

I'm My Own Boss

Barbershops Providing Economic Opportunities

Chris Williams, Goode Looks Barber Shop

Part II: Chapter IV

There aren't many people that can tell Chris Williams what to do. Known to many as "C-Will", Chris has spent his entire career at Goode Looks Barbershop in Third Ward. Of all six barbers at this shop, Chris is the most vocal. Unapologetic in his tone, Chris is unafraid to have an intense debate with customers or his colleagues. Even though Chris is unafraid of a challenge, he is not necessarily an instigator. Rather, his boisterous personality amplifies almost every conversation that he engages in. For example, if barbershop attendees are having a casual roundtable discussion about which restaurant



Chris puts the finishing touches on a client's head. Chris averages between one to three customers per hour. (2018)

makes the best chicken wings, you can bet that Chris's yipping cackle and loud exclamations will be heard.

It's also important to acknowledge that Chris is my personal barber. When I began my college career at the University of Houston, Chris was the first barber I visited. It was August of 2014 when I took my father's rickety, broken-down bike through Third Ward searching for a barber. Goode Looks was located less than one mile from campus, so it became my first choice.

When I arrived, nervous about my first impression, Chris invited me to sit in his chair.

Shaking my hand, he assured me that he was one of the best barbers in town. *“I promise I won’t fuck you up bro, you’re in good hands buddy”* he said. From my first haircut with Chris, I could tell that his wild personality misrepresented his perfectionism. Like a watchmaker, he took his time executing each step of the haircutting process. While it is common for a few minor nicks and cuts to occur when performing a close shave, Chris mitigates these mistakes by prioritizing finesse and patience with each customer. The mutual trust we established for each other came from the awkward conclusion of my first haircut with Chris. I reached into my back pocket and realized that I accidentally left my wallet in my dorm room. Chris was visibly displeased with my blunder, but he trusted me to ride back to my dorm and secure the twenty dollars that I owed to him. It’s not uncommon for rogue customers to dash on their barbers without paying them. I was worried about how this mistake would affect our newfound business relationship. I returned to Chris with his money after a frantic, fifteen-minute round trip. Drenched in perspiration, I think that my urgency to return to the shop restored my rapport with Chris and the other barbers.



A picture of me, before (left) and after (right) receiving a haircut from Chris. I typically visit him every two weeks for a shave. (2017)

Chris has been my personal barber for four years. I typically come to him for a haircut two or three times per month on average, so our business relationship solidified over the years. We keep up with each other through social media and share updates on our personal lives during every session. Getting to know Chris helped me to understand the dedicated businessman behind this rambunctious personality. I informed about my project on the Black barbers of Third Ward, and he was unsurprisingly eager to share his story.

We've known each other for a few years now, and oddly, we've rarely talked about how you began your career. Could you share your story with me?

I've been out of the corporate world for like eight years now. I didn't like just being a foot soldier for a company. For example, for every hundred dollars I make, the company could be making tens of thousands of dollars. I went from different sales jobs to sales job. It got pretty tiring for me to learn so many different sales pitches. I wasn't feeling nun' of that that at all. So, I decided that if I was going to sell anything, I would sell MY product. So, I became a barber.

It sounds like your experience in the corporate world influenced you to become a barber. Could you tell me some of your frustrations with corporate work environments?

I don't like to be micromanaged. I don't like the overhead. I don't like for my earnings to be on the line just for being a few minutes late. I don't like keeping documents of how long or how many times I performed a small task or having to ask to

*go to the restroom. I especially hate not being able to speak my mind in front of certain people and getting written up for insubordination. As a barber, I have control over my own destiny. I'd rather not deal with all the extra stress. But don't get me wrong, because the corporate does have some benefits. They set you up with health benefits and a 401k, or whatever. But I'd rather take my own journey and make my own path.*³⁶

Chris never finished his degree at Texas Southern University. Chris bounced between dead-end temp jobs after dropping his marketing major. He was once a door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman and was even able to recite the various scripted sales pitches that he learned from his former jobs during our interview. Fortunately, Chris was gifted with the razor before he earned his barber's license. He practiced cutting hair with his brothers as a teenager, and this led to his dorm room barbershop business at Texas Southern University.

Chris expressed his interest to finish his degree. He also admitted that he wasn't totally prepared for his first stint at Texas Southern University. Coming from a single parent household, and away from his home in Beaumont, Chris struggled to stay completely focused in his freshman level courses. It's not uncommon for many of today's Black barbers to have had limited college or secondary educational experience. Another barber at Goode Looks mentioned that he dropped out of high school in the eleventh grade. However, Black barbers are the antithesis to the university education success narrative. Like many Barbers, Chris doesn't have to worry about student loan debt. Nine months of a barber college education endowed with the potential to create more wealth

³⁶ Chris Williams. Interview by Chris Chambers, January 6, 2018.

than a recent grad with a four-year university degree. The barbering industry is an extremely underrated profession. In addition to the financial upside of this profession, barbers have total agency over their work schedules. Most importantly, barbering provides additional career options to low income Black communities.

You've told me before that your job is very lucrative. On average, how much do you earn per day?

On a good and busy day, I can make like three-hundred-fifty to four-hundred dollars. Sometimes more. Sometimes less. It really just depends on how serious you are about your hustle. How serious you are about your grind. You don't even have to be the best barber in the game to have a steady flow of income. You could be an OK barber, but still be a good people person, or just a smart businessman. Whatever you put into it, is what you'll get out of it.

Could you take me back to when you just graduated from your barber college? How were you able to build your clientele? I'm sure it wasn't easy at the beginning of your career.

As a young barber fresh out of barber college eight years ago, there was a lot of marketing involved in my career. My availability had to be very open. I knew I had the talent. I knew I had a great product. But I didn't have the clientele yet. So, I used business cards, social media, and word of mouth to market my product. It's kind of like a snowball effect. At first, my business started small, but more and more people began knowing about what I do. The word hit the streets and spread like a wildfire! Even being successful today, I don't want to become too comfortable. I remember how I struggled at

the beginning, waiting at the shop for heads to cut. I've had my share of sixty-dollar days, eighty-dollar days. Sometimes I'd make just twenty dollars in an entire day. In this game, you have to be persistent and patient. But I never felt like giving up. It's not in my DNA, nor is it an option.

I've been coming to you for haircuts for almost 4 years, and I'd like to think I've been loyal to you. We even talk about our personal lives outside of the barbershop, and we trust each other with private information. I personally believe that's why customers are loyal to their barbers. How important is your customer's loyalty play into your success? Do you believe in barber loyalty?

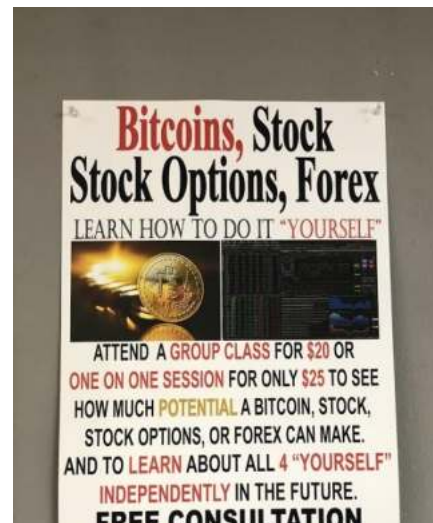
The clients tell me personal things. When the customer gives me personal information, that tells me that they are looking forward to following up with me on their situation. This relationship plays a big role into the loyalty aspect of the game. A relationship is bound to happen when you see your customer on a weekly basis.

Of course if I'm not available for work on certain days, I'm comfortable with my customers getting a cut from other barbers at Goode Looks. It's better that my customer comes to this shop and sits in another barber's chair than to leave this shop altogether. Fortunately, we have a pretty good team of barbers here at Goode Looks. When one of us is overbooked, we cover for each other. We also have excellent camaraderie here at Goode Looks. We lift each other up and encourage each other. Always positive vibes, even when we're joking around and giving each other a hard time.³⁷

³⁷ Williams, interview.

Barbershops are Black institutions that encourage financial independence in their communities. Most of the Black barbers that I've interviewed have never taken a single business administration course. However, a combination of street smarts and experiential knowledge of their industry propels them to be some America's most prosperous entrepreneurs. Many Black barbers are only equipped with their nine months of barber college. Despite having little formalized business training, Black barbers use many of the business practices that students pay thousands of dollars to learn at their universities. Therefore, Black people who aren't financially privileged or socially exposed to college can find success in the hair industry.

Barbers are not the only entrepreneurs present in their shops. Black barbershops are engines of irregular economies, and they often function as stopping points for salesmen in their communities. When viable job opportunities are scarce, Black people in low-income communities have find ways to survive. The irregular economy, which sometimes is referred to as "under-the-table income", is the commerce that encourages under-the-table income for Black people in their communities. Transactions within the irregular economies are usually hand-over cash. Goods a are not regulated by any governmental or bureaucratic authority. There is a lot of money to be made-under the-table, and Black barbershops sometimes operate as mini bazaars where the semi-legitimate salesmen can work. The irregular economy is not just limited to physical



An open ad for a Bitcoin training session. This is one of many ways that community entrepreneurs sell their brand. (Apr. 20, 2018)

goods, but services and labor are compensated as well. For example, it's not uncommon to see customers sweeping hair off the tiled barbershop floors for small sums of cash. In fact, I remember sweeping hair at a barbershop when I was eleven years old while waiting in queue for my haircut. In exchange, the owner of the shop fisted me a handful of quarters and dimes upon completion of the task. Excited about earning money at age ten, I would unsurprisingly proceed to spending it all at the nearest gumball machine. Black barbershops are like trading outposts along the Silk Road of local Black businesses, and it's not uncommon for local salespeople to solicit customers while they wait for their haircuts. Black community members come to barbershops to sell washing detergent, watches, socks, frozen vegetables, bootleg DVDs, jewelry, perfume, and much more. Black barbershop owners not only determine what products can be bartered within their business, but they regulate the specific windows of time in which salesmen can visit. When the owners set their expectations, the other barbers execute them by communicating these rules to the traders. Some owners are more laissez-faire, and others set strict parameters to maintain the integrity of their business. In either case, Black barbershops support local Black businesses.



A visitor selling women's shoes at Clipper Styles Barber Shop. Not many people were interested in buying his product that day. (Apr. 18 2018)



A community member known as “Mr. Davis” selling mixed fruit out of his cooler at Goode Looks. He also sells ready-to-eat hot plates during lunch hours. (Apr. 28, 2018)

I’ve seen all types of local sales people walk through these doors. One day it’s the meat man, and the next day it might be the cupcake lady. How do you and the other barbers regulate the economic activity in this shop?

You know, being in a Black barbershop in the middle of a Black community, we definitely want to support other Black entrepreneurs. We have various characters and salesman come here every day from the Third Ward community. One day we might see the hat man and the candy lady, and the next day the meat man

and the cake lady. Everyone has their own hustle. I mean, as long as you have a legitimate hustle you’re selling something that’s legal! It could be food, earrings, shoes, even barbeque and hot plates. And if you’re not good, we are gonna definitely let you know with good ol’ Black brutal honesty!

In addition to managing the economic activity here, what do you bring to the table at Goode Looks? What role do you play?

I play a pretty significant role here at Goode Looks. I’m thirty-four, so I’m not the youngest guy here, but definitely not the oldest. I want to stay relevant to both the older and younger crowd. You never want to act too old and whack, and act too young and dumb either. So personally, I see myself as the medium between both crowds. There’s a certain way that I conduct myself in order to gain respect from both my younger and older customers.

I've actually matured a lot over the past eight years I've cut here. For me, being surrounded by older men helped me with my personal growth. A huge part of what this shop is about is setting an example in this community with Black male role models.³⁸

Barbering has clearly done wonders for Chris's personal development. He's a home owner and pulls in a steady income from cutting hair. His open schedule grants him time to practice his keyboard piano skills, and he serves as one of the praise leaders at his church. He even has a couple of tattoos symbolizing his passion for music. Chris loves his profession because it allows him to be free. He's liberated from the strict standards of the corporate world, and this enables him to grow out his dreadlocks, speak his mind at work, and create wealth all at the same time. Chris asserts that the hair industry can change anyone's narrative.

Do you have any other thoughts on your career in the barbering industry?

Being a barber can give you something to hold on too. For some people in this game, it's their last resort, especially if you have a family to provide for. You can definitely take care of your family and more in this industry. The barber profession is extremely important to a lot of brothers across the country, and even women too. This career can save your life if you respect it. It's a great game, and if you are good to the game, it will be good to you.³⁹

³⁸ Williams, interview.

³⁹ Williams, interview.