

Dominique Wells, Ultimate Look Salon

Interviewed by Peter Myers at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul
March 1, 2011

Q Please introduce yourself.

A My name is Dominique Wells and I am part owner of the Ultimate Look Hair Salon.

Q Talk about the history of the salon....

A My aunt, Wendy Lane, was a very talented hair stylist. She worked in numerous shops around the city, in St. Paul mainly. I believe she worked previously on University and Snelling, in the Spruce Tree building. So her clientele outgrew the salon that she was previously working at and she always had grand ideals and was the businessperson in the family, so she thought that University was where it was at. And at the time, there wasn't too many African American salons on University, so I believe the guy that owns Earth's – right next door to Ultimate Look – he got ahold of the landlord and got her a spot on University. So it's been there for as long as I can remember – about 20 years, so I was about 6 years old when she opened the salon.

Q How have you seen University Avenue change since that early time?

A Well, when I was a kid, I seen Montgomery Wards was probably the biggest department store on University and me and my family would go visit it. And when they tore that down, it just looked like a dustbowl or something, and then all these new stores like Cub Foods and I think Mervyns had opened around that time. University started to look a lot better as far as big businesses. Even the car dealerships were still on University Avenue, which aren't really presently.

Q Describe University Avenue to someone who has never been there.

A I would say that it's very diverse – lots of culture on University. As a kid -I believe towards the early 90s - a lot of Asians, the Asian culture really took over University and there were just businesses opening left and right. But University is a place where you can pretty much get anything that you need, whether it's a car, a hairstyle, haircut, clothes, food, print ads, photography – everything's on University. So its, like the consumer market I believe for the neighborhood.

Q Talk about the clientele in your salon.

A Our typical customers are usually African American. Mostly youth – we get a lot of youthful clients between ages from 16 to 35. Then we also have seniors that have been coming to the salon since it was opened. Now they're seniors and they started out as maybe a 40 year old and now they're in their 60s, so the salon has serviced generations and even some of my customers are taller than me, now. So its kind of weird, but it's a good feel because we know our customers are familiar with us and we've been around for a long time. We get all types of people – all races come in here

and it's starting to become more diverse. We have Caucasian, we have Asians and definitely, of course, African Americans in the salon working now.

Q What role do you think University Avenue plays in the economic and social life of St. Paul?

A Well, I'm sure there is hundreds of small businesses on University Avenue and we employ over 100,000+. I'm not sure of all the numbers, but I'm sure it's very vast. Just in my salon alone, there's probably at least I would say 25 to 50 families that have gotten financially stable through Ultimate Look because there's six other salons on the Avenue and those people started at Ultimate Look and branched out. So now their families are eating off the wealth, so...I think University plays a very major part in the Twin Cities economic financial standpoint.

Q Have you done any work with the Neighborhood Development Center?

A Yes. I've worked through the NDC with U7. They did some marketing for my salon, as far as helping me put together a branded logo, which we have never officially obtained as to late, and also a website we put together. A few marketing strategies and they're trying to help me out with my financial budgeting also, getting prepared for the light rail construction.

Q The light rail is a very controversial topic for many small businesses. How would you see your business five or six years from now?

A I would definitely like to see it still on University and that's the biggest concern that I have with the light rail coming through and the construction period. Because there are so many different perceptions of how it's going to affect our businesses, but the main thing is I'm sure it's going to have a negative affect on us currently, during the construction period. I'm just hoping that we're able to be there when the construction's over with and the light rail's here and all the small business owners are still there and not bought out by big corporations or the city. So I'm really just trying to get a feel for what the city's plans are as far as the small businesses on University because I feel like we are the ones that work hard and a lot of us are just talented people with business ideals and put them together with hard work and created these businesses on University. So I just hope that we're able to be a part of something special.

Q Do you own or lease?

A We're currently leasing the building.

Q Do you hear a lot of buzz from your customers?

A As of late, yes. I've been hearing talks about the light rail and a lot of people are...well the jist of them are misunderstood about the light rail, uneducated about the light rail I should say for better words. They just believe like, man, you all are going to be really busy when the light rail gets here. And I'm like, well if we're here when the light rail gets here. They probably don't understand that the construction is really going to impact and take a toll on a lot of businesses and customers or consumers they act on conveniency. So, I'm wondering are you going to be the one that still makes your way in here when University is still tore up? I mean that's neither here or there, but those are

questions that go on in my mind. But yeah, we're definitely getting the buzz and they're more positive about the light rail than some of the business owners are, because we have our blood, sweat and tears put into these businesses.

Q Is your aunt still involved in the business?

A Yeah, she is very much involved still in the business. Me and her work together as partners, trying to get the salon to be able to withstand the new happenings on University.

Q What kind of things are you doing to keep customers coming in?

A Right now I plan to create a, I would say a better database, and in order to get information from the current clientele I was going to offer discounted hair styles and possibly free – like a raffle or some type like that to encourage them that it's very important and vital that they still support us while we give back something to them. Those are little things that I've been thinking and planning on – customer appreciation day and stuff like that.

Q Do you think the fact that all the businesses are facing the same thing...is it bringing people together at all?

A Yes, I think so because when I walk into other businesses on the Avenue, seeing them from these meetings that we have had for light rail and stuff like that, now we're getting to know each other on a name to name basis, versus a face to face basis or not even knowing that this guy down the street owned the steak house for however long or you know stuff like that. So I think the light rail is really bringing the small business owners together and I think its great. When adversity hits, we all get together. But even after or before it would be nice to know your fellow neighbor or your next businessman or what not. Yeah, it's really starting to get the business people together because we know that we have to be strong through this to survive.

Q Where do most of your customers come from?

A Well, I'm pretty sure that most of them stay in St. Paul, probably like Frogtown area, Midway area, we have a few people traveling from like River Falls or something like that, some of those out cities from 45 minutes or....the bulk of them stay in St. Paul but we do have travelers, though.

Q Is there anything else you'd like to say?

A I'd definitely want our business, or my business, and all the other ones that want to stay on University be able to do so with help from the city, government, the federal government if needed. I feel like we are the ones that should reap the benefits from the light rail when it's up and running because we are responsible for the financial means on University. So you can't kick us out of our homes and businesses and expect everybody to have a smile on their face at the end of the day.

Q Do you know many people from the Rondo neighborhood? What are their stories.....

A I've heard some talk and its almost like, oh well here we go again. They're moving us out – that type of feel and attitude. Actually my mom and my aunt and my grandma – they stayed in the neighborhood, Rondo neighborhood, when 94 went through the neighborhood. I really haven't spoken to anyone in particular but I hear talks and some of its kind of scary because I don't want to get bought out on University or not be able to make ends meet where my business currently is. So I really couldn't picture University without Ultimate Looks still standing there, as long as I'm alive.