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Friday, July 25, 2008

Making the cut

Sutton hairdresser to appear on Style Networks 'Split Ends'

By Nancy Sheehan TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

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Local stylist Christian Rea is facing a hair-raising challenge.

Rea, of Sutton, has been chosen to appear on the Style Network show "Split Ends." The hit series looks at what happens when two very different hairstylists swap shops and discover what it's really like to cut with each other's scissors. Rea, who works at the Jeffrey Robert Salon at 1 Kelley Square, was whisked away Wednesday to a salon the exact location of which the network will not disclose until closer to the episode air date of Nov. 22. We hear, however, that it is somewhere in Kentucky.

On Tuesday, crews descended on the Jeffrey Robert Salon to tape some background segments while Rea, 26, was still in town. While Christian will be the local star of the episode, Rea does have an alter ego who just might upstage him: Crystal. In addition to being a top stylist, Rea is a female impersonator who creates the tres chic Crystal with deft makeup application, stylish clothes and a wig.

How will the drag queen from Massachusetts fare in Kentucky?

"She's strong," salon co-worker A.J. Leto said. "Believe me, she'll be just fine."

It might be Rea's girlish side that got him his TV gig in the first place.

Hoping to land a spot on the show, Rea sent in a video-taped audition in which he talked a bit about himself and



Christian Rea of Sutton, left, in his "Crystal" persona, works on the hair of Tracey Cowden of Worcester at the Jeffrey Robert Salon in Worcester as a TV crew films. (T&G Staff/MARK C. IDE)

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why he wanted to televise his talents.

"The first video I did was not in drag and they called me back and said, 'We love your personality but we want to see you in drag,' " he said. That prospect called for a tête-à-tête with salon owner Jeff Kilcoyne.

"I sat down with Jeff and said, 'What can we do that would set me apart from everybody else?' And he said, 'Why don't you do it in drag?' I was, like, I don't know if that's how I want to go down in history, as the hairdresser who did "Split Ends" in drag.' " Show producers also encouraged Rea to show both sides of his expansive personality. "So I made a video of me in drag and I think that's what actually won them over," he said.

There was a five-month wait, however, during which he heard nothing at all.

"With anything in life, if you put too much emphasis on something and it doesn't happen then you let yourself down," he said. "I was, like, if it happens it happens and after a while I kind of forgot about it. Then just the other day somebody asked me about it. I said 'I don't think it's going to happen' and then they called and said 'We're going to be there Tuesday.' "

The shooting started at Rea's home in Sutton, where he was filmed getting up, drinking coffee out on his deck and putting Crystal's makeup on, which is a whole production unto itself. It was mid-afternoon before she was ready to make her entrance at the salon, where several clients were waiting.

Rea's clients had been told about the taping and several volunteered to take part. One of them is Mary Ellen Moore of Clinton, a retired school teacher who looks much younger than her 59 years.

"I attribute it all to Christian," she said. "I had this bob and my hair was dark brown and he did a complete makeover. He was, like, 'Honey you're going to be hot. Where you going tonight?'"

His big personality probably will play well on TV. When asked Tuesday how he was holding up under all the tele-attention, Rea, as Crystal, gave this cheeky reply: "I'm great. Everything is easy, breezy, beautiful, Cover Girl. I wish I could be a model."

He has a serious side as well.

"He's very ambitious. He works very hard," a friend, Rich McNally of Worcester, said. "He's self made; he wants to get ahead. He's motivated. You can give everybody resources but you can't give somebody driving ambition. That's something that comes from within and that's what he has."

A little flexibility would come in handy as a character trait, too. Recent "Split Ends" episodes included a no-nonsense, no-patience hairstylist from Philadelphia trading salons with the owner of a sleepy antique store/barbershop in rural Washington

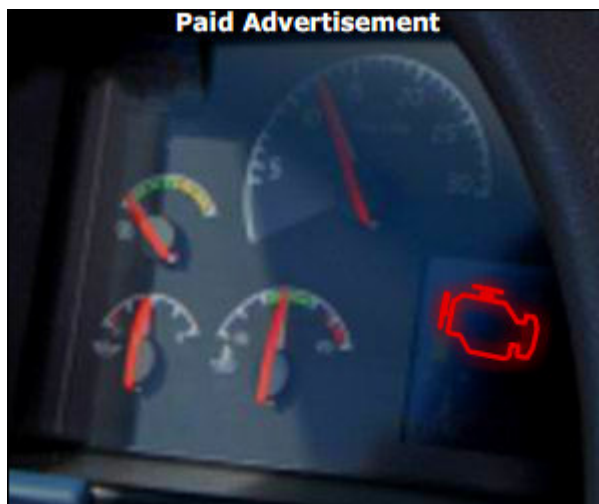


Christian Rea is being taped for the television show "Split Ends," which appears on the Style Network.

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state and a tattooed, punk-rock hairstylist from Boston swapping with a prissy, uptight salon owner from Pasadena.

"Our show, like most swap shows, is sort of a fish-out-of-water kind of scenario," said Josh Oliver, producer for the production company shooting at Jeffrey Robert. "These people are chosen for their differences and we like to put them in an environment to see how people meld and blend with other people in different walks of life, with different points of view, different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds."

For Oliver, Worcester is an environment not so different from his hometown of Fort Collins, Colo.

"I'm from a town of a similar population, about 180,000 people," he said. "So it seems a lot like Fort Collins that, even though it's a pretty good size, it feels like a small town — except that people here talk kind of weird, but they're cool."

Another thing Oliver thinks is cool: the graceful old buildings Worcester has instead of the featureless box-like structures much of the rest of the country is made of. Kilcoyne has converted an old industrial building into a trendy salon that is a high point of the city's revitalized Canal District.

"We're really impressed by the architecture, the fact that this is an old building that's been remodeled or the interior and preserved on the exterior," Oliver said. "I understand that it used to be an old factory. There are two floors and a spa upstairs. It's really impressive."

Although Rea has gone off to his new assignment, taping is slated to continue at Jeffrey Robert through tomorrow as his TV replacement from Kentucky settles in to the Worcester scene. Challenging as Rea's new environment may be for him, we can only imagine he's a bit more relaxed than he was before his destination was revealed to him.

"I think he's a little nervous so we're trying to keep him calm," Oliver said, before Rea was let in on the plans. "I think he'll probably relax a bit more when he finds out where he's going but right now we've kind of got him dangling on a string."

Rea agreed that, indeed, the waiting is the hardest part.

"That's the only part that's nerve-racking because God only knows where they're going to send me," he said Tuesday.

"But all in all, I think it's great opportunity. It brings some exposure to Worcester, especially to the Canal District, and with everyone working to revive the area, if I can help shine a spotlight on it, that's great."



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