Barber Alex Delgado finishes cutting LHS student Devin Farrell's hair.

Billy’s Barber Shop is a place of community, of brotherhood; a place to be listened to and respected – and you’ll leave looking pretty sharp too.

It’s a Friday afternoon and 10 young men from Lowell High School’s McDonough Freshman Academy file into Billy’s and get comfortable on the couches. They grab a slice of pizza and a
soda. This is the third of six sessions Billy Cabrera and his team have held for the students and they already see him as trusted uncle and his son, Willie, as their big brother.

The group talks about things they have been struggling with recently – anger issues, school, family troubles. They talk about toxic masculinity, what it really means to be a man, and how to find and stay on a path to success.

“Things happen,” Cabrera tells the guys. “We learn from them, try to get to the root of the problem and move on.”

He tells them not to give in to negativity or let people antagonize them into fighting by trying to insult or offend them.

“At the end of the day, you know the truth and that is what really matters,” he said.

The barbershop is also a place to share their successes – Edwin Algarin proudly pulls certificates out of his backpack chronicling his achievements on the wrestling mat.

While they are talking and sharing, one by one, the students get called to the barber chair for a free haircut by Billy, Willie, or barber Alex Delgado.
Devin Farrell had a lot of hair. He sat with his head down, a black hoodie covering most of his face. He got into Delgado’s chair ready for a new look. He flipped through the style book to find something that may suit him.

Snip, snip, buzz. Delgado even trimmed Farrell’s eyebrows and shaved his mustache. He turned him around in the chair so he could face the mirror. The young man’s face lit up. He looked like a new person. The other kids even told him how good he looked.

Step one on the path to success completed. You need that confidence to keep moving forward.

The older men know how a path to a successful and fulfilling life can easily be derailed. Billy spent his younger years getting into trouble and falling into drug addiction. He spent time in prison and in rehab before attending barber school and improving his life. After renting a chair at another shop for five years, he opened Billy’s Barber Shop on Andover St. in 2014.

He knew he wanted the shop to be more than just a place to get a fade and a close shave. In the backroom he created the Resource and Reclamation Center, a place where people struggling with homelessness, addiction, or other troubles can stop in for a cup of coffee, necessities, information about local programs and resources, and some time with a friend who will listen.

“I started mentoring, took courses and workshops and began to train other people to become mentors,” said Cabrera. “Today, we run a group for fathers in recovery reintegrating into their children’s lives, as well as mentorship for citizens returning from the prison system (all of whom receive a free haircut).”
Willie Cabrera cuts Manny Hernandez's hair, while Alex Delgado works on Devin Farrell.

Superintendent of Schools Joel Boyd gets his hair cut at Billy’s. Once they got talking about what Cabrera does for the community, Boyd asked if he would be willing to do some mentoring with a group of young men from Lowell High School. Billy jumped at the chance.

“We have a unique set up to do it because it is a barbershop; it is a more comfortable environment, not so structured,” Cabrera said. “Creating a space where people feel comfortable was my mission.”

On this Friday afternoon, Boyd stops in to say hello and see how things are going. He tells the guys that he was not a great student in school and did not find his way until he made a connection with a trusted adult – his wrestling coach.

Cabrera points out Algarin’s mastery of the mat and the trash talking you expect to hear at a barbershop ensues, with talk of a possible matchup between the two.

“I don’t lose when I get on the mat,” said Boyd.

“You’re going to lose,” said Algarin.

Everyone laughed.
Boyd attempted to draw Lowell High School Student Support Specialist Sean Kiley, who himself was a championship wrestler at Methuen High and later Springfield College, into the fray, but he declined saying he’s “retired” from wrestling.

Kiley did say the sessions at the barbershop have “paid off in dividends” for the young men. He said he has seen an improvement in their academics and behavior and they are bonding as a group and helping each other out.

“I’m very proud to be part of this,” he said. “There is a lot of courage in this room right now. It means a lot for them to have a place where they can talk openly and feel safe.”