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Mr. Hair

Meet Gene Juarez

You know his name, but how much do you really know about Gene Juarez, the man behind the brand-name salons where for decades high-fashion hairstyles have been created throughout the Northwest? >>

BY LISA PATTERSON | PHOTOS BY RODRIGO DEMEDEIROS

GENE JUAREZ

BARBER & SPA

“I’ve been able to live a very privileged life. When people ask what I do I say I’m a hairdresser. I’m most proud to represent the profession and I do it with a great deal of honor.”

— Gene Juarez





<< His parents were from Mexico and they followed the crops to the tiny Eastern Washington town of Wapato, where his mother declared she didn't want to move anymore. He was the youngest of four brothers and a sister. Throughout the area the name Juarez was synonymous with hard work and quality. He thought about his mother. "Even with a scrub board outside, by hand, she would wash it twice so she'd have the whitest laundry in the neighborhood — it's what a Juarez did," he said. His father was illiterate and worked the fields most of his life. His biggest wish for his children was for them to get "indoor" jobs. "He meant a warehouse, that's the way it was back then" Juarez said.

When Juarez was 16, his mother died. With the other children already grown and gone, it was just him and his dad. It got him thinking hard about what he wanted to do with his life. "I knew I liked working with people and I knew I wanted to work with my hands and I wanted to make people happy and I wanted to be creative and a chance to own my own business — and I wanted a piece of paper, a license," he said. When he told the high school counselor he wanted to be a hairdresser, he was told to rethink that idea because hairdressers didn't make a lot of money. As he managed a nearby burger joint and worked toward his diploma, he dreamt of heading to Seattle. "My goal was to go to Seattle and be Mr. Hair," he said. "You have to understand, I never touched hair before."

He attended Mr. Lee's Beauty School and worked at three very different salons to learn and study his craft. The first salon in downtown Seattle was like a fast-food joint — more about quantity than quality. The second was fashion-forward

and women wanted "show-off" styles. The third catered to the "carriage trade" or the people with money. They wanted a fresh look without looking like they just left the salon. "All three of these (experiences) were defining me," he said.

As Juarez was about to open his own downtown location, a new trend in Europe caught his attention — blow dryers. It was the early 1970s and Seattle ladies were still hitting the salons for roller-set dos that would last (if their stylist was good) for a week. Then they'd come back for a comb out. "I didn't know how to use a blow dryer, but I knew it was the next hottest direction," he said. He took a risk and introduced Seattle women to hair dryers — and hair styling freedom, in a sense. "The industry thought I was crazy," he recalled. "But I was willing to take the gamble."

It worked. Throughout the years the Gene Juarez brand continued to grow, as did the number of salons — nine today. It became internationally known. The Gene Juarez Academy and the Advanced Training Salons helped him develop the best in the industry, and more importantly, instill the "Juarez" culture. Even though he sold the business in 2006, the Juarez culture, philosophy and brand continue on. >>



Q & A with Gene

Best Advice He Ever Received

"My dad was the hardest worker. He always said the hardest worker will always have a job."

Whose Hair He Wishes He Could Style

Tears welled up in his eyes. "No one has ever asked me that before," he said. "My mother's — I never had the opportunity."

A Book Worth Reading Over and Over Again

"I like books about human growth and potential. 'Personal Coaching for Results,' by Lou Tice, a local author. I'm a big advocate of his."

His Favorite Place to Dine

"Bis on Main. The best dish on the menu is the fried chicken, extra crispy. I don't have it often."

What Inspires Him

"Passionate people ... people who live it. Identify it. It's a unique group of people."

The Definition of True Beauty

"Understanding one self."

On Fashion

"Fashion is a game, a wonderful game. But if you don't try to understand the rules, you will be a fashion victim."

About Being an Entrepreneur

"If you don't take risks, nothing changes."

When He Knew He Arrived:

"I thought every man should have a brand new car once in his life. My first car was a Chevy. Orchid purple. But it was all mine and I was so proud of it."

Three Words He Uses to Describe Himself

"Quiet, shy, bashful. When I lose weight — a goal of mine this year — it will also be little, tiny and petite."

What's Next?

He's investing in several start-up companies. He's involved in an import business (along with former Seattle Mariner Edgar Martinez and others) to bring Mezcal from Mexico to Washington. Mezcal is, "the brother to tequila," he said.

He's also one of the founders and serves on the board of directors of Plaza Bank, one of the only chartered Hispanic banks in the state. Branches are in downtown Seattle and Kent. When he got involved with the bank, he had to get fingerprinted for security reasons. "My mom would be so proud of her son, getting fingerprinted for the right reasons." 📸