

Nick Nicola, AKA “The Barber of East Fourth Street”

By Rev Dale Whitney

Nick Nicola, aka “The Barber of East Fourth Street,” was born into a Greek-heritage family on the Eastern Mediterranean island of Cyprus in 1946, and has been the “master barber” at Spiro’s Barber Shop since April 1977.

When he was very young, Nick used to help out at his uncle’s nearby barber shop by sweeping the floor at the end of the day, as well as applying cologne and powder to customers after they had received their shaves, haircuts, and scalp massages. By the time Nick was 13, his uncle had already taught him most of the other “tricks of the trade” of being a barber. Once when Nick made a pretty bad mistake, his uncle suddenly slapped him on the cheek and said: “Do it right or don’t do it at all!” (Presumably in appropriately emphatic Greek!)

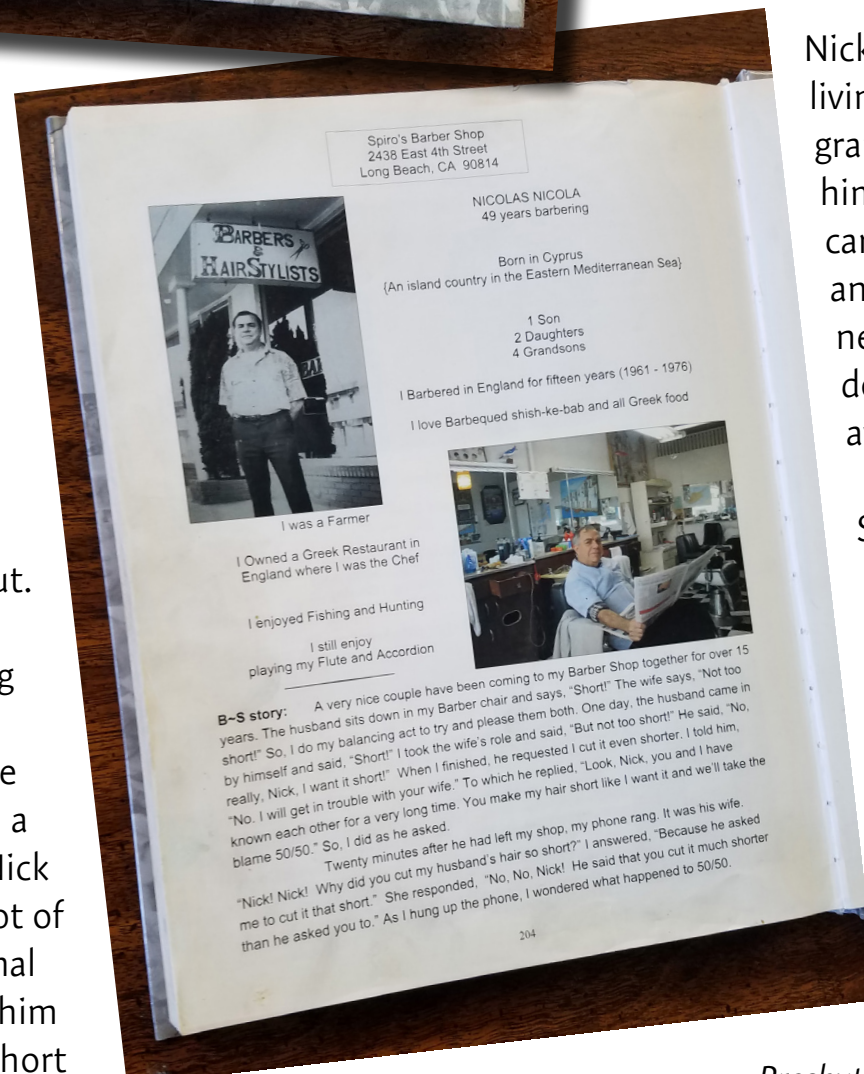
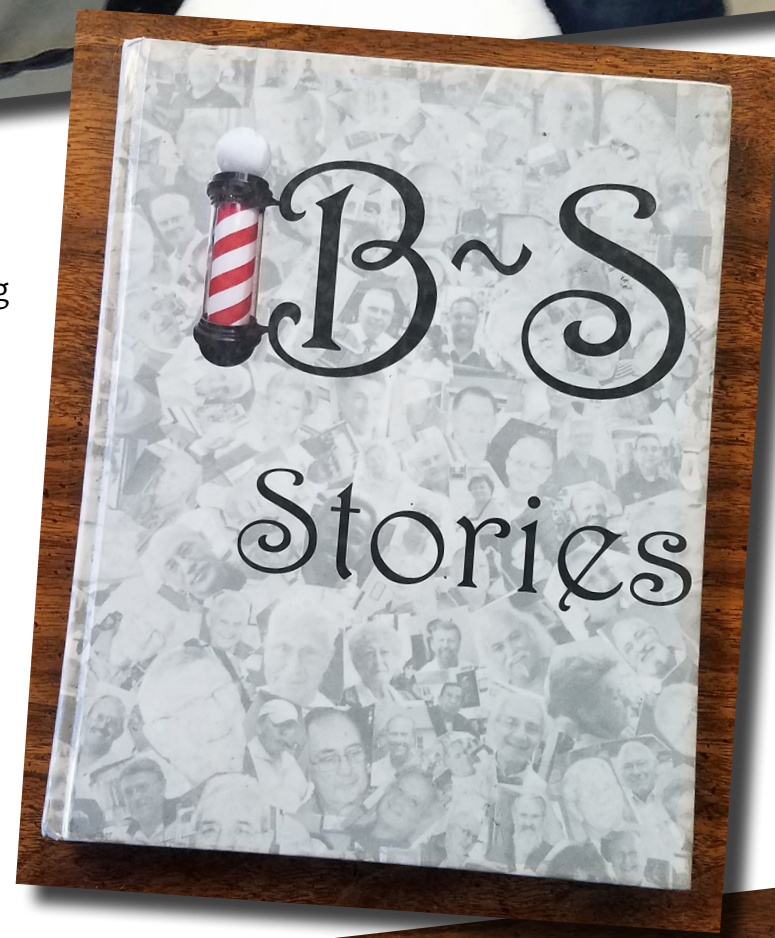
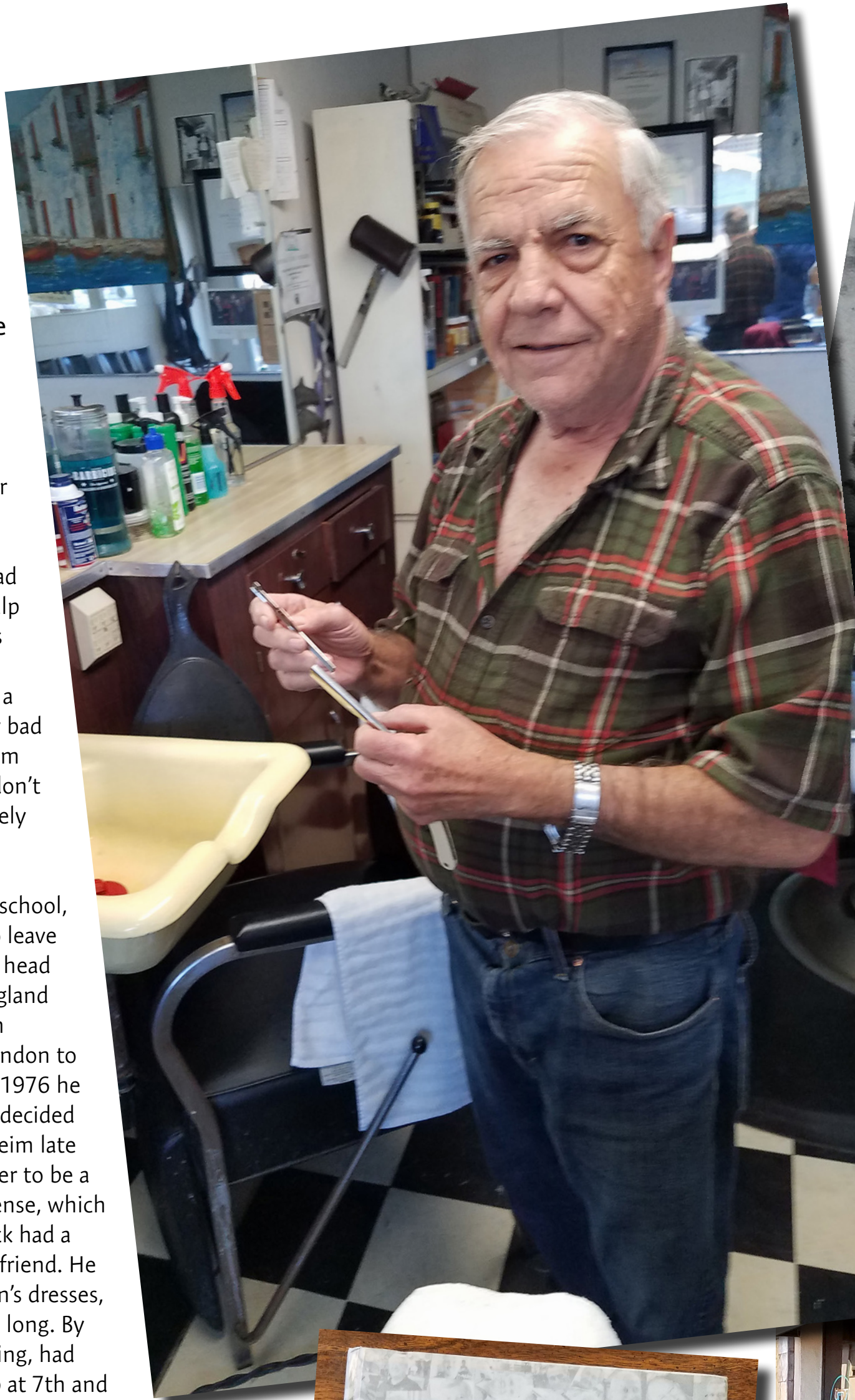
Nick was able to finish 2 years of high school, but when he was 15 1/2 he decided to leave the fairly isolated island of Cyprus and head for a big city somewhere. He chose England as his destination and ended up first in Birmingham and then eventually in London to set up shop as a barber. From 1961 to 1976 he toiled in England, but by 1976 he had decided to move further west, arriving in Anaheim late that same year only to find that in order to be a barber in the U.S. he had to have a license, which required some supervised training. Nick had a place to stay in Anaheim with a Greek friend. He got a job in Los Angeles making women’s dresses, but he did not have to do that for very long. By early 1977 he had completed his training, had done apprentice work at a barber shop at 7th and Alvarado in Los Angeles, and received his license.

Nick then came into some good luck: through his connections in the local Greek community he heard about a Greek barber wanting to sell his business at 2438 E. 4th Street in Long Beach. By April 1977, that shop and all its equipment belonged to Nick, and he’s been there ever since.

After 44 years both serving our community and listening to its citizens, I knew Nick MUST have a few stories to tell. Hence the following selection of anecdotes:

- One of Nick’s customers was a Latino professor at CSULB who had very long hair. Interestingly, each and every time he came in, his wife came with him and would proceed to dictate “exactly and precisely” how the professor’s hair should be cut. One day the man came in alone and asked Nick to cut his hair quite a bit shorter than before. Nick was nervous about this, sensing that there might be real trouble. The man said, “Keep cutting, and we will share the guilt!” About 20 minutes later the man’s wife called, screaming into the phone about the short haircut and blaming it all on Nick, who kept telling her “It will grow back out.” The man came back many more times for his haircuts, but Nick was never able to figure out how the guilt was shared 50/50 like the man had offered, since Nick had gotten all the blame!

- “Bill” was a steady customer for 25 years who always brought his small white poodle with him on haircut day. Bill always parked his car right in front of the shop but also always left the dog in the car during his haircut. The dog was so devoted that he could be seen through the barber shop window looking right at his owner throughout the haircut, never looking to either side. Then one day the man arrived without the dog. When Nick asked where the dog was, the man stated crying uncontrollably. The man said he loved the dog so much that he was going to spend \$400 on a special funeral for the dog and have it buried in a pet cemetery. When Nick said he often went hunting out in Riverside County where there was a lot of open space and suggested taking the dog’s body out there for an “informal burial” that would save the \$400, the man was greatly offended and let him know. The man was evidently truly heartbroken; he passed away just a short time after. Nick commented that he had seen many of his customers greatly ruing the loss of both their dogs and their wives. I had enough delicacy to not ask him which type of losses seemed greater to the men.



Nick is now 75 and happily married with three grown children living in Seattle, Santa Barbara, and Corona with a total of four grandchildren. He and his wife live in Cerritos. When I asked him about the greatest lesson he had learned from his long career as a barber, he said, “Learn to respect every religion and every nationality because we all belong to the same God; never be jealous of people who seem to know more than you do. Grow closer to them so you can learn from them. Don’t avoid them but make friends of them!”

Spiro’s Barber Shop is located at 2438 East 4th Street, between Wisconsin and Junipero. For the current hours of operation, call 562-433-9106. The hours are somewhat flexible.

Rev. Dale Whitney was born in Nebraska during WWII and came to California with his father, who was an osteopathic physician, and the rest of their family in 1943. He attended elementary school in the LA area, then junior high and high school in Santa Barbara. He attended Pomona College and San Francisco Theological Seminary and was ordained in 1970 as a Presbyterian minister. He was pastor of Geneva Presbyterian Church in Long Beach from 1971 to 1989 and then was manager of the Harbor Area Farmers’ Markets, a project of the South Coast Interfaith Council, from 1989 to 2016.