Tales from the barbershop

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Aidan Gill, left, discussed his life and career in a special New Orleans Entrepreneur Week talk hosted by the Freeman School's Lepage Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

In the last 30 years, Aidan Gill has built his defiantly old-fashioned New Orleans barbershop into a leading personal care brand, earning national press and celebrity customers like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Denzel Washington and Hunter S. Thompson. But the Irish-born entrepreneur’s early life wasn’t nearly as glamorous.

“It was like *Angela’s Ashes*,” he quips, “without all the money and fun.”

On Monday (March 19), Gill discussed his 50-year career behind the chair in a special New Orleans Entrepreneur Week talk hosted by the Lepage Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation at Tulane University’s A. B. Freeman School of Business.

“We wanted to highlight an outstanding small business in New Orleans, and Aidan Gill fit that bill perfectly,” says Rob Lalka, executive director of the Lepage Center. “It was great to hear his story and learn his thoughts on building and sustaining a business.”

In a conversation with Jude Olinger, CEO of the Olinger Group and a longtime customer and friend, Gill described his impoverished upbringing in Dublin and his decision to forgo the promise of a scholarship to Trinity College to become an apprentice barber at the age of 16. His reason? He needed money to buy a second pair of shoes.

“There’s an old Irish saying,” Gill says. “Jobs are like lobster pots. They’re really easy to get into, very hard to get out of.”

After losing out on a coveted lease for a planned shop in London, Gill emigrated to New Orleans and opened his first store in 1990 in a tiny space just off Maple Street. Nine years later, he moved to a larger space on Magazine Street, which remains his flagship location today.

From the beginning, Gill had a clear entrepreneurial vision. An aficionado of barbershop history, he equipped the store with antique furnishings and memorabilia to evoke the profession’s past. He also offered a large selection of high-end colognes and grooming products from Europe. That wasn’t by accident.

“Barbers are a fickle bunch,” Gill says. “They can up stakes and move out at a moment’s notice, and then you’re left with no business. In order to avoid that happening to me, I wanted to have a large retail component, and I thought there was a market for it here.”

Gill’s latest undertaking is his own line of personal care products. Gill worked with a chemist for three years to develop Aidan Gill for Men shave cream, shampoo and after-shave balm.

Looking back on his career, Gill is careful to avoid taking too much credit for his success.

“People think they make their luck. You don’t make your own luck. It happens to you and it’s a mystery. A lot of stuff I really don’t understand. I just know it happens. You do it every day and you get there and 50 years later, you look and go, ‘Well, that wasn’t too bad.’”