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Saturday at Michelle's: At a Bed-Stuy salon, Beyonce, Halloween and 'full sets' dominate the agenda



BY KHRISTOPHER J. BROOKS
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On a recent Saturday morning, hairstylist Marsha Bowen arrived at Michelle's Hair Salon just before 10:30 a.m. Just off the intersection of Fulton Street and New York Avenue at that late hour of the morning the sun was just now climbing up above the surrounding buildings, making it seem much earlier.

Marsha's skin this morning looked bright and smooth, framed by the short-cropped hair that hugs her cheeks; she stood there in her soft orange jogging suit and pink-and-white Nikes, jamming her key in the lock and twisting open the front door to the salon.

Directly on her heels were two 40-something women, already wearing wide smiles as they walked in behind her.

Marsha mumbled a good morning to them as they stepped in behind her, then pressed two beige buttons on the wall and brought the one-room salon to life, bathing it in a gold-colored light.

In the back half are three black hair-washing sinks with the little divet in the front where the customer's neck rests (though only two work right now); there's also a dusty black stereo, a coat rack and a doorway that leads to a bathroom. Back here the walls are painted sky blue and a few dirty towels are draped from the sinks.

In the front half, the walls are painted kiwi green and nine styling stations are lined up against the walls, five on one side and four on the other, each one a space divided psychically from the next as if it were contained in an invisible, five-foot-high, three-foot-wide cubicle, each with two mirrors attached to the wall facing its styling chair, and a small counter where the combs and the flatirons lay. On the near wall to the left as you walk in a black television with a 26-inch screen is suspended from the ceiling.

Marsha settled into her station, the last one on the left, as outside Fulton Street began to stir for the weekend. A coffee-line seven people long was developing inside the bodega. A middle-aged man wearing brown slacks and sandals raised the metal gate that covered the SK Cozy Boutique storefront. The owner of a bike shop called RIDE chased dirt out of his threshold, onto the sidewalk and then into the gutter with a broom.



Morning at Michelle's.

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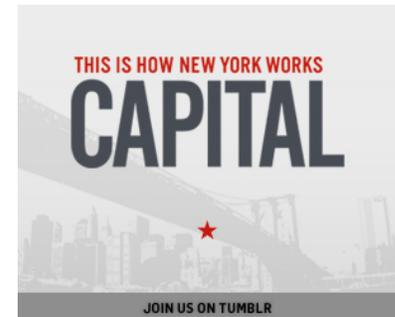
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The two forty-somethings were the first of dozens who would pass through these doors. They're young and old, all bound to this Saturday routine of upkeep that also gives them a few hours' escape from the grind of weekday work schedules and family obligations.

For the stylists Saturday is the opposite, their most grueling workday. Most of the stylists work late into the night, long after most of the other stores along the stretch of Fulton Street go dark.

Wall to wall, Michelle's is about the size of a middle school classroom. The salon benefits from being squeezed in a strip of shops that includes a beauty supply store, a nail salon and a fashion boutique: Women primping for a night on the town or a family party go from one place to the next, getting their beauty needs taken care of on one block. So even though there are six other hair salons within a five-block radius, most of the time (and especially on Saturdays), Michelle's salon is packed.

Marsha had dropped her purse on her countertop and checked her cell phone one last time before taking a deep breath. These are long days, and some clients are with you for hours. The sooner you start, the sooner you're done.

I've been coming to Michelle's for the past 16 weeks. It started as a project for a journalism class, but it became something much deeper.

I grew up in Detroit as the only boy in a large family. When my two sisters went to the hair salon, my mother drove me to the arcade or a friend's house. I was never allowed in the salon. There was nothing to interest a little boy in a salon, my mother would say. I'd be separated from my family on some Saturdays for hours at a time; and when they returned there was little to be said about what had happened there. The salon became a sort of mystery to me, one that I thought had to go deeper than what I could find in shallow treatments in movies like *Good Hair* and *Beauty Shop*.

Whatever notion I had that the salon held secrets not meant for the ears of a man were allayed, over time, as I got to know the stylists and the customers and became a fixture in the place. They must, like my mother and sisters, have thought the events that go down every day in the salon aren't much worth mentioning, part of a routine. But, I always thought, an essential part, for reasons that went beyond beauty.

AS MARSHA STARTED WORKING WITH HER FIRST client, the hairdresser Kerida walked through the door.

She bid Marsha good morning, grabbed the remote control and powered on the TV, flipping to MTV2; she turned up the volume before plopping into her own styling chair. She was resting before the impending invasion of clients.

Back at Marsha's area, a conversation started between the woman in Marsha's chair and another woman waiting to be served. They outlined their plans for attending a party on Oct. 29. "But you gotta help me find something to wear though," the waiting woman said.

"I thought you were gonna get a Burberry dress," said the woman in the chair as Marsha diligently worked around her scalp.

"I was, but I haven't found one that's *dressy* dressy. All of them have been too casual."

Mornings are quieter, as the social rhythm and the volume slowly builds among stylists and customers alike. Kerida was texting in silence and Marsha was listening in on her customers as MTV2 played Monica's new song featuring Rick Ross, "*Anything to Find You*."

That relative quiet endured for an hour and a quarter—small-gauge chitchat to the tune of the hip-hop coming from the television speakers, when Michelle Anderson walked in.

All but one of Michelle's hairdressers are black women and most were born in the Caribbean. Their skin tones range from the color of beach sand to a dark and warm brownie-batter complexion of the owner, for whom the shop is named.

Here, the island accent is spoken, and the place feels like a home bound by its own shared language. The hard 'H' is missing in most words, and the pronoun 'I' is generally not to be heard, which is to say they are "airdressers" and the restaurant across the street is "ireing" for a new waitress.

"Me know, me know," one says to another when the topic turns to the neighborhood news. "Me saw 'dem on the news laust nite."

Michelle was 15 years old when she moved to the United States in 1987. She said she hadn't then imagined she'd be the owner of a small business; but she opened the salon in 1994 when she was just 22

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years old and has been weathering good times and bad there ever since. Walking in, it was hard not to imagine her surveying the beginnings of another important Saturday, because they're all important. But these days things have been rougher. She cast her eye on Kerida, texting in her chair, before being called to attention with a wave from Marsha. A client called earlier and wanted to make an appointment for today.

Marsha handed Michelle the telephone: "She wants you to call back."

The afternoon is when things pick up. Michelle pecked at the buttons on the phone while Rose, another hairdresser from Jamaica, walked in. Rose signaled for her first client, already waiting in the chair. As the woman stood, Reese, another one of Michelle's hairdressers, passed through the doorway.

"Oh my God, I'm so tired," Reese confessed.

"Girl, *please*," came the consensus response, as if to say, aren't we all?

"OK, wut time you wan come?" Michelle said into the phone. "And wut you wan' done?"

"What happened to you lass night? I called ya phone like twice." Another conversation.

As the noise picks up the conversations get muddled, snippets of them rising and fading behind a cover of Jason Derulo singing "It Girl" or Selena Gomez.

The noise of the blow dryers, the rumble of the A train underfoot and Selena Gomez are all instruments for modulating the rhythms of the salon, in covering multiple conversations or focusing common ones. It helps create private conversations, client to hairdresser, hairdresser to hairdresser, shouting confession-booths. When it's quieter it alleviates the tedium of precision-work or gives a jolt of energy to a stylist who's been on her feet for hours, her arms raised. It gives a customer who's been waiting a half hour something to do, and something to talk about with her fellow stylists.

At eight minutes past noon, the salon's only male stylist Jabooki arrived. He is a skinny man, average height, with black and copper dreads and thin-framed eyeglasses. He didn't have clients lined up, so he dropped his messenger bag on his countertop and slumped into his chair as Kerida, now hard at work, had done before him. He propped his elbow on the chair's armrest, cupped his head in his left hand and closed his eyes.

Then came Danya James and Dawanna Carter, walking in together, checking their phones. Now everyone was here.

There are moments where all the noise, all the sound converges, and the salon directs its energy to one direction. This happened when MTV2 aired [Beyonce Knowles' performance at the Video Music Awards](#), the one where she revealed she was pregnant.

Two women who'd just entered the salon craned their necks to see the performance.

"I'm just looking at this and wondering how she's going to do all this with it in her belly," a round woman wearing a black jacket and eyeglasses said. A shorthaired woman admonished everyone to pay attention; she'd seen it.

"She's gonna show it here, watch, look."

Beyonce finished the song and opened her jacket, exposing her bump.

"See! See! And look at Jay-Z," the shorthaired woman said.

"Oh wow!"

"Actually it shouldn't have been a surprise to anyone cause every month there was always rumors she was pregnant," the short-haired woman said with a knowing chuckle.

MARSHA HAD JUST SEATED A NEW CLIENT IN HER CHAIR; she wanted a "full set." That means a full head of extensions. The material for a weave comes to the hairdresser in neatly packaged locks, but once it's opened it's treated with the same lack of sentimentality as a harried baker with his dough. It's cut, curled, pressed, combed, twisted, stamped, ripped and



often enough, finally, tossed to the floor, no good.

When hair weave was invented in 1950, it radically changed the way women (particularly black women) cared for their hair and the way they perceive their own beauty.

Today many black women see weave as the great pinch hitter, the stand-in for her natural hair, a substitute that's shinier, less tangled and safer to expose to extreme heat and cold. In some salons, customers pay upwards of \$125 per visit to get a "full set," depending on the length of the weave and how much a client wants.

Most women who visit Michelle's get full sets, which means they get their entire head covered in weave, a process that takes an hour.



The process begins once a customer chooses between a sew-in, glue-in or a quick weave.

In a sew-in, the hairdresser starts by French-braiding the hair (braiding the hair so that the strands lay directly on the scalp like cornrows, as opposed to loose braids that don't touch the scalp.)

There's debate among hairdressers across the country on the proper pattern for this foundation: Traditional cornrows that "braid to the back" of one's head, or around the head in a spiral ending at the top.

At Michelle's, there isn't religion on this; it just depends on the length and texture (or thickness) of the customer's hair. (Shorter and thinner hair works best if braided in a circle while long and thick hair lends itself to corn-rowing.)

After the braiding, a hairdresser lays the track (or the black band that groups all the strands of weave together) on top of the braided hair. Using a sewing needle that is curved like a Crescent moon, the hairdresser sews the track against the braided hair, interlocking the two with thin black thread. The technique looks similar to needlepoint, except with hair.

In a glue-in, the hairdresser "wraps" the customer's hair (or combs and coaxes it in a circular motion until all strands circumvent the scalp.) Clear ooze is then applied to the wrapped hair so that the oncoming glue does not damage the hair's strength and health. After the protectant solution, the hairdresser smears hair glue around the customer's head and pastes the weave tracks directly on the hair.

In a quick weave, the customer's hair is braided or wrapped, then a hairdresser places a stocking cap over the hair. She applies the hair glue over the stocking cap instead of the hair, creating a makeshift custom wig expertly on the spot. It's the fastest.

Marsha's new client chose a sew-in. One seat over, Danya was cornrowing another customer's hair, preparing for a full set. Meanwhile Dawanna sat in her styling chair picking the meat off a piece of chicken from Popeye's.

Now it was quiet again, with a critical mass of the stylists engaged in precision work. In stretches of quiet like this, the hairdressers focus on the scalp in front of them, and let their minds wander at the same time. Anything else would leave room for the mounting pain in the feet, the soreness of the fingers and the agitation of the nerves that must follow such detailed work done so consistently over so many hours, to take hold and make their presence known.

Dawanna told me that at times like this she often imagines herself at home with her son and two daughters. She pictures herself stretched across the couch in the living room, leaned against her husband Novada while her children crawl on the floor and play. They tumble and laugh and Dawanna glances at the clock and notices that it's getting late. She asks her kids what they want for dinner. They yell out suggestions. Her husband nods approvingly to one of the suggestions. Dawanna says OK, lifts herself up and walks toward the kitchen.

Marsha focuses her mind on her money, she said: Not how much she's making but how to stage the

payment of her bills as the money comes in so that as many as possible aren't late. Even though she lives with her cousins who split the rent with her, a nine-month-old child has upset her financial equilibrium with the constant outgoings for diapers, bottles, formula, and the baby clothes she needs to restock every three months because he keeps growing every second. Most daunting of all is considering how often her baby has been getting sick recently.

"He's been sick before, but it was always something *my-ner* like a cold," she said. "He been sick a long time this time. I don't know. I think honestly it's cause my cousins don't wrap 'im up right before he go outside. When I take 'im out, ee's in a shirt and a sweater and vest and jacket. I don't tink dey doing that. But, I don't know. He's sick."

Shortly after 5 p.m., a walk-in customer, a woman with broad shoulders and a flat nose, entered the salon. She asked Michelle for a full set of bright strawberry-colored weave. Michelle agreed and didn't wince. But such requests aren't always smiled upon here.

A regular walked in and broke everyone's silent meditations. She flashed a huge grin, said hi to everyone and hugged Danya and Marsha as if they were long-lost sisters reunited after a lengthy custody battle.

The regular was looking for someone to dye her hair a brown-sugar color. She noticed that every hairdresser was busy, so she walked deeper into the salon and spotted another one of Michelle's regulars.

"Awww, look at you, losing weight," the hugger said to her feller regular.

"Yeah, I been losing weight," the other regular said. "My doctor said I was overweight so I've been walking and—"

The hugger glanced over at Michelle and her current customer.

"Oh, wait, *wait*, what is Ms. Thang over there doing, getting ready for Halloween?"

The hugger-regular and her walking-regimen friend snickered and the whole salon, now, had a new topic.

MICHELLE'S SONS HAD APPROACHED HER WITH A FEW IDEAS for Halloween costumes earlier that morning, all ideas that she said she would not entertain. Marsha hadn't decided whether her son was getting a costume. She was inclined to think he was still too young for it.

Dawanna already made up her mind: trick or treating was out of the question for her kids. She had a terrible experience as a child, trick or treating in the early evening, returning home and gorging on chocolate until her teeth were packed with sugar. Now as an adult, Dawanna said trick or treating leads to bad oral health.

"I wish my mom didn't make me do it when I was little. Yeah, they used to make me dress up and go trick or treating—all of us, you know, it was me and my cousins too and they'd take us out one time. Oh, I was the Wicked Witch once and then Cinderella. But I'm paying for it now—two cavities back here."

Dawanna tapped the part of her jaw directly under her ear lobe. "The bottom two!"

"But I took my kids to the dentist and let him explain how a cavity starts and the sugar and how it spreads to the next tooth. They were like ewww! Ever since then they've been good about their teeth - I hear them say 'Oh I need to brush my teeth' or 'Oh I forgot to brush my teeth' and I'm like 'Oh that's nice.'"

The topic exhausted, it was time for the next movement in the cycle, that cacophony of many private conversations, and the TV was inched louder by an unseen hand on the remote.

At 10 minutes to 6 p.m., a skinny young woman wearing a beanie walked in and started a conversation with Jabooki, who is also from Jamaica.

"Hi, my hair is natural. It's already washed and dried; I want it curled."

Jabooki sized her up as she yanked the beanie off her head.

There are dozens of ways to curl hair and Jabooki had no idea what this woman wanted. He glanced at Rose, who was curling another client's hair in a sort of Shirley Temple, full head of curls.

"Curled like dat?" Jabooki pointed.

"No. Tighter than that."

Jabooki assessed the woman's hair. Under Marsha's countertop there was a clear bin full of hair rollers, all the same size and length. There was another bin with another group of rollers, all different sizes. In

order to curl it the way she wanted, Jabooki had to determine if he could use the same size rollers on her entire head or if he needed the bin with the different sizes. If her hair had all different lengths, he would need to fetch the mixed bin.

"Is it all even?"

"Huh?"

"I say, is your 'air ... all ... even?"

"Oh, yeah."

Jabooki invited the young woman to sit. He left her there and fetched a bin full of small hair rollers.

By the time the clock hit 6:30 p.m., most of the hairdressers had been at the salon for six or seven hours. Some of them had had a lull here and there between clients and managed a trip to the bodega next door for a bag of chips and a bottle of juice. But the juice and chips did not give them enough energy to last the rest of the day. Realizing this, Danya suggested the group buy some iced lattes from the Dunkin Donuts down Fulton Street.

She summoned Andre, the salon's errand boy with chocolate skin and focused eyes, who appeared mysteriously from the back of the store and took their orders. With ridiculous speed he reappeared holding a tray of six plastic cups filled with tan liquid and whipped cream tops.

"No straws?" Danya asked.

Andre sighed, dropped his head and walked back outside.

At 7 p.m., the salon was just as busy as it had been six hours before. Michelle had no customer, so she sat in her chair, head down on her countertop, surrounded by a jumble of hairspray cans, a wireless internet modem and a Holy Bible opened to the book of Psalms 30:10, and dozed. She has been working at her salon so long that her body finds it easy to block out the room's noise and find sleep.

Jabooki put the finishing touches on the natural woman's hair and Reese primped her own hair.

Michelle's doesn't have an official closing time. If someone is waiting, one or two of the hairdresser stays. It's not unusual to find Danya braiding someone's hair at 1 a.m.

Reese started the procession of exiting hairdressers. Her mother came to pick her up at 8 p.m.

After Reese left, Kerida said her goodbyes, followed twenty minutes later by Dawanna and Jabooki, who had to get home to their significant others.

Marsha and Rose were next to leave. When Rose walked out, she grabbed the remote from Kerida's countertop. She pressed the power button and the television screen went black.

Michelle and Danya were the last two hairdressers in the shop at a quarter past 10. Michelle had enough 30 minutes later. She slung her purse over her shoulder and shook her car keys.

"OK Danya," Michelle mumbled.

Danya had one client in her chair and another waiting. At 11 p.m., it was unclear how long Danya would be in the salon.

"Bye Michelle. I see you later," she called as Michelle walked back out onto Fulton Street and made her way home.

Kristopher Brooks will be filing regular reports from Michelle's. Some last names have been omitted at the request of the subjects.

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