

# Ahead of the game

## Fast hair-cutting salons take cue from fast food restaurants

By Tom Henderson  
staff writer

FANTASTIC SAM'S may not mean much to you, now. If Natalie Davis has her way, though, in a few years Fantastic Sam's will conjure up hair cutting just as quickly and clearly as McDonald's brings to mind, not some old man on a farm, but hamburgers, fries and golden arches.

"We're the McDonald's of hair care," says Davis, albeit a bit prematurely. After all, McDonald's has served those 60 billion burgers, or whatever their signs are saying these days, and can be found from Singapore to Montego Bay to Iceland.

Actually, Sam's is more like Chuck E. Cheese, the non-stop-action family pizza joint replete with singing fake dogs (the Beagles), free prizes and video games.

Fantastic Sam's is a family-oriented franchised hair-styling operation that was founded by Sam Ross in Memphis, Tenn., 10 years ago. Today, there are 350 stores in operation in the U.S., with rapid expansion going on in Canada and on the drawing board for Japan.

Expansion is the key to a successful franchise operation. Expand too quickly, and the business can blow up like an overinflated balloon, as Tom Monaghan discovered the first time he tried to go big time with Domino's. After recovering from bankruptcy, Domino's showed what can happen when a franchise grows at an optimum rate. The proof came last winter, when Monaghan paid out \$50 million in cash in payment for the Detroit Tigers.

Fantastic Sam's are a cross between expensive hair-styling salons and their \$23 haircuts, and the neighborhood barber shop, where a trim goes for about \$7.50.

All haircuts at Sam's come with a shampoo and a blow-dry, and perms are available. The basic rate is \$10 for adults and \$5 for children, though Davis is offering a grand-opening special through September of \$6 for adults and \$4 for children. (Her shop in the Mid-

shopping center at Middlebelt and Seven Mile has been open for four weeks.)

**KIDS GET SPECIAL treatment.** There's a hand puppet the cosmetologists use to keep the kids occupied during hair cutting, and then there are such post-cutting rewards as bubble gum and what is billed as the "Fantastic Machine," which is basically a TV, VHS machine, and elaborate cabinet. Kids slip a silver of their hair in one part of the cabinet and out pops a free toy from another part.

"We want to constantly reinforce them," says Davis.

All the while there are such features as Looney Tune cartoons with Bugs Bunny ("Wackiki Wabbit") was showing on a recent weekday and Walt Disney movies ("TigerTown").

"It's not just for the kids. You'd be surprised," joked Davis. "Everyone was crowding around during 'TigerTown.'"

Davis said the shop, which is open seven days a week and employs 11 cosmetologists (all Sam's cutters are licensed cosmetologists) has been doing 50-70 cuts a day.

"It's been very good," Davis said, "better than our expectations. We're dealing with a seasonal lull to begin with, plus a large part of the business is word of mouth."

Davis has bought another franchise, this scheduled to open in Farmington in late fall. There are other Sam's stores currently operating in Garden City and Westland.

According to Dennis Horwath, spokesman for regional director Barry Ely of Livonia, company projections call for 80 Fantastic Sam's in Michigan by the end of the year and 40 in Vancouver, British Columbia. In addition, the rights have been sold for 2,000 of the stores in Japan, though buying rights and opening stores are two vastly different things.

DAVIS SAYS she stumbled upon the business last year when she was working as a real-estate broker for V.R. Business Brokers of Livonia, which also employed Ely.



Fantastic Sam's cosmetologists are given stage names like Twiggy and Peaches to avoid any build up of individuals. One day you could

"I was looking for a business to buy and I stumbled into it," Davis said. "I liked the numbers on it and I liked that it was service oriented and not product oriented."

Prior to joining V.R. Brokers last year, Davis had been in a business that was extremely product oriented — building houses with her husband in Livingston County. But a divorce and subsequent sellout of her part in the business, left Davis looking for an investment.

"I looked around and I fell in love with Livonia," said Davis. "I love the

ethnic diversity here — orientals, blacks, whites — I just loved the whole atmosphere." She still lives in Brighton, but is looking to sell or trade her home and move to Livonia.

Davis is a native of Honolulu, Hawaii, who moved here after meeting her husband in college in Hawaii. Despite the divorce, and the fact that most of her family is still in Honolulu, Davis had no intention of leaving Michigan.

"I love the area," she said. "And I love winters. I love cross-country ski-

ing. The first time I saw snow I was 24, deplaning at Metro Airport. I held up the line. It was so beautiful I just stared at it."

**ONE CUTESY TOUCH** at Sam's is the stage names given the cosmetologists. Each cutter works at a station under a big sign bearing such names as Annie, Sparkle, Bubbles and Foxy.

"We don't want personalities, which is too common in the business," explained Horwath. "We don't want anyone coming in and asking for Marilyn, for example. We don't want the tall

wagging the dog. We offer individual services but want the personality out of it."

"We found that the tendency of cosmetologists to develop personality was detrimental to the company."

He denied that such terms as "Bubbles" or "Foxy" were sexist or might invite comment from customers. "We mean the animal 'foxy,' not the vernacular 'foxy,' being sexy or whatever," said Horwath. "We've also got names like Snoopy, Dandelion, Sweet Pea and Curly."

## community calendar

### • HOT GRASS

Thursday, Aug. 9: "Hot Grass," in concert of blue grass music at 7 p.m. on the parking lot of Farmington Branch Library, 23500 Liberty Street. Guests are asked to bring lawn chairs or blankets. No charge. If weather is inclement, performance will be given inside the library.

### • GARAGE AND BAKE SALE

Thursday and Friday, Aug. 9-10: Giant Garage and Bake Sale sponsored by Farmington Chapter, Associates of Christian College of Rochester, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day, at 2741 Doreen, vicinity of Inkster and Nine Mile roads.

### • SCOLIOSIS CHECK-UP

Thursday and Friday, Aug. 9-10: Free checkups for scoliosis (lateral curvature of the spine) from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. each day in Alliance Chiropractic Health Clinic, Suite 4, 31620 12 Mile. Appointments are necessary, made by calling the clinic, 553-3080.

### • ROBOT SHOW

Thursday, Aug. 9: Dodge Automation Robot Show, with robots that move, talk, sing, in Livonia Mall, Seven Mile and Middlebelt Road throughout regular mall hours. Shoppers can also visit a small museum in the mall devoted to the history and restoration of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.

### • EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER

Thursday, Aug. 9: Fairview and Alameda Early Childhood Centers are now accepting registrations for two, three and five- to six-week sessions for preschoolers, in classes which begin the week of Sept. 10. Registration information given by calling Fairview at 626-8356, or Alameda at 476-1470.

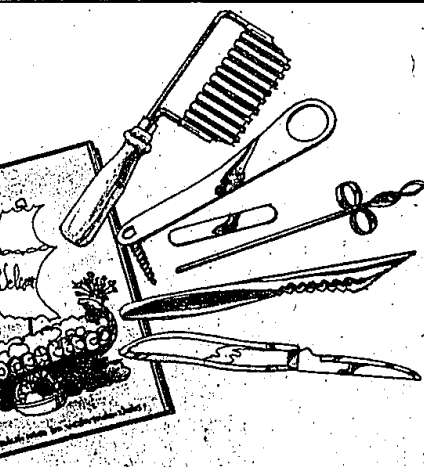
• **PRESCHOOL REGISTRATION** Thursday, Aug. 9: Farmington Co-op Preschool, located at 23501 Hildred Road, is now accepting registrations for 3- and 4-year-olds for classes which begin the week of Sept. 5. Extended care program is also offered. Inquiries

taken by Linda McSweeney, 476-2533.

### • IMAGE AWARENESS

Monday, Aug. 13: "Image Awareness for the Adolescent Male," five session class for 10-14-year-olds begins at 10 a.m. in Room M-200, Orchard Ridge Campus, Oakland Community College, instructed by May Arvo, certified professional model and instructor. Fee is \$24, payable to instructor first day of class.

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