

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Karibbean Kuts, Where A Good Laugh Is Always Available, Expands Operation

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Ernice Gilbert **January 15, 2017**



ST. CROIX -- In a time when businesses are shuttering their doors because of growing expenses and dwindling sales, it's always welcome news when a local operation announces expansion to facilitate growth.

Such has been the case with Caribbean Kuts, a barbershop located on Constitution Hill road, across from the Brass Key Homestore, which has been in operation in its current location for over six years.

This week, the barbershop left its original spot for a new location in the same building, adding more space, new barbers and more services for customers. The expansion had

been a long time coming, said co-founder Carlos Martinez, above, 34, who started his career 17 years ago. He said the new space was needed because the shop's customer base was swelling.

"We needed to do that because we had too many customers [as the first space was a little small], so we had to come here to accommodate everybody, give them a pool table so they could play while they wait," he said. "We got a domino table coming so they could play dominoes and, you know, make the wait a little easier for everybody. You have to think large. Like Mapp said, a time to build."

Indeed, the new location is much more spacious than the former, boasts more seating, includes male and female restrooms as well as things to do for those who loathe waiting idly. Another hallmark of the barbershop is the comedian attributes of founder Martinez, who keeps customers laughing from their arrival to the shop until their departure. Asked about the origin of his jokes, Mr. Martinez credited his mother, who he said kept a sense of humor even while they struggled to make ends meet.

"I think I got that from my mother," he said. "Growing up in the hood, I came up hard, but my mother was a magician. My mother had a welfare check for \$360, and she managed to pay light, water, buy me a Nike -- she managed to pay everything with \$360. She's also a very funny person, and she influenced that into me so I bring it to my customers and give them front row for free."

With the expansion, the barbershop now has eight barbers, according to Mr. Martinez, who highlighted two of his longtime employees specializing in eyebrows (co-founder Miguel Santiago was not at the barbershop during the interview). The shop opens Monday through Saturday weekly, but Mr. Martinez said he's mulling a Sunday rotation for his barbers in order to accommodate customers whose only free time may be the first day of the week. The shop also takes appointments, which sees customers paying a little extra for timely service.

Karibbean Kuts has been this reporter's favorite barbershop for at least three years because of the welcoming atmosphere it boasts, channeled through Mr. Martinez and shared by his colleagues. The expansion of the shop speaks to its winning strategy and expert barbers. It also serves as an encouraging outlook at a time when the territory's government seems to be struggling to meet financial obligations, and may have to take drastic measures to remain afloat.

Mr. Martinez thanked loyal customers for their continuous patronage. He reminisced on his young days when he would cut hair for as little as \$5 and even food stamps, to his current position as one of the top barbershops on St. Croix.

"It's about giving back to those who have supported me this whole time," he said, pointing to his 17 years in the sector.