

A LIFE OF MANY LAYERS:

BARBETORIUM'S JES SUTTON

By Stacey Rowe

It's a rainy Sunday afternoon when I arrive at Barbetorium. I've met the owner, Jes Sutton, on a couple occasions, and today he answers the door in his signature head-to-toe black and porkpie hat. Delightful and charming as ever, Sutton offers up an array of beverages, including his new favorite, an apple and cinnamon infused water. He gives me a quick tour, and I take a seat in one of the comfortable studio chairs. We chat briefly about the photo shoot we're planning, then I steer the topic to his life transformation.

"What do you want to know?" Sutton asks.

"Whatever you are willing to tell me," I reply.

As one of four children, his mother and stepfather raised Sutton in Rochester. His early life revolved around his creativity. "I was cutting clothes and dyeing them—I wanted to be a clothing designer. I was very fashionable at a young age," he says. Around the same time, his mother noticed he wasn't learning at the same pace as other children in his class. After some testing, it was determined he had a learning disability and was placed in special education. Separated from his peers, Sutton was traumatized and continued to do poorly in school. It would eventually be determined that he had a reading comprehension problem, but not before Sutton decided to drop out.

His older sister, Deana Marie Sutton, had entered a hair program at Edison Tech and encouraged Sutton to sign up for classes. He attended a few classes at Continental but wound up changing his mind and picking up work at the



mall. He eventually moved into an apartment with Deana on Oxford Street. “We were brought up to be open minded and welcoming,” says Sutton, as he recalls the evening that would change his life forever. “I was seventeen and out at a club. My sister was out at a neighborhood bar with my brother,” he says. “She was engaged at the time, and she and my brother met this guy at a bar. It was not uncommon for people to casually hang out back then, and like I said—we were raised to be friendly.” Sutton arrived home to a new face sitting on the couch in the living room with his sister. He thought nothing of it and went to bed.

A strange noise awakened him twenty-five minutes later, and he heard the door of his bedroom open. The new “friend” of his sister’s was standing in the doorway staring at him. Sutton’s instinct told him not to move or make a sound. When he heard the front door close, he sprung out of bed to check on his sister. He found her unconscious and dialed 911. “September is always a tough month. The eleventh is a sad day for many reasons, but it meant something to our family before the tragedy of 9/11 happened,” Sutton explains. After doctors determined his sister was brain dead, his family removed Deana from life support on September 11, 1987. They were not able to donate her organs due to the necessary autopsy and investigation surrounding her death.

Not only had this stranger murdered Sutton’s sister, but he had also stolen her car, which led to his capture. He was convicted of second-degree manslaughter after it was revealed a struggle led to Deana being smothered in a bear hug. Alongside his family, Sutton spent most of his twenties fighting to keep her killer in jail. “I got into drugs and alcohol. I was having a lot of flashbacks and wondering what I could have done differently that night,” says Sutton.

With no driver’s license and no degree, he had been living at home with his parents on Park Avenue while working at several of the neighborhood establishments. One night in 1996, he was at a pub and ran into an old friend, an architect, who asked him what he was doing with his life. “I remember he asked me, ‘Isn’t it time?’ and I knew what I needed to do,” says Sutton. He knew it was time to let go of the hold his sister’s murder had on his life. “Fear and guilt was holding me back,” he says, “and once I let go of that, I realized anything was possible.” Sutton obtained his license and GED and applied for financial aid. Through the help of a grant, he returned for his first official day of hair school on January 13, 1997. “I remember the first week was all braiding—they do that to improve your dexterity,” Sutton continues. “I remember having a strange sense of calmness about it, like I would never have to worry about anything again.”

In 2001, after driving up and down Park

Avenue with a cup of coffee, Sutton discovered an available space for rent. “It was the shittiest house on the street and used to be [themed gift shop] Deborah’s Heavenly Angels,” Sutton laughs. “I deposited the exact amount I had left in my bank account.” He also sold his car and was cutting hair left and right to pay contractors. Sutton opened his first salon, Fusion, on March 5, 2001, his stepfather’s birthday. “He passed away from cancer the year prior. Opening on that day was a testament to his strength for taking on my mom and her kids,” says Sutton. The salon featured collaborations with Java’s Coffee and a gallery of rotating artwork—something that Sutton has continued at Barbetorium. “Opening up the salon truly saved my life. Showing up every day gave me responsibility.”

Things were going well with Fusion when Sutton and his family received word that Deana’s killer was released from jail. Eight months after his release, Deana’s murderer killed another girl. Sutton’s family supported his latest victim’s family during the trial. “My mom could finally connect with someone who was going through the same thing,” he says. This time, the killer was convicted of murder and received twenty-five years to life.

Several years later, Sutton was frequently traveling to New York City for magazine shoots when he was confronted with another dilemma: The building in which Fusion was housed was facing foreclosure. Inspired by the work he was doing, Sutton considered relocating to New York. He grabbed a cup of coffee and drove up and down Rochester’s Park Avenue again to mull it over. As fate would have it, he encountered another “Space for Rent” sign. “At that point, I knew I wasn’t moving,” says Sutton. He decided to relocate Fusion down the street and focus on creating a stronger brand. He opened the new location during Park Ave Fest in 2008.

Sutton had also started doing speaking engagements at beauty schools and recalls one in particular at Shear Ego: “I did my talk and invited the class to call anytime or visit the salon for an art opening. The art show came and went. Nobody called. Nobody came,” says Sutton, “but I remembered this one young kid staring at me in class.” A few months later, he got a letter in the mail that said, “Hi, my name is Nico, and I want to work for you.” Sutton laughs, “He was nineteen and two months into school and so persistent. I thought I had a stalker. So, I made him cut my hair, and it was the worst haircut I had in my entire life—he butchered it!” Sutton physically held the student’s hands and taught him how to correct it. That young stylist, better known today as “Scissor Guy” Nico Merritt, has worked alongside Sutton ever since.

“Fusion was kicking ass,” says Sutton, “but I was really itching to do a barber school.” In 2011, Barbetorium was born. Sutton

made a separate room in Fusion and started Barbetorium Academy, a men’s education program, for one simple reason: Sutton couldn’t cut every man’s hair. “There I was, an uneducated guy with a learning disability, creating a program to educate others,” he says, “and the reason it worked is because I’m passionate about it.” Classes quickly sold out, and half-day sessions moved to full days.

Sutton finally decided to leave Park Avenue in the spring of 2016 for his new location at 25 Circle Street. “I had stayed here to be close to her [Deana] and where it happened, but it was time to move on. I knew I was going to be okay,” he says. Dropping the Fusion name and “gentlemen’s grooming” and rebranding with a new tagline, Barbetorium emerged as a “fusion hair studio.” With the combined skills of Sutton, Merritt, and stylists Anthony Marasco and Taryn Treviso, the team could service both men and women’s needs in an industrial, stylish, neither masculine nor feminine setting.

In addition to transforming his brand, Sutton has also transformed his life despite many obstacles. He no longer dabbles in drugs and managed to correct his learning disability by reading and reciting newspaper articles to his clients. With a passion for giving back to the community and sharing his knowledge, he started the ROC Hair Exchange in 2016 as a means to connect industry professionals through collaboration and education. He also travels for speaking engagements, helped to rewrite seven chapters in the latest edition of the *Milady Standard Barbering* textbook, and is the co-vice president for the Neighborhood of the Arts Business Association. Additionally, he started a scholarship in honor of his sister using her initials (D.M.S.)—the Do More Scholarship. Per Sutton, “Every year on September 11, we award \$1,000 in cash and/or tools to a student or salon in need. They have to write an essay on why they got into the industry and what they plan to do.” The scholarship is now in its fourth year and has helped several students as well as a salon that burned down.

Sutton has never forgotten his roots and those who helped him along the way and says, “I grew up poor, and now I am in a position to help others.” He wants to give hope to people going through drinking, drug, or mental health issues by showing them there is a better life waiting for them. “Each one of us has the strength, courage, and passion to fight through it. Believe in yourself and others will too.” He continues, “I want people, particularly males, to know that it’s okay to grieve and that everyone grieves differently. You can make a difference through supporting others going through trauma. Your life doesn’t have to be a tragedy. There were times I didn’t think I could get through it. Now, I like being a leader and a positive influence in other people’s lives.”⁽⁵⁸⁵⁾

#HairGoals:

Three men transform their look

“I love helping someone find their identity,” says Sutton. When clients are seeking a new cut, color, or both, he likes to know their long-term hair goals in order to determine the best solution. Joined by Barbetorium stylists Nico Merritt and Taryn Treviso, the team helps three male clients transform their everyday looks.



Look 1:

Curls gone wild

Nathaniel Hall's typical look is as sleek as his cocktail slinging skills. “Hydration is key here,” says Sutton, as he refreshes Hall's cut and capitalizes on his natural waves for a tousled and curly look. Sutton applies KMS California Curl Up defining mousse to damp hair for texture and volume. Hall's hair is then hand-styled while blow drying and finished with a light spray for hold.





**Look 2:
Re-shades of grey**

Tom Adamski says, “I noticed my hair was becoming increasingly gray in a picture with my grandchildren.” To create a subtle change and a more youthful appearance, Sutton shampoos Adamski with a clarifier to remove buildup and open the cuticle. After cutting, he applies Goldwell Men’s Re-Shade, a technologically advanced product that deposits color on every other strand, resulting in a more natural finish—a perfect fit for men who are reluctant to color. Available in five shades, the actual color process only takes five minutes, which works for busy people who are pressed for time or on a lunch hour. “With the wash and cut, men are in and out of here in forty-five minutes,” says Sutton, “and they can maintain their color every five to six weeks or sooner if they prefer.”





Look 3: Not a bad ombré

Mack Hartman is generally spotted behind the bar at the Revelry with long dark hair in his signature man bun. After growing his hair for three years, he was ready for a change. "I've always wanted to go lighter," says Hartman.

Steering away from the harsh ombré trend that celebrities were sporting several years ago, stylists Treviso and Merritt apply an updated painterly version with foil to give Hartman a natural sun-kissed blonde ombré that will grow out naturally should he decide to go back to his dark roots. The color process takes just under two hours. After stylists blow his hair out, Hartman's style is transformed from man bun to man braids. Treviso makes a center part and forms two Dutch braids (an inside-out version of the French braid) along each side of Hartman's head. For a tighter, sleeker look, she recommends braiding with slightly damp hair. "I want men to know they shouldn't be afraid to try highlights or braids," says Sutton. "This is a really great look on the right person."

