

# Hair Affair

More than two-thirds of North Americans are in a committed relationship—with their hairstylist

BY SHERI RADFORD

One of Benjamin Raine's regular clients made a special request: since she was pregnant and about to have labour induced, "she wanted Lara Croft *Tomb Raider* braids, because they would make her push harder." So Raine opened his salon early that day, just for her and her husband.

As the owner of John Steinberg & Associates in Toronto and a stylist for more than 20 years, Raine knows how long and meaningful the client-stylist relationship can be. "I ended up walking one of my brides down the aisle," he says. Stylists see clients on emotionally charged days, from weddings and birthdays to grads and anniversaries, and the up-close nature of a haircut helps to create a strong bond. "I'm really in your zone. I'm in your face. I'm overtop of you while shampooing," Raine says. "It's a very intimate setting."

A recent report from tech company Square found that 68 per cent of us are in a committed relationship with our hairstylist, and one of the top reasons cited for that loyalty may surprise some. In addition to good haircuts, fair prices and easy booking, many clients say they remain loyal because they enjoy talking to their stylists.

The minutes that a client spends in the chair are an escape from the "world where everything goes fast," allowing enough time for a deep conversation, says Dave Lechasseur. He spent 10 years working as a barber and still owns Savvy Salon de Barbier in Montreal. "We talk about everything and anything," he says. "When's the last time you've met a stranger and then you've spent half an hour just talking with him?"

"One of the reasons that you develop such a close relationship with your stylist is because, A, you're spending so much time one-on-one with them, and B, you're talking a lot about your insecurities," says Nicole Pidherny. She's worked for almost two decades as a hairstylist, founding Pomme Salon in Kelowna and recently opening a second location in Toronto. "When you're sitting in that chair, you're in a very vulnerable position." And



NICOLE PIDHERNY / POMME SALON

since the stylist's life isn't personally intertwined with that of the client, the resulting relationship can be surprisingly deep, full of honesty and openness, but devoid of judgement.

When a client comes in for a haircut every month, Lechasseur says, the barber gets regular glimpses into each life stage: "They get their new girlfriend, then they have their first breakup, then they pass college and they get their first real job." The barber is ideally situated to develop an informed but neutral perspective on the client's life and offer what Lechasseur calls a "reality check." Over the years he's

advised struggling clients to make major life changes such as enrolling in school or switching careers.

As with any relationship, though, people don't always click. "Some human beings just don't match," Pidherny says. Early in her career, she used to dread appointments with certain clients. Now that she's more experienced and better at communicating, she doesn't hesitate to say, if necessary, "Listen, I think you're great, but I think your energy is so much better matched with this other stylist in the salon." It happened again recently, and after Pidherny recom-



mended that the client switch to another stylist, "sure enough, they are client-stylist besties." She notes, "It's not personal, and everyone is happy." There's even a common term in the biz: QTIP, which stands for Quit Taking It Personally. Similarly, an unhappy client shouldn't hesitate to try a new stylist.

"No peg fits into every single hole," Raine says. "We need to share. We need to mesh. We need to collaborate." Open and honest communication is key, especially before the scissors come out. "I do a very thorough consultation," he says—but clients sometimes refuse to listen. He remembers one who insisted on bangs, against his advice. "I warned the girl, I warned the girl, I warned the girl," he says. "I cut the bangs. She cried hysterically in the middle of the salon."

When mistakes and miscommunication do, inevitably, happen, Pidherny recommends that a dissatisfied client be honest but polite about the situation. "Stylists are human beings. We're not robots," she says. "Let's fix it."

One thing that doesn't affect the client-stylist relationship, according to Raine, Pidherny, and Lechasseur, is tipping. Anyone who cuts hair for a living relies on tips to survive, but stylists don't judge clients based on the size of the tip—they might not even see the final amount, because another employee often handles payments. And, at the end of the day, Pidherny says the hairstylist's goal is "making sure the client is leaving happy." ▽



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