

Female barber gives cuts and confidence

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Twana James had a successful home-based hair-braiding business for a decade, but she found herself wanting to do more for her clients.

“A lot of braid clients have alopecia, and they were getting braids to cover the hair loss,” James said.

Though it can be caused or exacerbated by repeated pulling on the hair through the use of tight ponytails, braids or buns—a condition called “traction alopecia”—hair loss can also be the result of an underlying disease, medication, psychological condition or genetics.

James wants to change the misperception that



James displays some of the tools and products she uses for temporary hair replacement.

when women—especially Black women—experience hair loss, it’s because they don’t take care of their hair.

“The assumption is, you’re doing something to cause it. It’s your fault,” she said. “But if you look at the side effects of many medica-

tions, hair loss is at the top. And who wants to choose between their health and their hair?”

Hair loss can be especially traumatic for women, but it’s also traumatic for men, James said.

“Not every man wants to be bald,” she said.



WATCH:

Barber Twana James practices hair replacement

at her Spotsylvania County business. Point your smart-phone camera at the QR code, then tap the link.

“Say you’re a man in his 20s, looking for work. You might not want a shaved head.”

James felt driven to do more for her clients with alopecia, but to provide some services, she realized that she’d need to be licensed.

She didn’t want to go to cosmetology school because she wasn’t interested in working with chemicals, so she en-

SEE BARBER, A6

BARBER

► FROM A1

rolled in Seaward's Barber Academy in Stafford County.

James, 51, completed most of the yearlong program while continuing to work part-time and be a single mom to her three children. She was the only female student, and recently became the first female graduate.

She's taken a leap and moved her business out of her home and into Finesse Salon Studios in Spotsylvania County, where she sees clients who come to her from the Fredericksburg area as well as from North Carolina, Florida, California and New York.

James moved to the Fredericksburg area from Northern Virginia in 2013. The daughter of an Arlington County sheriff's deputy, she is a veteran of six years in the Army and a 20-year career in broadcasting.

She got her start in braiding by sharing a YouTube video of the technique she developed for attaching crochet braids—or synthetic hair extensions—to natural hair.

The video went viral and people started asking James how much she charged for the service.

She hadn't thought about doing hair as a business, but after realizing that she could pay for her children's preschool while working at home, she launched Crochet Braids by Twana.



James combs out locks adhered to Dr. Walker's temples in her Spotsylvania salon on Thursday.

When James started barber school, she'd never held a pair of shears and had anxiety about touching people's skin.

She credits Joe Seward, a retired Marine, master barber and owner/instructor at Seward's Barber Academy, with helping her get over her squeamishness.

"He made me feel comfortable," she said.

With her new skills, James wants to help clients who desire to transition to natural hair from hair extensions.

"That can be life-altering," said James. "Hair cuts are much less expensive than hair extensions and less time-consuming."

She also strives to create a family-friendly and private space where male and female clients with hair loss feel comfortable taking off their wigs, hats and headscarves and

letting her come up with solutions that make them feel good.

"People feel better when they look better," James said. "If I can be a conduit to that, I'm blessed."

James is now working on growing and expanding her business and possibly taking her services into the local homeless population.

"I'd love to work with that population as a ministry," she said.

She'd also love to open an all-female barber shop one day.

Until then, she'd be happy just to see more female barbers.

"There is a lot more to barbering than cutting hair," James said. "A lot of barbers have gotten away from the art of barbering and I think it will take women to bring it back."

Adele Uphaus-Conner:
540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@fsadele

Teen's brand promotes unity

JM freshman builds apparel business on vision of equality

ADELE UPHAUS
The Free Lance-Star

Many people were inspired to take action during the racial justice protests that followed the murder of George Floyd in summer 2020 — but perhaps not many were as young as Elijah Wilson.

He was 12 at the time, but he felt called to respond to the strong, raw feelings he saw in footage of

protests across the country, some of which turned destructive.

“I saw businesses being destroyed and I thought, ‘That’s not how we should be doing this,’” said Elijah, now 15 and a freshman at James Monroe High School. “I wanted to find a way to share that we are all created equal.”

Elijah said his family always taught him to treat others the way he would want to be treated, and that’s the message he wanted to promote.

He wrote down his feelings in his phone’s notepad app and went in to see his parents, James and Robyn Wilson.

“I told them, ‘I want to do something,’” he recalled.

He shared his vision of that simple phrase — “created equal” — on T-shirts, hats and hoodies. His parents were on board right away and CreatedEqual was born.

James Wilson reached out to some friends who are graphic designers. They worked with Elijah on his vision for the design of the CreatedEqual brand, which Elijah saw as “kind of graffiti-like, but also clean.”

The E in “equal” is double underlined to reference the mathematical symbol for equality. It’s also a callout to Elijah’s own

nickname, “E.”

Elijah had shirts made with the CreatedEqual logo for his immediate and extended family and shared the design on his social media. As the Wilsons sported the shirts around town, people started asking where they could purchase their own.

“The very first shirt I sold was to a friend of my mom’s,” Elijah said. “I thought, OK, this is really going to go somewhere. People really like this.”

Robyn Wilson said her son earns money from doing chores

Please see **CREATEDEQUAL**, Page A5

CreatedEqual

From A1

around the house and playing the drums at a local church. The Wilsons told Elijah they would match whatever amount he wanted to put in to buying a press so he could print more CreatedEqual shirts.

“We wanted to make sure this was really something he wanted to do,” Robyn Wilson said.

The Wilsons said they weren’t surprised by Elijah’s initial desire

to respond to the protests in a positive way.

“He always has been aware and conscious of his surroundings,” James Wilson said. “That’s something we taught him: always keep your eyes open. And he’s very caring.”

But they were surprised by his commitment to his vision. Elijah put up \$500 of his own money, which they matched.

“To see him follow through with it is impressive,” James Wilson said. “A lot of kids have ideas but

put them aside. We see the passion behind this.”

Since 2020, Elijah has sold 1,500 CreatedEqual items. Each one comes with the message of unity and equality.

“This is more than a shirt—there’s a movement behind it,” Elijah said. “It’s not about Black or white, but all ethnicities.”

He recently expanded the CreatedEqual collection, adding autism awareness and Black History Month editions of his shirts, hoodies, hats and tote bags.

This year, Elijah received the inaugural Rising Young King award from the Hypeman Foundation, a local nonprofit founded in honor of Isaac “Hype-man” Evans, a James Monroe High School graduate and Army reservist who was killed in a car crash last year.

“Elijah shares a lot of the same qualities as [Isaac],” Robyn Wilson said. “They’re both family- and church-oriented.”

The award money is going back into the CreatedEqual brand, Elijah said. He also received an award

this year from the Spotsylvania Branch of the NAACP.

Elijah’s goals for the future are to establish a website, open a CreatedEqual store and continue spreading his message, both through selling and giving away his merchandise.

“He’s also a giver,” Robyn Wilson said. “I teach him that you have to give in order to get.”

Adele Uphaus: 540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@flsadele

Spotsy teen launches nonprofit

Group helps students pay for sports, exams

ADELE UPHAUS
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

When Kendall Levinsohn was a student at Courtland High School in Spotsylvania County, she had a few conversations that she couldn't stop thinking about.

One was with a parent she met at a school sporting event when

she was a freshman. Levinsohn was on the cheer team, and the parent told her that she wished her child could participate in school sports, but the associated fees made it impossible.

Another was with her history teacher, who told her he paid out of his own pocket for students with financial needs to take Advanced Placement exams.

"Which is significant, considering teacher salaries," Levin-

sohn said. "I had more conversations like this and I really began to see a need."

Levinsohn, 17, finished high school in three years and graduated last year. Last fall, she began setting up her own nonprofit to meet that need.

Helping Wheel, which received 501(c)3 nonprofit status in June, provides financial aid to students from low-income households to be able to partic-

ipate in after-school activities, such as sports and clubs and to take AP exams.

The organization, which operates within Spotsylvania County high schools, can also pay for athletic equipment, which it is able to purchase at a discount through a partnership with Play It Again Sports in Fredericksburg.

Please see **NONPROFIT**, Page A10

Nonprofit

From A1

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Levinsohn conducted a supply drive for Her Drive, which collects bras and menstrual care items for people in need, with her friend Kyleigh Foy. She also volunteered with local nonprofits such as Olde Dominion Humane Society and Love Thy Neighbor, a food pantry in King George County, and worked with the local health department to organize a vaccine clinic in King George.

“Seeing how everything was during COVID showed me how much help people really need,” Levinsohn said.

Connections with fellow nonprofit workers made during that time were helpful when she was setting up her own organization, she said.

Levinsohn said her dad and a friend, Seth Christenson, also helped her organize Helping Wheel.

“I hope I can inspire other teenagers. I think the scary part for kids is they believe they don’t have resources. There are bad people out there, but there are lots of good people who are willing to help.”

Kendall Levinsohn, founder of Helping Wheel

Helping Wheel has received some funding from the local Elks lodge and Levinsohn said she wants to organize a community fundraising event at the Fredericksburg Fairgrounds next year.

The organization is accepting applications now for its first round of grants.

Levinsohn—who is now a student at Germanna Community College and plans to transfer to a four-year college to study political science and international affairs—said she picked out the name for her nonprofit years ago, before its mission had even taken shape.

“The wheel represents circles and constant rotation,” she said. “It’s about how we are ever-changing

and always moving.”

Levinsohn’s future plans include going to law school and becoming a federal public defender. She said she hopes to change a perception that teenagers aren’t educated about needs in their communities and offered to help other students set up their own organizations to give back.

“I hope I can inspire other teenagers,” she said. “I think the scary part for kids is they believe they don’t have resources. There are bad people out there, but there are lots of good people who are willing to help.”

Adele Uphaus: 540/735-1973
auphaus@freelancestar.com
@filsadele