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## To find talent, this new Denver barbershop looked in a unique place

The shop's founder is the former president of the Denver-born Floyd's Barbershop franchise.



R&R Head Labs, a new Denver barbershop that employs formerly incarcerated people, opened the week of Feb. 19.

ALEX DEAN CREATIVE



By Analisa Romano – Reporter, Denver Business Journal  
Feb 29, 2024

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James Repenning has a Hollywood movie producer to thank for giving him the idea that transformed into his new Denver business.

After Repenning left his role as president of the Denver-born Floyd's Barbershop franchise, he received a Facebook message from Scott Budnick, the producer behind movies like "The Hangover" and "War Dogs." Budnick needed help getting people from California's prison system connected with barber licensures for his nonprofit.

Working with Budnick, Repenning quickly realized that the nation's prison systems were pools of untapped talent. Many prisons train inmates to work in-house, while other inmates get informal experience working with hair, Repenning said.



Image: R&R Head Labs

James Repenning, founder of R&R Head Labs.

R&R HEAD LABS

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"If you think about it, any prison on the planet has hair that's growing," he said. "That turned into this idea of, 'Wait – there's some awesome barbers with tons of experience ... There's a business here. I could build around people that want to work hard and want to show you what they're capable of.'"

That business is now R&R Head Labs, a new barbershop at the corner of East Colfax Avenue and York Street that employs formerly incarcerated people. The shop opened last week with nine employees, all of whom have at least five years of experience.

The flagship location on East Colfax struck the perfect balance between a well-traveled, safe-feeling space and a grittier edge, Repenning said. It also matches the aesthetic of the shop's brand, which incorporates a mural commissioned by graffiti artist TukeOne and sells custom-designed clothing.



Interior of R&R Head Labs

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Repenning said his brand intentionally mirrors the culture often associated with barbers, whom he calls "creative people who cut hair."

There is also some stigma that accompanies people who are out of the prison system, which prompted discussions about aesthetics early on in the process, Repenning said. A creative space with lots of art and light set the tone for a welcoming atmosphere.

Repenning is already on the lookout for another Denver metro location and is working with his networks in Boston, Chicago and New York for shops even further down the line.

With those aspirations comes a hyper-focus on culture, which Repenning said he hopes to achieve by promoting leaders of the next shops from within. His insistence on culture stems in part from his time at Floyd's, which Repenning said felt at times disconnected.



R&R Head Labs at 2260 East York Street

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"I don't mean that in a bad way. It's just a growing pain," he said. Floyd's now has over 125 barbershops nationwide, according to the company's website.

"Because our culture is so core to what we do, I'm very aware of that and it has to be why people take this job and why they stay here," Repenning said.

To continue filling barber roles at R&R, Repenning said he works with a variety of nonprofits, the U.S. Department of Corrections and an advisory council made up of formerly incarcerated people who can recommend job candidates through their networks.

Repenning traces his own history working with people out of the prison system back to when he managed part of his family's recycling business at 22 years old. After a promising interview with a job candidate, he learned that the candidate had spent the last 20 years in prison.

"Fortunately, I had met him and gotten to like him first," Repenning said. He stuck with the hire and the two are still friends today.

R&R is short for "Rabbit Rabbit," a concept that Repenning said he derived from mythology that embraces good luck and fortune.

"I just love that idea of an undertone of positivity," he said. "It's just sort of a good vibe that is built into everything we do and into our branding."