

A Gift Of Wigs Helps The Sick



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When the economy pushed Jangwon Son, a graduate of Pratt Institute, back to Connecticut to work full-time in the family's business, Son made the redesign of Hair City, their north Hartford shop, his special project.

The bulk of their clientele is African American and Hispanic, says Son. Relaxers hold positions on shelves next to spray-on curls. Brand names like Let's Dred compete for space with Dr. Miracle. The wigs are named Monica, Ivy, Flashy, and they pretty much live up to their names.

A walk through the store is like a giddy romp through the possibilities.

Son selects the products, and he's even had a hand in designing some of the wigs, but making room on the shelves has involved getting rid of some things. In between ordering, organizing, and waiting on customers, Son started culling through the store's wigs.

Starting in the late '60s, wigs became a uniquely Korean industry, Son said, and he'll patiently trace that history as well as show the difference between human and synthetic hair, if you ask nicely. As an undergraduate, Son studied biology. At Pratt, he studied industrial design. There isn't a single aspect of the business that doesn't engage him.

Over the 15 or so years the family's had the store, they developed relationships with hairdressers, stylists and clients from local hospitals — both staff and patients. Early on, Son's parents occasionally donated wigs to area cancer patients. That might seem a small thing to someone who hasn't lived through cancer, but to a patient, a full head of hair can be huge.

A few weeks ago, Son had put aside 75, maybe 100 wigs in a backroom when he got a call from Denise Rivera,

coordinator of the DIVAS Latina cancer support program at the Hispanic Health Council. In its four years, the program has worked with about 60 women, many of whom either don't have health insurance or are under-covered.

Rivera has been working with two clients whose health insurance does not cover the cost of wigs during their cancer treatment, and neither woman had even \$20 to purchase a wig. She'd called Hair City hoping to find a deal for them.

Son offered more than that. He told Rivera he had two boxes of wigs, free to good homes. Rivera could outfit the two women, with plenty to spare for new clients. The gift was a staggering boon to the program and its clients.

As for Hair City: "I was happy," said Son. A few years ago, Son's aunt died after battling breast cancer. He understands that a full head of hair is far more than just maintaining appearances. His mother had supplied her sister with wigs as she struggled with her illness, our health care system and the language barrier. Sharing the wigs just seemed right to him.

"I want to give somebody what I can," said Son. "Other people can give food. I can give hair."

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