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BEYOND HAIR: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WEARING LOCS

By yomag (<http://theyomag.com/index.php/author/yomag/>) / May 12, 2020

By Angelica Diaz

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Here are your choices: play the sport you love or keep your hair. Walk at your high school graduation or keep your hair. Many children of color are forced to make these choices in order to participate in everyday school activities.

According to a 2019 report by ABC news, Andrew Johnson, an African American student from New Jersey, was told by school administrators that he had to cut his dreadlocks in order to participate in his high school wrestling match. His dreadlocks had never been a problem before, but when it was demanded that he choose, he decided to cut his hair and continue with the wrestling match. The crowd watched the young athlete as a game official cut his dreadlocks.

More recently, a high school senior from Texas, DeAndre Arnold, was told by high school administrators that he could not walk into his high school graduation ceremony unless he cut his dreadlocks. He was told he needed to be in accordance with “dress code regulations” to participate in the ceremony. His dreadlocks had never been a problem until a recent policy change. He chose not to cut his dreadlocks.

Patrick Spearman, associate professor in educational foundations and director of the Africana Studies program at Youngstown State University, explained the cultural significance of dreadlocks within the African American community.

“Dreadlocks represent a hairstyle that is prominent among African Americans and Africans throughout the world,” Spearman said. “The hair is dreaded or matted together to resemble twists. The dreaded hair begins as a short afro with twists at the ends and can grow to long flowing dreads, depending on how long the hair is allowed to grow.”

Originating in Africa, dreadlocks were continued in the Americas due to the slave trade.

“Most Americans probably associate dreadlocks with the Rastafarian tradition and Jamaica and know very little about its connection to ancient Africa,” he said. “There are pictures of Africans with dreaded hair from ancient



Malik Montgomery, a Youngstown State University music recording major, poses with the city of Pittsburgh behind him.

/ Photo courtesy of Malik Montgomery

Africa. Some of the most recent connections to dreadlocks comes from the Rastafarian tradition. So, dreadlocks are as old as the continent of Africa.”

Spearman explained many who have dreadlocks feel a connection to their roots.

“This hairstyle allows individuals of African descent to connect to a past and a culture that was taken from them when they were stolen from Africa and brought to America,” he said.

Jaietta Jackson, senior lecturer in communication studies at YSU, said that her son Jibril has had locs, which are very similar to dreadlocks, since he was 2 years old.

“I locked his hair because I like the look of them, but the main reason is because his father has really long locs,” she said.

Jackson said she has told her son what the locs represent.

“In the Bible, Samson’s strength derived from his hair. His hair represents him and who he is, part of his father and his strength within,” she said.

Jackson said although Jibril has not experienced any teasing due to his locs, she has had a difficult time enrolling him in certain schools.

She explained that she really liked a Catholic school in her area and wanted to enroll Jibril there, but in order for her son to attend the school, Jackson was told by school administrators that Jibril would have to cut his locs.

“In their dress code, he could not have hair past his collar. I said fine, I would cut his locs shoulder length, or I could pull them up into a tight bun,” Jackson said.

“[Then] I was told this was unacceptable and also, that boys could not have long hanging hair, even to the collar.”

She opted to enroll him in a Jewish school where he didn’t have to cut his locs.

“He later went to a school for gifted students. Neither schools cared about the length of his hair. He now attends Austintown Middle [School] and hair is not a problem there,” she said.

Jibril, now 13, will soon be going to high school and wants to go to a specific Youngstown Catholic school, but he understands if he decides to enroll, he must cut his locs.

“He knows that he may have to cut his hair. So, we’ve had talks about that. He said he may be ready to cut his hair at that time. But we will see. After this school year, he has one more year to decide,” she said.

Jackson said one way we can prevent discrimination regarding natural hairstyles is by passing laws and even exposing members of the community to people who have locs.

“If maybe more people with locs were seen in the media, [it] could possibly help,” she said.

“People need to be exposed to people with locs, meaning talk to them, interact with them and realize it’s a beautiful hairstyle and has nothing to do with a person’s intellect or friendliness.”

Stories like Johnson's, Arnold's and Jackson's led federal lawmakers to propose the CROWN Act, which stands for "Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair." The CROWN Act was first introduced and named by Senator Holly Mitchell of California's 30th District in 2019. California went on to become the first U.S. state to ban natural hair discrimination.

According to the [CROWN Act's official campaign site](https://www.thecrownact.com/) (<https://www.thecrownact.com/>), passage of the CROWN Act at the federal level would ensure protection against discrimination based on hairstyles. "The CROWN Act ensures protection against discrimination based on hairstyles by extending statutory protection to hair texture and protective styles in the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA) and state Education Codes."

The act has also been made a law in states like New York, West Virginia and Florida. Recently, Reps. Juanita Brent and Paula Hicks-Hudson introduced the bill in Ohio.

Spearman said it is important for our community to learn the truth about dreadlocks and not the stereotypical myths.

"Young people should not be suspended, penalized, punished [or] fired for a hairstyle that represents the pride in the culture and background of a particular group of people," he said.

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