stylist and owned his first salon at the age of 23, teaches that “each time a guest sits in your chair for service, you should immediately think, ‘up-sell’”(83). Try to talk up other services to the client that you feel would benefit them. This will spark their interest and if you have a close bond with your client and they trust you, you can bet that they will go for that extra service. It is important though that in this industry you treat the client with the utmost respect, and always have their best interest at heart. Being an honest stylist will reflect in you clientele when they become your regular clients. Daniels also states that being shy about an up-sell “will keep people making less than \$25,000 a year” (85). When presented in the right manner, the stylist will avoid coming across pushy, but rather as giving a suggestion to the client and with reasoning behind it. This will help you break the median wage, and start seeing those six-figures.

VII. Having an Edge in the Industry

In the beauty industry, there are many professional associations. The American Association of Cosmetology Schools (AACCS) provides private and public cosmetology schools with the newest teaching methods, and allows their members to attend national conferences to network with other schools across the nation. This association charges their fees to public beauty schools and private beauty schools. Annual memberships for a publicly ran beauty schools start at a price of \$950, and can be charged an additional \$200 to \$600 for additional school locations they wish to include in the membership. For a private beauty schools, their annual memberships start at \$600 and each additional school location costs an extra \$200 to \$600.

There are also other associations for employees and salons as well. The Professional Beauty Association has similar objectives as the AACCS. They offer yearly conventions, and they even hold annual competitions for stylists across the county. The memberships are open to cosmetology students, stylists that rent chairs, and salon owners who want to register their salon and the employees that work within the salon to be members. To be members, the stylists signing up have to meet specific qualifications and pay annual fees. Individuals have a \$50 annual fee, students pay \$20, and business memberships “[r]ange from \$175 - \$10,000 depending on the number of employees that

receive member benefits” (*Professional Beauty Association*).

VIII. Hairy Situations

In the news recently, there has been a very serious issue with the way people are shampooed at hair salons. When lying in the shampoo chair, the client’s neck is usually tilted backwards at an unnatural angle, and recently this has become a very serious health hazard. Elisabeth Rosenthal from the *New York Times* found that “[t]he position commonly used for shampooing at beauty salons, with the neck tipped far backward over the edge of a sink, can diminish the blood supply to the brain, sometimes precipitating strokes in older people.” Whenever there is a lack of blood supply to the brain, that causes many dangerous health problems such as “severe dizziness, imbalance and facial numbness.” When looking into the cases of “five women between the ages of 54 and 84 who developed serious neurological symptoms requiring hospitalization after shampoos at beauty parlors,” Rosenthal found that “[f]our out of five suffered strokes [led] to permanent neurologic damage.”

While this article was written back in 1993, this health scare is making a comeback. According to the article “Visit to salon caused California woman’s stroke, doctors say” published by Fox News, there was just a case found in California about a woman suffered a stroke after going to a hair salon. Now the employees who are shampooing the clients frequently ask how comfortable their neck feels, and make sure to place towels underneath to add more support. Even though people that are in their fifties and older are at a higher risk of these health issues, people of all ages should make sure they are one-hundred percent comfortable when they are sitting in the shampoo chair.

IX. Highlights of the Field

Looking past the negatives, being a hairstylist has many positives in the field. As a stylist, you have many choices of employment to choose from. In this industry, you have the ability to choose to work as a hired employee in salons, or you can be your own boss and rent out a chair at a salon. Mark Mittelhauser talks in his article “Cosmetology: A Career on the Cutting Edge” about the business aspect of being a cosmetologist and how “[a]bout 40 percent of cosmetologists are their own bosses, compared to 9 percent of all workers.” He goes on to explain how the choice of being an employee versus being your own boss is a major aspect of the field that draws in potential cosmetologists. Working as your own boss in this industry allows the stylist to create your own hours. But there are some negatives of this as well. If you decide to rent out a chair, you must be responsible for all of your own products, colors, appointments, and doing all of the tasks such as shampooing that as an employee you wouldn’t have to.

Another interesting fact about being a hairstylist is all of the perks you receive if you work for a salon with a brand affiliation. Not only do you get to use all of their products but you are able to purchase them at a significantly discounted price, and usually the products are very expensive, such as the brand Bumble and Bumble, with a 2oz bottle of hair serum that costs around \$40. Along with discounts, the brands can offer classes to teach the stylists how to use the products offered in the salons, and some even send stylists to large out-of-state conventions to learn new techniques and styles from other professionals in the industry. In the personal interview with a stylist I conducted, Gina Broughton was leaving to go to New York for a week, paid for by the brand Bumble and Bumble, affiliated with the salon Amber Waves she works for. On her trip she was able to attend many education-building classes and a large convention. This gives the stylists a great opportunity to not only meet others in the industry but to refine their current skills, and learn many new ones.

X. Movement of the Industry

The great thing about being in the hairstyling industry, is that even when the economy is not great, people will still be in need of haircuts from stylists. There will always be job opportunities and “employment of barbers, hairdressers, and cosmetologists is projected to grow 10 percent from 2014 to 2024,” which is “faster than the average for all occupations” (United States). This projection gives those who are currently studying to become cosmetologists and those who will be in the future, a

positive outlook on finding a job after they complete the necessary schooling. Due to older generations starting to retire from the industry, and the frequent turnover of employees in salons, there will always be a demand for new stylists. The Bureau of Labor Statistics also mentions how “[d]emand for hair coloring, hair straightening, and other advanced hair treatments has risen in recent years, a trend that is expected to continue over the coming decade,” which will also lead to a demand in those who are able to have the skills to meet the needs of society.

XI. Interview with a Professional

Talking to a professional in this industry can help solidify your decision about pursuing a career in the cosmetology industry. Gina Broughton has been working as a hairstylist for over 25 years, and has seen how the industry has changed, and where it is headed.

Gina was very open about her experience, making me feel more comfortable. I was really surprised when she mentioned how “[s]ometimes the thing that drives me the craziest is the young girls that come in, and don’t want to work. They think they’re going to get this full clientele, and they’re going to sit there and not do anything.” Being that cosmetology is a service industry, I was intrigued to hear that as the hairstylists coming into salons are younger and younger, they have less work-ethic than stylists that have been in the industry for a longer period of time. She also was able to give me a look into the most negative aspect of the career, which she finds to “be being on your feet all day. There’s no breaks.” This won’t be too much of an issue for me because I’m a pretty active person and I’m always on my feet now for work, and I really enjoy it.

The best part of the interview however, was when she gave me advice on going into the industry when she talked about how “[hairstyling is] fun, and we are all a lot of fun. The advice I would give is if you work at it hard, it will pay off. It’s very very rewarding.” Being able to talk to a seasoned professional was an amazing experience and really helped solidify my decision to pursue this field.

XII. Tying Up Loose Ends

Those who pursue a career in cosmetology have to work very hard. The schooling is very rigorous, and after graduating there are numerous years of just proving yourself. Once becoming a full-time stylist, there is a new struggle of trying to build a clientele. But with hard work and perseverance, hair stylists can be extremely successful. Hair stylists are dedicated to their job and to those they serve. It’s a profession that is starting to become more respected, and the growth of the industry will lead to an increase in the need for hairstylists.

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