



T-Time Brings the Salon Experience to the Boston Trans & Nonbinary Community

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For most, a haircut entails thinking about which salon you'll go to, and how you'd like it styled this time. A few places are on your list – running economical for a trim to higher-priced if you're getting ready for a special event – and perhaps you have a preferred barber or stylist you work with. They'll listen to you, generally agree with your ideas, and the result is in line with what you're looking for.

If you're trans, nonbinary, or gender-nonconforming in some fashion, the experience becomes drastically different. You'll encounter barbers or stylists that **don't do your hair**, or you'll present them with an idea, perhaps through a few photos drawn up on your phone, that gets skewed or twisted around.

The finished product seems too feminine when you wanted it to be masculine, it ends up too long or too short for your liking, and – if you'll even get service at all – the stylist goes on their own creative way, not listening to your thoughts or even acknowledging your gender.

The experience, in turn, makes you feel invisible and unheard, and you start to dread getting something as ordinary as a haircut. This is what you *should* look like. This is *how* you should cut your hair.

And none of this factors in any harassment you could encounter, overt discomfort or hostility from salon or store staff, or the costs of keeping up your appearance – a significant financial factor when you're paying for hormones and other procedures as you transition.

This last point inspired Lou Rod Cueva, CEO and Founder of MLR Artist Management, to come up with [T-Time](#), a pop-up salon experience geared toward the transgender and nonbinary community.

Earlier in 2019, Cueva had the chance to work with Carmen Carrera – the model, activist, and former *RuPaul’s Drag Race* contestant who spoke about the myriad of expenses and high monetary cost of transitioning. T-Time debuted its soft launch on October 1 at [ThreadTech](#) in East Boston, and its official launch is slated for June 2020 in Los Angeles – right in time for Pride month.

Founded by Cueva in 2010, MLR, an integrated management company that represents professional hairstylists, makeup artists, men’s groomers, and manicurists, has locations in both cities, and is committed toward social responsibility throughout its efforts, which range from corporate projects through weddings.

Last year, the company put together a pop-up to raise money and awareness for the victims of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, and as Cueva explains, T-Time addresses a “community that’s been swept under the rug.”

In the U.S., most places to get your hair cut or makeup done are geared toward cisgender consumers, and often have a strong heteronormative atmosphere, whether you’re privy to locker room talk as you sit in the barbershop chair or glance through the celebrity gossip and fashion magazines in the salon’s waiting room.

Grooming spaces catered to LGBTQ+ individuals have started to emerge, but growth is slow, and they’re few and far between, often in large coastal cities and driven by word of mouth. Others, like [ProjectQ](#) a few years ago, might only be mobile.

Boston’s options are just as scant, which meant Cueva had to take a multipronged approach to get the word out. As one avenue, MLR worked with the Massachusetts LGBT Chamber of Commerce, known for their advocacy and educational efforts to help LGBTQ+-owned businesses get off the ground and thrive. The Chamber of Commerce then advertised T-Time through its social channels.

Yet, he had just three weeks to put the whole thing together. In the process, Cueva partnered with like-minded companies who work to support the LGBTQ+ community outside of Pride season (like Dapper Confidential, who he found via our collab with the [Trans Cosmetic Donation Program](#)).

ThreadTech, a woman-owned fashion incubation center, provided the space, and [Impressions](#) helped with the vanities. Urban Decay, MAC, BLK LABL, Lit, [Luxie](#), and BoxyCharm supplied the cosmetics, makeup brushes, and grooming products. [The Aromi](#) provided fragrance gift certificates and [Fernweh Factory](#) launched their scented candles.

Cueva also tried a less-conventional tactic: Reaching out via Grindr to tell local trans people about the event. The response rate proved higher than expected, with many individuals interested in the experience. In total, 16 people signed up for appointments held from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Heading to T-Time

In walking through a warehouse-like building converted into a multitude of working spaces, finding ThreadTech and T-Time felt like reaching Boston's best-kept secret. The space – at the end of a long hallway filled with nondescript office doors – had the particularly angular, somewhat blank minimalism that's always open to possibilities.

You can start up a fashion brand – and getting more designers' creations out to market is ThreadTech founder Donielle Martorano McKeever's mission – or you can transform it into a salon experience where transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals are not only heard, acknowledged, and visible, but get to fully be themselves without questioning or compromises.

In short, T-Time became the very definition of a safe space, where individuals could fully realize their gender through hair, makeup, or styling instruction or simply work with a stylist without having to concede every step of the way.

MLR's stylists, plus Javier Rivera from De Novo Salon in Wakefield, Mass., set up around six stations, each with an assortment of supplies – from full makeup palettes to straighteners and curling irons.

With ambient lighting, the warm glow of dressing room-style mirrors, and dance-pop music flowing through the speakers, the atmosphere replicated that of a higher-end establishment, but with a little bit more fun and edginess.

Sponsor Host served drinks at the back, as stylists worked with each customer – some of whom already knew what they wanted, and others looking for more instruction. In some cases, the work was as straightforward as shaping a brow to be read as more masculine or feminine.

In others, a full makeover – from the foundation, eyes, and lips through styled hair – was accompanied by how-to tips for using each product.

Helping one customer put on makeup, MLR artist Priceless Rivera gets to the point: “It feels good to feel good.”

That experience isn’t always easy to come by, especially when you want to present a certain way but the world expects something different from you and continues to disregard your presentation and pronouns.

Finding out about the event through the LGBT Chamber of Commerce’s Facebook page, one nonbinary participant spoke about having their brows done to appear less feminine. “I feel more validated...It reads a little more masculine.”

In other instances – especially considering how shaving and makeup application are passed down from parent to child or from friend to friend – figuring out how to look like your best, most authentic self isn’t as easy. Tove – a newly out transwoman – had previously been getting her makeup through friends that worked at Ultra, but she explains, “I really don’t know what I’m doing.”

Going into her appointment at T-Time, she wasn’t sure what to expect, but a full makeover offered her a bit more insight into application and usage that, even five years ago, one might’ve acquired strictly through online tutorials and lots of practice in the mirror.

Even in 2019, T-Time’s concept highlights how far the LGBTQ+ community has come, but also how much more work in terms of accessing relatively mundane services is needed. That next step is where Cueva’s striving to take T-Time for its Los Angeles opening in June.

Right now, his vision's toward a larger event, where trans people feel more confident and "Like they belong," but also one – in transforming from a pop-up into a brick-and-mortar location, ideally in West Hollywood – that's backed by a large brand or corporation that supports and gives visibility to the LGBTQ+ community.

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