

Aid Lets 'a Bad Kid' Learn a Good Trade

By JENNIFER 8. LEE

Mirrors are everywhere you turn at the American Barber Institute in Chelsea. Mirrors on walls. Mirrors on doors. Mirrors in the middle of the room. Row after row of mirrors, ping-ponging reflections back and forth. For the narcissistic, this would be paradise. For the self-conscious, this would



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be hell.

And for Geovanny Espaillat? The vanity represented by those mirrors gives him a chance to reinvent himself, as a barber.

"I'm not going to lie to you," said Mr. Espaillat, 20. "I was a bad kid. I was a troublemaker." When he was 5 years old, in the Dominican Republic, his native country, he grabbed a woman's backside. "From there," he said, "all the family told my mom, 'He's going to be bad.'"

After his immediate family moved to New York City, Mr. Espaillat, when he was in fifth grade, was found to have a learning disability,

Previously recorded	\$2,804,756.49
Recorded Thursday	\$110,035.21
Total	\$2,914,791.70
Last year to date	\$3,171,773.36

which led to a cascade of problems at school.

"What he'd hear in class one day, the next day someone would ask him and he wouldn't remember," his mother, Mayra Fernandez, 47, said in Spanish. "He used to get very frustrated and he'd start to cry."

Her son attended three New York City high schools and finished none. But he did manage to stay out of jail.

Why was he a troublemaker? He sheepishly smiled. "To show off in front of the girls," Mr. Espaillat said. His eyes crinkle at the thought of the beauties who populate New York City. It's easy to sidle up to them in the mall, on the train, on the street, with the opening: "How are you doing? My name is Geovanny. What is your name?" He prided himself on his game.



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Geovanny Espaillat practiced on a fellow student, Luciano Moriera, on Tuesday at the American Barber Institute, on West 29th Street.

Once when he was at Queens Center Mall with a friend, he saw a cute girl looking at him. He bragged to his friend, "She's looking at me, dude, watch out." and he approached her. With a smooth voice and a cocked head, Mr. Espaillat said: "You look very good. You look decent. I like your shoes." The girl looked at him and said, "I wasn't looking at you. I was looking at your boy."

That was four years ago. "He's still with her today," Mr. Espaillat said, laughing.

About a year ago, Mr. Espaillat realized that the No. 1 woman in his life was his mother, who had raised four sons by herself while working as a home attendant. "Mom is going to be the only one that is going to be there when you get locked up," said Mr. Espaillat, who still lives at home in Far Rockaway, Queens.

"I'm trying to help my mom out," he said. "I adore my mom. I love my mom to death. She's the one who brought me to this country. She put me in school. She is the one that raised me. She bought me all my clothes."

To return her love, he decided to attend the American Barber Institute so he could get a job. "She's very happy that I'm doing something," Mr. Espaillat said. "I told her I got \$3 for tips for my first time and she was happy for it."

"He's very good to me," Ms. Fernandez said. "I'm very happy and proud."

While Mr. Espaillat received a federal Pell Grant to cover most of the \$2,700 tuition, however, he was \$400 short, so he dropped out, with his training half-done. For a time, his goal, tantalizingly, seemed just beyond his reach.

But the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service came to his aid. The bureau had provided him with job counseling. One of the seven charitable agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, it reached into that fund for \$248 to help Mr. Espaillat return to school, and he came up with the rest.

Today, Mr. Espaillat projects his game onto each man in his barber chair, with his scissors and razors.

"I want to make his day," he said. "I think to myself, He is probably getting a haircut because he wants to look good for a girl."

Fernanda Santos contributed reporting for this article.