

MY CROWN IS PROFESSIONAL: WEARING NATURAL HAIR IN THE COURTROOM



I never knew what my hair looked like without chemicals. Every six weeks, my mom took me to the hair salon to have my hair relaxed because if you had kinky or non-straight hair, you would be seen as unkept. Generally, I was always the only African-American female in my classes and I didn't want to stand out any more than I already did. My belief that I had to conform to European beauty standards made me extremely insecure about my hair.

This insecurity continued throughout my life even when I began my first job after law school as a prosecutor at the Wake County District Attorney's Office. As the only African-American female out of 45 attorneys, I wanted to appear as "professional" as I could and dole out justice fairly and efficiently without being seen as a distraction.

It wasn't until I began to work at the North Carolina Attorney General's Office, surrounded by other African-American female lawyers who wore their hair in a variety of styles such as afros, locs, and braids that I realized that their hair was professional too. It was through this representation that I realized my inferiority complex didn't make sense. So on November 11, 2014, I "big chopped" (meaning I cut all of my relaxed hair off) and wore my hair in a short, blonde afro. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was finally free to embrace my natural beauty--my crown.

Since returning to the courthouse as a district court judge, I have been intentional in wearing my hair in different styles monthly from crotchets, braids, cornrows, faux locs, passion twists and everything in between. While I no longer struggle with hair insecurity, I've been approached while on the bench and told that my hair looks better straight than kinky curly. We also have implicit biases, but comments such as these are distracting, hurtful, and fuel the self-consciousness that African-American women already face in accepting who we are while suffering stigmatization of underrepresentation, oversexualization and imposter syndrome.

"I made the decision to stop chemically relaxing my hair several years ago. In order to ease my transition period, I wore a lot of protective styles such as Senegalese twists, faux locs and curly crochet styles. I recall one situation years ago when I had gotten my hair done a few weeks prior but I had a jury trial coming up. I didn't want to take out my protective style because: 1) I could get several more weeks out of the hairstyle and 2) It was not an inexpensive hairstyle. However, I was also concerned about how a jury in a rural area would respond to a black woman with natural hair. I was very conflicted because I felt that I had a duty to represent my client (the State of North Carolina) in the most effective way I knew how. I had spent countless hours preparing for this case to be tried but I didn't want all of my preparation to go to waste because some jury members were distracted by my hair or deemed it unprofessional. I also felt like I had a duty to be true to myself and not allow the potential prejudices of others to dictate how I would present and carry myself. My dilemma was compounded by knowledge that a male in my office had an unfavorable jury verdict and when the jury was polled afterwards, one of the issues that came up was how distracting his hair was. I did not want a repeat of that situation. However, in the end, I decided to keep my protective style and try the case with my natural hair. It was a win-win because not only did I get the verdict I wanted for my client but this experience gave me the confidence to try more cases in front of a jury while donning my natural hair."



"I first decided to go natural 10 years ago. To be more specific, I was studying for the Bar Exam. I was hesitant because I hadn't entered the legal profession yet and didn't necessarily know how it would be perceived. I also didn't know what it would "look like." This profession can be very judgmental when you are female and even more so when you are a woman of color. I was concerned I would be judged before I even opened my mouth. Looking back it's crazy how I even allowed that to affect what naturally grows from my crown (all puns intended). Ultimately I am happy I decided to go natural."

"I had so many concerns about going natural such as: 1) Too much commentary in professional settings/court about my hair. I once had a judge call me out in court about changing my hair (I had crotchets), and I was so embarrassed. Natural hair is often labeled unprofessional; 2) natural hair makes others think you are militant, especially when wearing afros; 3) I had a hard time adjusting to seeing myself as pretty without straight hair; 4) Since I am currently looking for work, I felt comfortable transitioning to natural. That way, when I start a new position they will meet me with natural hair. Honestly, I



don't know if I would have had the courage to do it while employed."

"Aside from the concern that I felt caring for natural hair would be more time consuming than my relaxed hair, my primary concern was the credibility issues I would encounter as a lawyer. I was already practicing in rural, western NC, where, as a young black female attorney I had already encountered blatant racism and was the target of microaggressions (although I didn't know the term at the time). Quite frankly, I was concerned about whether I had the time or energy to draw more attention to myself. Who wants to deal with unnecessary looks and hushed comments that come along with being a black professional? I wondered how clients would react and how judges may treat my clients based on my appearance. I know that my appearance had no bearing on my competency and ability to serve my

clients, but I had lived long enough to know that no matter how true that statement was, there were people who just couldn't grasp that understanding. By the time I came to Wake County (that also had its own shares of issues with inclusivity), I was more confident, although I still want to be mindful of how adjudicators would view my appearance in relationship to how they received my clients. I was representing some of the most vulnerable sects of our society who already had the cards stacked against them...I didn't want to add to it. Now I'm confident in my natural hair journey and wouldn't change it for the world!"

One common theme throughout these examples is the fear of retribution or discrimination due to our natural hair. This fear is not unfounded when there are several recent incidents of young children having their hair colored in with a sharpie or their locs cut off for a wrestling match. Discrimination whether explicit or implicit in regard to African American hair is a problem in the workplace, schools, and in our military. On July 3, 2019, California became the first state to pass the CROWN (Create a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair) Act which bans discrimination based on hair texture and style and specifically recognized that,



(a) The history of our nation is riddled with laws and societal norms that equated "blackness," and the associated physical traits, for example, dark skin, kinky and curly hair to a badge of inferiority, sometimes subject to separate and unequal treatment.

(b) This idea also permeated societal understanding of professionalism. Professionalism was, and still is, closely linked to European features and mannerisms, which entails that those who do not naturally fall into Eurocentric norms must alter their appearances, sometimes drastically and permanently, in order to be deemed professional. -CA SB 188

African American women having to worry about whether or not our hair will be seen as a distraction to a potential employer, judge, or juror is traumatic and no demographic throughout our profession should be penalized for something that naturally comes from their body. Natural



hair or our "crown" in all it's gravity-defying, versatile forms, is professional and no other attorney, client, defendant, victim, witness, or little girl should fear discrimination or the need to suppress their identity to meet someone else's beauty or professionalism standards. We must continue to work towards inclusivity in our profession because discrimination anywhere, in any setting, is intolerable. **WBF**

- Relaxed — A cream or lotion that chemically alters the texture of the hair by breaking down the hair strand to make the hair straight.
- Natural — Hair that has not been chemically treated or altered. The hair that grows naturally from one's scalp.
- Protective Styles — A hairstyle that is used to prevent the hair from becoming damaged due to exposure from damaging agents such as sun, heat, and constant manipulation. : Buns, Braids, Twists, Crotchets, Wigs, Weaves
- Crotchet Style — A form of protective styling which involves crotcheting synthetic hair extensions to a person's natural hair with a latch hook/crotchet needle and securing it with a knot.
- Wash and Go Style — When the hair is worn it its natural curl pattern, without manipulating the style with tools, braids or stretching.
- Blow-Out/Silk Press — A form of styling natural hair by using a blow dryer and/or flat-iron to temporarily straighten the hair.
- Big Chop — The act of cutting of all of the relaxed hair, leaving on the natural, unprocessed hair behind