

# Small Business Spotlight:

Jessie Anderson | Owner

Big Bros Barbershop, Est. 2015

## Life Story

Jessie grew up in East Vancouver and came out as queer at age 13 and as transgender at age 16. At the time, there were not many visible resources for trans people, especially youth. The closest thing Jessie could find to a peer-to-peer resource was a bookstore owned by a gay couple. Jessie worked there for a few years and considered it an apprenticeship on operating a queer-owned for-profit community space.

## What motivated you to start your own business?

The bookstore I worked at had a change in management, and it was no longer reflecting the values that I loved about it. I decided to take what I had learned and build a new business and community space with the values I wanted to see. It seemed no one wanted to hire me as a trans person, so I hired myself.

I started a barbershop as I had plenty of unofficial experience and some proper training as well. Without many qualifications besides being trans, I started a crowdfunding campaign and raised \$9,000 to open. I worked in a tiny space above a warehouse and built enough awareness to eventually upgrade to a better location.

## How has your business been impacted by and adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Operations have been impacted by significantly limiting capacity to allow for social distancing and staggering appointments for intensive cleaning.

It was a scary undertaking as an entrepreneur and community leader to reopen the shop in one of the first industries to shut down but also one of the first to be brought back. I had to navigate opening a space in a way that was physically safe but also considerate of our clients' needs. I have trans youth clients who may have been in isolation with unsupportive families and need some peer-to-peer exposure. I also have adult clients who have trauma from previous healthcare experiences and the AIDS crisis. We effectively communicate our plans and protocols to soothe any anxieties before clients come in.

Because we care about our clients, they care about us as well. We started a Patreon (a platform where fans can provide financial support) while we were shutdown and many clients and fans of our shop contributed.

Government programs helped quite a bit too, especially the rent and wage subsidies.

## What have you found most rewarding as a small business in your industry?

Big Bros Barbershop is unique because we are one of the very few brick-and-mortar spaces dedicated to trans wellness and where you can buy gender-affirming products in person. We have clients and visitors from across the lower mainland and sometimes internationally, including families with young trans teens.

Most other spaces that carry these products, or that are inclusive to trans people, are medical resources or adult shops. We offer an all-ages space where people can access products, information and community without barriers.

### **What challenges did you encounter while growing your business and how did you overcome them?**

The trans community is a marginalized and predominantly low-income demographic. I was worried about maintaining an expensive space in Vancouver while not overcharging clients. So, we offer a sliding scale pricing model. We trust clients to pay what they can and we predominately receive the generous rate.

### **What would be your advice for others starting a business?**

Open communication and building relationships with clients has been key. If you're ever struggling as a business owner, be upfront and keep in contact with your clients rather than failing to meet expectations. This upfront communication is why clients come from far away to visit us, contribute to our Patreon and supported us through the pandemic.

### **The Bottom Line:**

- Big Bros Barbershop is a trans owned and operated beauty and resource centre for the trans community and beyond. All types of folks are welcome!
- Five people now work in the barbershop including Jessie, two employees and two contractors.
- Big Bros won Small Business BC's Best Emerging Entrepreneur Award in 2016. This attention helped them expand into their current business location