Black Sacramento Barbers Advocate for Mental Health

HAIRitage is one of dozens of U.S. barbershops transforming mental health advocacy for Black men.

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Brothers Marichal and Rodney Brown use their Sacramento barbershop, HAIRitage, as a space to support Black men's mental health.

The brothers take after their father, Earlie D. Brown, who was a certified master barber in their Bay Area hometown and a trusted ear to his clients. Earlie's barbershop even featured a back room where customers who wanted a more private conversation could talk openly, according to The Sacramento Bee.

"We as Black men, we're taught not to show emotions," Marichal said. "But, as Black men, we can talk to others who understand."

The Browns are part of a growing national network of Black barbers advocating for mental health in their communities through the Confess Project of America (CPA) barber coalition, a national organization that reaches over 4 million people per year. Founded in 2016 by Atlanta-based behavioral health professional Lorenzo Lewis, CPA has provided mental health training to more than 4,000 licensed barbers and stylists in 54 U.S. cities.

Nearly one in seven adults in California reported that a household member has a mental health condition, according to the California Health Care Almanac. A California Health Care Foundation study titled "Listening to Black Californians with Mental Health Conditions" found that nearly one in four Black Californians reported a mental health condition. About 20% of Black men reported a mental health condition.

"Cultural biases have caused so many problems—misdiagnoses in treatment, lack of understanding. It's important to advocate for ourselves," said CPA trainer Darnell Rice, who recently joined Lewis in Sacramento for the first stop of a multicity tour for CPA's "Beyond the Shop" program.

In addition to training barbers and stylists to be mental health advocates, CPA connects Black men, boys and families with mental health care. Since joining the project, Marichal Brown said he

has provided more than a dozen individuals with referrals to clinicians. “We see people at their highest and at their lowest. They reveal everything that goes on with them,” he said.

In 2022, close to two thirds of California adults with a mental illness and two thirds of adolescents with major depressive episodes did not receive treatment. Four in 10 Black Californians with mental health conditions said they avoided care because they thought they would be treated unfairly or with disrespect, according to The Sacramento Bee.

“The barbershop is somewhere we can grow, where we can understand (how) to be men, to be ourselves—to authentically be ourselves; to not be judged, to open up and have those conversations with our barbers because we know how pivotal the barbershops and salons in our communities have been,” said Rice.

“For me, the barbershop has helped me become a better person, a better advocate and, most of all, a better man,” he added.

To read more, click #Mental Health. There, you’ll find headlines such as “Barbershop Sessions Provide Mental Health Support for Black Californians,” “Underdiagnosed and Undertreated, Young Black Males With ADHD Get Left Behind” and “Rising Suicide Rate Among Hispanics Worries Community Leaders.”

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