Untangling the Roots of Hair Identity

By Lydia Gafford & Annie Jones
DESIGN | Diane Guo, Celine Huang & Alice Xu
PHOTOS | Sarah Clark

Adonai Ross loves talking about her hair.

We're sitting on couches on the second floor of the Quad when I ask her how she feels about discussing her locks.

"I love talking about my hair because, for me, it was a journey," said Ross, a junior.

Like other Black students, Ross struggled to form a positive relationship with her hair. Growing up in predominantly white institutions can make hair unintentionally alienating.

"I used to hate my hair with a passion," junior Arianna Doss said. "I wanted my hair like everyone else's."

Ross asked her parents if she could straighten her hair when she was younger, but her mother refused.

"I wanted something that was easier to manage," Ross said. "But she told me to embrace [my] curls."

Growing up, Doss became attuned to the differences in hair maintenance compared to her white classmates. When she was in Lower School at Annunciation Orthodox School, she told her classmates that she only washed her hair once a week, to which they replied, "Oh my gosh, it must be so dirty."

THE PRICE OF BEAUTY

In 2018, consumers spent $2.51 billion on Black hair care products, according to Essence magazine, and anyone who has ever gone shopping for these products knows that they are often locked in anti-theft display cabinets. Not to mention, curly hair products are generally more expensive.

ADONAI ROSS

Planet Curls is one of the most popular hair salons in Houston for people with curls, with women's haircuts costing between $100 and $120. As they work, stylists provide a long list of products and chemicals that their clients should either use or avoid.

Gerri Curtis, owner and founder of the salon, said in a phone interview that clients hoping to transition to their natural hair need to avoid sulfates, parabens, silicones and alcohols, which are common in hair products.

"You have to go for the gusto," Curtis said. "Put your old hair tools in the attic so you're not tempted to straighten your hair again."

Since relaxers were created in 1909 by Garrett Morgan, Black Americans have used them to straighten their hair. Ross says that her great-grandmother used to complain that her daughter's hair was "nappy," so she used relaxers. Ross's grandmother had similar complaints about her daughters, so they too used relaxers.

Ross has been wearing her hair naturally since ninth grade and recently helped her grandmother transition to natural hair. Ross discovered that the supposed nappiness of her grandmother's hair had been greatly exaggerated. "It was so soft, with looser curls than mine," Ross said.

Ross worries that her aunt, who still uses relaxers to straighten her hair, has been conditioned to believe that natural hair is unattractive: "In the back of her head she still feels like, 'my hair is so nappy, my hair is so bad; I don't have good hair.'"

Curtis estimates that 80% of her clients have had their hair relaxed.

"Even people with looser curls have straightened them," Curtis said. "In the African American community, that's just what they do. Their parents tell them to do it; it's gone on for generations."

Relaxers, which Curtis describes as "burning" the hair, can cause hair loss, inhibit growth and make hair more brittle and breakable. "We're in it for the health of the natural hair," she said. "Every journey transitioning from relaxed to natural hair happens when you say, 'I'm gonna embrace who I am.' To embrace your natural hair is something that everyone should do."

THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

Dayton Voorhees started growing his hair long in second grade until his homeroom teacher instructed him to cut it. At the time, male students were required to cut their hair when it reached their collars.

Although Voorhees wanted his hair longer, he kept getting it cut until one day he decided "this is a stupid rule" and sent a handwritten letter to then-Head of School Mark Desjardins.

After receiving no response from administrators, Voorhees continued to send letters over the next two years. In fourth grade, Voorhees received a handwritten letter from Desjardins informing him that the rule was going to be changed.

Over the years, Voorhees has received some intrusive comments.

"I've had some friends tell me they liked my hair better short, or it made me look like a girl," Voorhees said. "I actually had one kid at camp try to convince me I was a girl, but I knew that I liked it long and eventually people would grow up and stop teasing me."

Male students can now wear their hair as long as they wish, but there are still hairstyles that the School deems inappropriate. According to the Upper School Student and Parent Handbook, "only naturally occurring hair color is permitted" and male students must be clean-shaven.

Noelle Alexander dyed her hair bright blue toward the end of her sophomore year, but during her first week back junior year she was told to dye it back to a natural color.

"I wanted to do something fun, make it a little unique," Alexander said. "That was the first time dyeing it, and I fully bleached my hair."

Since Alexander has been straightening her naturally brown hair for years, she wanted to do something else that "showed personality."

"For a lot of women, your hair is something pretty personal," she said. "I was getting too attached to my hair as it was. I figured that the easiest way to get it done with was to completely change it."

Alexander understands that the School has the right to restrict hair colors, but she misses her short-lived Blue Period.

"I don't think there should be a rule about hair when we already have uniforms," she said. "When it was blue, I had some fun doing cute hairstyles, but I'm just not excited by my hair anymore."

PERFECT AS YOU ARE MADE

Eden Anne Bauer, a senior, always wears her hair in a side braid that reaches her hips. Her mother's side of the family is Sikh, a religion that asks adherents not to cut their hair.

"It symbolizes that you're perfect as you are made," Bauer said. "You don't need to change anything about yourself."

Bauer maintains her long hair to honor her heritage and express solidarity with other Sikhs.

"Men in Sikhism wear turbans to protect their long hair, so they face a lot of discrimination when they come to the U.S.," Bauer said. "I like to keep my hair long to keep a connection to that part of me; it makes me feel closer to my family."

While Bauer occasionally trims her hair, she has never cut off a significant amount.

"It's incredible to think I've had this hair with me my whole life," she said. "Every single morning I wake up and I brush and braid my hair, so it's nice having that routine. I also just think it's pretty."

EDEN ANNE BAUER

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

Peer pressure often figures into the relationship between teenagers and their hair, especially for Black students. Classmates have encouraged Ross and Doss to get their hair straightened. But they warned against commenting on teens' hairstyle changes.

DAYTON VOORHEES

"Saying you like my hair better when I wear it a certain way is not the compliment you think it is," Doss said.

Ross once straightened her hair for a school function, and a classmate commented that boys would find her more attractive if she kept it that way. She does not straighten her hair anymore "because that opens the door to those kinds of conversations."

"They told me that if I were to change a couple things about my appearance and straighten my hair, then all the guys would actually start liking me," Ross said.

Attending a predominantly white high school made Howard University student Cameryn Burnette ('18) feel isolated and judged for her hair and race.

"I always felt like I was the Black Girl," Burnette said. "Now that I'm not at SJS, I do feel more freedom to try different hairstyles because I know I won't face any judgment or weird looks."

In November 2016, Burnette told the Review ("Splitting Hairs") that when she wore her natural hair at school she received negative comments.

"One thing about being Black at SJS was that I always felt so scrutinized for every single little action," Burnette said. "I don't blame the white kids and adults around me for acting like that because we had such limited exposure to Black culture and Black people."

Experiences of isolation ultimately pushed Burnette to attend Howard, a Historically Black University in Washington, D.C.

"If I really wanted to discover myself and experience life unhindered by the American concept of race, I needed to spend time in an environment where my race was not the first thing people notice," Burnette said.

Members of the African-American Affinity Group supported Burnette during her time at St. John's and helped her realize she wanted to attend Howard.

"[AAAG] couldn't shield me from racism that I faced in the classroom, but it did give me a space to vent frustrations and feel heard and seen," Burnette said.

Kennedy Black, president of AAAG, has always worn her natural hair in Upper School. In Middle School, she went through a period of "trying to conform," but she is now comfortable enough to wear her hair in a variety of ways. At the time of her interview, she sported colorful box braids.

"For the longest time, I wanted my mom to press my hair," Black said. "I would beg her to get a perm. But I'm really glad that she wouldn't let me get one because I would have regretted it."

Black said that a faculty member once complimented her hair, and then came up to her and touched it without asking.

Touching someone's hair without permission is always inappropriate.

"I'm not a petting zoo," Adonai Ross said.

Before she came to St. John's in high school, Arianna Doss struggled with feelings of isolation at AOS because no one in her grade had hair similar to hers. Today, she finds Black role models on social media.

"Following empowering people on Instagram and social media helped me realize that I do like my hair," Doss said.

Ross also turns to AAAG for a confidence boost. She recalls freshman year as the point when she "was able to feel comfortable" wearing her natural hair to school.

Burnette attributes her strong relationship with her hair to her family's support.

"It was always important to my parents and extended family for the children to have positive imagery around them that celebrated all Black skin and Black hair," Burnette said. "I never felt like I needed to change my hair to be beautiful."

GUEST COMMENTARY

Knot My Style: A Student's Brush with Hair Conformity

By Arianna Doss

The relationship I have with my hair has always been touchy.

As a little kid, I used to complain about the tangles, pain, and maintenance, but after a series of rude comments, I began to truly resent my hair.

In first grade, I took classes at Houston Ballet, and one class in particular still stands out nine years later. My mom and I got up early so she could do my bun for that day's ballet class.

Like most weekday mornings, I sat on an oversized bear, suffered from butt cramps and fatigue, and complained about my hair's endless knots. By the time I arrived at dance nine hours later, my bun was messy and frizzy, but it got the job done.

As I stood in a straight line with all the other little ballerinas, the instructor's eyes lingered in my general direction for an uncomfortable amount of time. Finally, she asked, "Who did your hair?"

I looked to my right and left, trying to figure out who she was talking to when she demanded again, "You! Who did your hair for class today?"

I recognized that I was the "you" she was addressing, and in an unassuming voice, I replied: "My mom."

The dance instructor appeared taken aback before forcefully responding, "Tell her to do it better next time."

This encounter sowed seeds of doubt about how the public perceived my hair. From then on, a voice in the back of my mind always whispered that I needed to straighten my hair. Straight equaled pretty. I begged my mom for permanently straight hair; she understandably said no. Regardless of the damage caused by texturizers and relaxers, an athlete living in Houston's constant humidity cannot realistically maintain the style, so it did not make sense to straighten my hair in the first place.

As I grew older, I learned more about how and why my hair differed from most of the people around me, but I still looked forward to the couple of times each year when there was low humidity and no sports to play so I could rock straight hair– the style that always yielded the most compliments.

In 8th grade, my mom and I brainstormed different hairstyles for my final middle school yearbook photo. I wanted straight hair, which adhered to Eurocentric beauty standards. At the hair salon, I waited as two other Black teens, clearly friends, got their hair styled. We spoke a little, and I found out that both girls were upperclassmen at St. John's. They too were getting their hair straightened for school pictures.

I wish I had not allowed myself to feel so pressured to straighten my hair. It was not until I got to high school–where I was not the sole Black woman in my grade–that I even considered favoring any other styles. It took me years to find role models who embodied confidence with their natural hair. I have formed a much more appreciative relationship with the curly strands growing out of my head, and I know now that all hair is truly beautiful. I just wish it had not taken me quite so much time to come to this conclusion.