BEFORE YOU READ: In English, we use the helping verb “would” to form the conditional tense for things that might happen in the future if certain conditions are in place. For example: *If I had enough money, I would open my own barber shop.* We also use “would” when referring to things that happened habitually in the past. *I used to talk to my mother about my dream of opening a barber shop, and she would always encourage me.* Make two sentences using “would” in both ways. As you read this article, notice how the author uses “would.”

An Early Start

When I was about six years old, my father used to take me to the barber shop with him. My father and the barber were good friends, and they would talk while I played. Sometimes, I would watch the barbers cut hair. When I observed the barbers, I felt something different inside. I was fascinated.

I left home at the age of 17, and I rented a room in the neighborhood. There was a park across the street where I would play basketball with the neighborhood guys. My rent was $15.00 a month. I would tell these guys that I was cutting hair in my room for $3.50. Cutting hair and working in factories helped me pay my monthly rent.

Later, I moved to Harlem and got a job in a hospital working as a nurse’s aide. I worked in hospitals for many years, but I quit because I felt disrespected by the nurses that I worked with. One day, I packed my things and walked off the job. I found myself on the corner of Utica and Church Avenue. I was crying and asking myself, “Did I just leave my job? What am I going to do?”

Career Paths

For more stories about students pursuing their career paths, see Issue #45 of The Change Agent.
Training

The next day, I took a walk down Flatbush Avenue thinking, “What else can I do? What do I want to do?” I got to a barber shop called Knapp’s. There were six women cutting hair inside. I watched them, and I said, “Wow, these women can really cut hair!” I asked one of them where she learned to cut hair. She said, “We didn’t go to school. The owner trains us for nine weeks and if he likes your work, he will hire you and put you in one of his three shops.”

When I met with him, I asked, “Could you teach me to cut hair?” He charged me $500 for the tools and $25 for the training. When I got good at cutting, I made good money, but it only lasted for a couple years. The other women working with me were not treating me well. They discriminated against me because I was gay. I left that shop with my tools and went home.

Getting My Own

A friend of mine introduced me to someone that had a shop and rented out chairs. Terry, the owner, gave me a chance to work in her shop. It was on the corner of Bergen and Washington Avenue, and it was called Jake’s Barber Shop. Jake was Terry’s father who worked also there. I stayed in that shop for nine years. During the time I worked there, Jake taught me how to shave in the proper manner so that I could pass the New York State barbering test.

I took the test and passed. I would also cut Jake’s hair, and he would always ask me, “When are you going to get your own shop?” And I would say, “Why are you always trying to get rid of me?” And we would joke together.

I did not know he was dying of cancer. Eventually Mr. Jake passed away. When I got back to the shop from the funeral, I was looking around and I heard his voice. He said, “Go get your own, Ruthie.” I took a week off and searched for a spot and came across two available spaces. I chose the shop that gave me a better feeling. In 1996, I started to fix up my shop, which is now called Ruthie’s Neighborhood Barber Shop. It took me one month to fix up, and I opened on August 1, 1996. It is located in Park Slope in Brooklyn, on St. Mark’s Avenue. I’ve had my shop for 21 years.

I am grateful to have had a father-figure like Mr. Jake. He encouraged me, and if it weren’t for his voice, I don’t know if I would have opened my own place. I am grateful to everyone that came into my life at the right time. And I am thankful for everything that has happened to me. I truly appreciate my life today.

Ruthie in her shop (above) and outside her shop (opposite page). Photos by Kevin Dotson.

Use Online Maps

Go online and look up some of the locations and barber shops mentioned in this article. Use street view. Are the shops still there? What else can you learn about Ruthie and her barber shop?

After you read: What are some key turning points in the author’s life?