

North Minneapolis barber cuts through vaccine hesitancy with 'Shots at the Shop'

MINNEAPOLIS — There's been a buzz about the recent promotion offered by Wilson's Image Barbers in North Minneapolis.

"We're offering 50% off haircuts for anybody that receives the COVID-19 vaccine," said owner Teto Wilson.

Wilson is also eliminating 100% of excuses for customers who may be unvaccinated, by bringing the required shots directly to his shop at Penn and Broadway. The effort is part of the Biden Administration's "Shots and the Shop" happening nationwide this summer.

"If half off a haircut can help convince you, then have at it," he said.

And if it takes a little more convincing, community partners from the StairStep Foundation, His Works United and Black Nurses Rock are all spending time on the street outside the shop, helping engage the unvaccinated public and helping get them signed up for a shot.

"We're reaching that part of the population that's skeptical," said Mekka Clark with the StairStep Foundation. "So we're just here to have that face to face conversation with people and answer any questions they may have about getting vaccinated."

It's an approach that will take patience, but it appears to be having an impact over time. After averaging just four vaccinations a day last Friday and Saturday, the shop matched that number in just two hours this Friday.

"I saw it on his social media, reached out to him and I'm like, 'This is great. I'm going to come through and get my vaccine,'" said Leslie Redmond, a former director of the NAACP Minneapolis, who got her first dose of the Pfizer vaccine at the shop on Friday.

Redmond, who recovered from COVID last summer, says she was hesitant until recently. She's not alone. According to MDH, just 47% of Black Minnesotans 15 and older are fully vaccinated, compared to 61% of white Minnesotans.

"Like many African Americans, I think there is some hesitation with trusting vaccines," Redmond said. "However, I've seen so many successful (vaccination) cases and, secondly, I realized that it wasn't just about me. Just like combating racism and white supremacy, combating COVID-19 is going to take all of us. Even though I had COVID-19 last summer, this wasn't about me specifically, this was about all of humanity."

Wilson has been careful not to judge the skeptics because he was there once too.

"I think it just depends on people's experiences," Wilson said. "I said, 'No way, I'm not going to get it,' but there is a doctor who is involved with this project here and he kept coming in, giving me the facts and giving me the information; so I just changed my mind."

That decision would later become pivotal. The barber who works next to him was also skeptical, but changed his mind after seeing how Wilson had fared.

"All I can do is encourage people," Wilson said. "At this point, any death from COVID is avoidable, so come and get your vaccine."

The Shots at the Shop program will continue at Wilson's Image each Friday and Saturday through Aug. 21. It's part of a national initiative and more Minnesota barbershops are expected to join in the coming weeks.