

ON THE COVER

READER DIARY

Becoming your own boss

Nathaniel Miles Jr., 24, is an inspiration to younger African Americans who would like to own businesses.

"They know I co-own a barbershop and they ask me how we have done it," he said.

"I tell them they can do it. There are more opportunities for blacks. I think what I have done has given younger African Americans ideas.

"Many blacks are scared to invest in a business and take chances. They don't think they can own their own business."

An even larger chain of barbershops is a goal for Miles.

"I'd like about 15 shops," he said.

Venture into unknown

Nathaniel Miles Sr. surprised the family when he opened his second and later fourth barbershops, said daughter Sharon Miles.

"For a while I was scared that it may not work out," said Miles, who cleans up the shops and orders supplies.

"I hadn't seen any African Americans open up two shops. I had never heard of it.

"His goal is five barbershops and I want to help him out as much as I can to achieve that. It's important to him and he's being a role model doing what he is doing. I'm proud of him."

Teaching in reverse

Young people don't want to hear about how to do it, they want to see it done, said Nathaniel Miles Sr.

"Rather than teach kids about how electricity is made, I let them find out where a connection has broken on an appliance and then showed them how to fix it.

"When the kids got curious, they asked how it worked and I explained it to them. I did it backwards, but kids don't listen to lectures well and you lose them after a few seconds.

"I kept those kids curious. They wanted to fix everything." ■

COVER PHOTO BY PEYTON HOGE

Family members encouraged Nathaniel Miles Sr., standing, right, to pursue his goal of having five barbershops open by 1995. With Miles in his Nolensville Road barber shop are his wife, Rosetta, standing, and their children, seated, from left, Sharon Miles Turner, Nathaniel Jr. and Tina.

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T2B

Shops bring smiles to Miles

'Teaches' better by clipping hair

By Kevin D. Pollard/Staff Writer

Barbershop owner Nathaniel Miles Sr. was a frustrated industrial arts teacher with a plan to own "five in '95" when he resigned from Whites Creek High School in late December 1988.

"I got disgusted because the school system was getting away from teaching kids how to be productive and make money and the lack of respect of teachers from administrators, students and parents," the 22-year Metro school veteran said.

"Let me tell you, I went home that Christmas and I didn't go back," said a laughing Miles, 52.

"My friends tried to talk me out of it, but my mind was made up. I took the money I had coming for my retirement, put half into a mutual fund and the other half into barber-shops.

"They all tried to talk me out of it, saying you can just take it easy until you get 25 years."

Now he owns four Nashville-area Miles Barbershops.

Miles, a thin man with a big straw hat, wide, easy grin and three children, all of whom grew up around a barbershop, decided he was going to show African-American youth how to run a "big business."

"Five by '95 means five barber-shops by 1995," he said. "I left the school system with that goal" — and a single barber shop.

For years, subtle messages had been sent to the Memphis native and TSU graduate by his wife, Rosetta, and children — Nathaniel Jr., Sharon and Tina.

They didn't understand why Miles stayed in the school system when he could be working for himself full time.

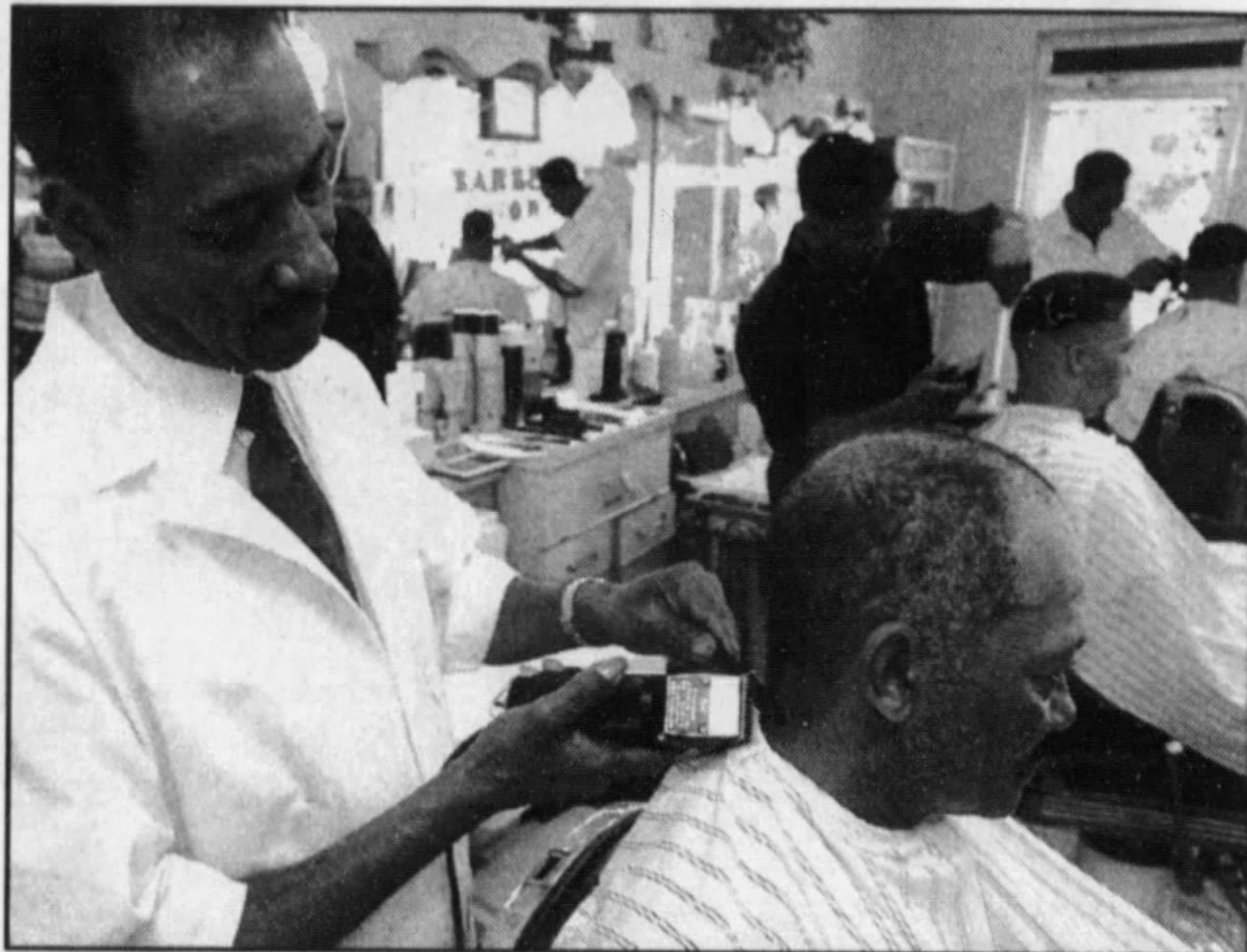
"I kept one foot on first base when I should have been ready to move," he said.

Miles opened his first barbershop on Trinity Lane in 1979. He operated the business after school and on weekends until he closed it in 1986 to spend more time with his family.

A few people were still taken by appointment only.

In 1984, two years before he closed the Trinity Lane shop, Miles purchased a barbershop at 1609 Jefferson Street from his brother, James, a fellow barber and accomplished artist.

"James had his artwork hanging up in the shop," Miles said. "I liked the atmosphere. When he left, he



PEYTON HOGE

Nathaniel Miles Sr. cuts customer Curtis Bradley's hair.

took all those paintings except three. I told him 'I thought they came with the shop.'

In early 1989, Miles started working earnestly on the fulfillment of his goal, and later on that year, "Miles Barbershop Location 2" at 3063 Brick Church Pike opened.

At the same time, Miles created a friendlier, more businesslike atmosphere in his two shops — with regular posted hours.

Flowers, plants and aquariums were put in the shop and a concerted effort was made to keep them as clean as possible, he said.

A little extra added attraction was a mint for adults and suckers for children, he added.

"I read somewhere that the fish in aquariums had a calming effect on people," Miles said. "It does. My customers have more peaceful debates now and not shouting disagreements.

"When my brother owned the shop, people used to get so mad at one another that they would be ready to fight. Talk about tension."

The changes in decor were made as much for the pleasure of customers as an example for the young barbers, he said.

"My wife and I came to the conclusion we need flash because that's what the young kids respect," Miles said. "Most black barbershops don't look like a business. I wanted mine to look like a big business because it is. I will do these things in every shop I open up."

"Miles Barbershop Location 3" at 3716 Nolensville Road opened last year.

It's important for African-American youth to have an example of success, and that's what the shop pro-

vides, he said.

The barbers rent a chair and pay 30% commission to the shop, Miles said. Barbers also sign in and out and drop the shop's money into a slot in the barber shop office, he said.

They get paid every day, Miles said. The business skills Miles' barbers are learning now will serve them well later, he said. Once upon a time, the school systems taught these skills, but not now, Miles said.

"If we can't teach kids to be productive and make money, what can we teach them and what are we supposed to be doing," he said.

"Three of my barbers have left and opened their own shops. I like that."

"Miles Barbershop Location 4" opens this Friday at 2109 Buena Vista Pike. Number 5 should be open next year.

Some of his barber friends didn't think expansion was possible, but that didn't stop him.

"Some people have said to me 'Are you trying to corner the market?'" he said. "'Yes, I am,' I tell them."

Five additional barbershops may be the next goal. "I have my foot off of first base," Miles said. "You have to take some risks. More African Americans don't have businesses because of that first-base mentality."

If more African-Americans were exposed to business, more would own them, Miles said, adding that some people think it's harder to start a business than it is. Dream big, but start small and work up, he said.

"The only regret I have is I didn't start sooner. But, at least we did get started. The shops are here to stay. My kids will continue running them after I'm gone." ■