

# Beloved Local Hairdresser Retires After 58 Years

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GODFREY/ALTON - On the surface, Helen Shelby's career seems like a regular story. Shelby is retiring on Sept. 29 after 58 years as a hairdresser in salons across Alton and Godfrey. She speaks fondly about her customers and coworkers, recounting their loyalty and her gratitude for their friendships. If you ask Shelby, it's been a good career, though nothing special.

Her friends and customers would disagree.

“One said to me, ‘You have no idea how you’ve touched my life.’ And let me tell you, that just got to me,” Shelby said. “You don’t think, maybe, you’re helping someone. But I’ve had things and people that affect me like that too, so I know what that feels like.”

Some of these people are women that Shelby has seen once a week for over 50 years. They sit in her chair and chat about their lives, their families, and their stresses. They tell her things they haven’t been able to tell anyone else.

“They really do kind of unload on a hairdresser or a bartender. You hear stories like that and I do think it’s true,” Shelby said.

And Shelby does what they need: she listens. Sometimes she offers advice. She shares her own stories, and they confide in each other.

As Shelby’s friend and coworker, Kay Rafferty has seen this firsthand. The two met at a salon in North Alton 40 years ago. It was an “instant friendship,” Rafferty said. They’ve worked together ever since then, even opening their own shop for 13 years before settling at Rumours Salon in Godfrey for the past 17.

“I admire her thinking, her doing and her talents,” Rafferty explained. “I respect Helen. I’m not a thinker and a decorator and an instigator. She is, and we worked well.”

When they opened their salon, they “laughed all the way through it,” often joking that Shelby was the boss and Rafferty was more than happy to follow her lead. It will be an adjustment to lose Shelby as a coworker, but that friendship is as strong as ever.

“Like I’ve said to her, she’s not moving, she’s not leaving, and I’ll need her to do my hair every once in a while,” Rafferty said. “We’ve laughed together, we’ve cried together. It’s been from the get-go. It’s all the emotional things that you go through with our families and friends and everything, that’s what we’ve been through. A true friendship.”

The feeling is mutual. Shelby speaks fondly of the “great group of girls” she works with and her “faithful, faithful customers.” Over the years, they’ve helped Shelby raise her twin daughters, Bonnie and Connie. They’ve celebrated the birth of grandchildren, talked through the difficulties of marriage, and navigated life’s ups and downs — all from Shelby’s chair at the salon.

“They’ve stuck by me through thick and thin,” she said. “We’ve had some fun conversations and just picked each other up when we were down. That’s a great feeling when you can work with people like that.”

In a show of true friendship, Shelby goes out of her way to be there for her customers; sometimes, she even follows them to the funeral home. She does their hair one last time, so they look like themselves in the casket.

“It’s just kind of a thank you for them being such a sweet person and a good customer, a good friend,” she said. “That’s just the last thing you can help them with ... You just feel like, ‘You know what? This is the last thing I can do for you and I’m going to do it.’”

Even though Shelby will no longer be at the salon every day, those friendships will continue. She hopes to make the most of her retirement by traveling and spending time with her husband, children and grandchildren. And she’ll forever be grateful for the people who helped her along the way and the clients she helped in turn, maybe in ways that neither of them will ever fully realize.

“I think that means a lot to each of us, not just to them, but to me as well,” she added. “You give kindness away and it comes back to you. That’s just a nice thing to remember.”