

DanvilleLife

Charlie's Barber Shop cuts it right

BY NANCY L. VALCKE
CORRESPONDENT

A blond, blue-eyed boy climbs up into the barber's chair with a complete air of confidence that both he and the barber know what they're doing.

"Can I have it pretty short on the sides and long on top so I can spike it up," asks 10-year-old Garrett Cohune of Danville, concentrating on the task at hand.

"You want a Mohawk today?" asks shop owner Chau Phan in his singsong Vietnamese accent.

Cohune ignores the joke.

"What's your girlfriend's name?" Phan inquires.

"I don't have a girlfriend," Cohune replies.

"You got tired of the long hair already?" Phan continues to tease.

Phan takes out his clippers and blond hair begins to fall to the ground. Once he has most of the length off, he begins to work on the style the customer has asked for. But halfway through he stops as though he has finished his creation. He moves in front of Cohune to get his impression of the cut.

"If you don't like it, come back on Monday," Phan says. "I'm kidding."

Once the cut is done, and Cohune has inspected it in the mirror, he jumps down from the chair. His mother hands him some money to give to Phan, telling him no change is needed. Before paying, Cohune helps himself to a lollipop at Phan's request.

Phan, or "Charlie" as he is called by all his customers, opened his barbershop at 534 San Ramon Blvd., in Danville about a year ago and



MIKE RUSSELL/STAFF

CHARLIE, or Chau Phan, owner of a barbershop at 534 San Ramon Blvd., knows his buzz cuts from his flat tops, plus many other styles. Here he performs his clipping magic on a young customer.

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there has been a steady stream of customers ever since. Many who have just discovered him and others who followed him from a shop in Alamo where he was formerly employed.

Five-year-old Scott Hosteley and his uncle Ben are regular customers. The brown-eyed Danville boy says he likes the way Charlie cuts his hair.

"It gets flat and my hair doesn't stick up on my head," explains Hosteley. "And I don't like it on my ears. It bothers me."

It's Jim Rodgers first time at Charlie's.

"I needed a hair cut and saw the sign as I was driving by," says Rodgers, a Danville resident.

Charlie doesn't take appointments, only drop ins.

"I love that idea," says Ryan McDonald, a regular. "That's the greatest idea."

Outside the shop is a small sandwich board with painted barber polls boasting that Charlie's is open. There is also a neon barber poll light in the window, but Phan is most proud of his recent purchase of the real McCoy — a four-foot spinning barber poll mounted on the window frame.

Inside a flat screen television is tuned to a basketball game, chairs for waiting customers and a table with reading material — the local

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paper's sports section, a gossip rag and a large assortment of children's books.

Phan appears to be in no hurry as he seats his customers and begins clipping. He is relaxed. Yet in one hour he has cut and styled two boys, a man and is starting on his fourth customer. Each is pleased with the outcome.

Phan says learning to cut hair was a survival skill when his wife presented him with identical twin boys, now 11 years old. Survival skills are second nature to this Vietnamese refugee. Phan escaped by boat from Vietnam to Hong Kong in 1981. He was 20 and his future wife and fellow escapee, Hoa Nguyen, was 10.

"She was just a little kid then," recalls Phan. "I used to play with her older brother. We escaped at the same time."

From there Phan flew to San Francisco and then on to Las Vegas where a sponsor was supposed to meet him.

"When I arrived in Vegas, I couldn't find my

sponsor," recalls Phan.

He never did find his sponsor. He was taken in by the church organization that brought him to the country. But he spent most of his days alone, so he decided to come to California.

With a bus ticket to Visalia via Los Angeles, \$300 in his pocket and a large note pinned to his collar that read "No English, Please Help," he boarded the bus. It was an adventure for the young man, but he finally arrived at his destination. There he enrolled in English as a Second Language. Phan worked various jobs throughout the Central Valley. When in Stockton he met Nguyen and her family again. The two were married in 1988 and have four children: a girl, Mai, 17, a boy, Trung, 15, and twin boys, 11, Tuan and Tu. They relocated to the Danville area.

Customers love coming to Charlie's because of his barber skills and his ever-present smile.

"He gives a great haircut," says Tim Ahlberg, who has been a customer since Phan arrived in the area. "He's always extremely upbeat," he adds.

For all those who ask why Phan is always so happy he says, "I like people. I love to talk with everybody."

Charlie's Barber Shop, 534 San Ramon Blvd., open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday to Friday, Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., 820-8821.

Charlie