

Federal laws needed to stop hair discrimination against Black people



Kalandra Jones, the artist who created this work, now has her own studio. HENRIETTA WILDSMITH/THE TIMES

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Artist Kalandra Jones, 24, is one of the countless African Americans with stories chronicling discrimination and traumatic experiences associated with the texture and style of her hair.

"The place I worked previous to being hired on at a local business was predominantly Black and I was the only female. Everybody just kind of got along and we didn't have conversations about

hair other than to say, 'Hey your hair is looking good today.' It was just an accepted part of people and individuals."

Jones left the old job while transitioning from a tiny Afro to "locking" her hair.

Initially termed "dreadlocks, the unique, rope-like strands, made when the hair locks into itself, are referred to today, as "locs" or "locks."

"My hair was coiled, neat, and professional in my own opinion," Jones said. "But when I got hired on at this new place, they made me feel as though

I would not have the same treatment that I had at my old job, where it was just normal to have natural hair. No one really put a spotlight on it."

Jones was the only African American at her new job.

"My hair was getting quite long," Jones recalled. "After months of being there, I started to become more and more bothered by some of the comments and some of the treatment I was receiving due to my hair. I would get

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comments like, "Your hair is getting kind of long, when are you going to cut it?"

One co-worker described Jones's hair as little snakes and asked how often she washed her hair.

"That conversation led to me leaving the room altogether and then being labeled as difficult because I did not want to have that conversation," Jones said.

Like countless other African Americans who've had that question posed to them, Jones felt the question was out of line, inappropriate, and disrespectful.

"I was at this place for about two years," Jones said. "Right before the pandemic, I started to have less patience and less tolerance for the comments about my hair. I'm really proud of how I handled myself with the situations where I was trying to remain professional while at the same time, I needed to let it be known that what's happening and what's being said is not OK."

Jones received more comments and attention about her hair than a co-worker received for showing up routinely late for work.

During a meeting where discussions took place about how to make the workplace better, Jones brought up that personal comments should be avoided, particularly, comments about her hair.

"I mentioned that my hair has nothing to do with my work performance," Jones said. "I said my hair has nothing to do with anything outside of helping customers and doing my job and showing up on time. After saying that, I was called 'difficult,' and 'emotional,' and they tried to make it seem like myself and another co-worker were troublemakers for voicing our opinions."

Feeling bullied and mocked, Jones endured.

At some point during the pandemic, Jones was asked to take a break. The reason given was business was uncertain.

After staying home for two months and not hearing from her employer, Jones decided she had been fired.

"I took them the key," Jones said. "I had my mask on and when I went there, a new person had taken my place. I asked to speak with the manager. The manager comes out, I hand him the key and he acted as if he didn't know who I was even though I worked for him for two years."

Her experience on that job left her traumatized, Jones said.

"I'm recording quite a few nightmares that I have surrounding that work environment," Jones said. "To this day, I still have struggles just accepting my appearance and being comfortable around certain people because I just never know what they're going to think about me as a person and what assumptions they're going to make about me because of my hair."

Had she not been released from that job, Jones said she probably would have just struggled and dealt with it because obtaining employment is tough, let



Kalandra Kyelle Jones now has her own studio to showcase her artwork.
HENRIETTA WILDSMITH/THE TIMES

alone trying to obtain it during a pandemic.

After being released from that trauma-filled situation, Jones found a release through her art.

"I'm a painter," Jones said. "My studio is filled with paintings about my the Black experience and African American hair. I would never have grown as a painter to where I am now if I had stayed at that job."

The Big Chop movement

Afros, cornrows, and other natural hairstyles are worn as symbols of pride. However, the path through corporate America for African Americans requires conforming in the way of straightening naturally coiled hair.

"There's been years and years of brainwashing that comes from African Americans not being allowed to fully express themselves," Jones said.

Whether by hot comb or chemical treatment, "kinky" hair was made bone straight to come as close as possible to the Eurocentric idea of acceptance. Hair extensions and weaves were later added to the mix.

Somewhere around 2016, maybe sooner, the "Natural Hair Movement" started to take hold. Black women all around the globe were chopping off their chemically treated hair and embracing their natural hair, something regarded as a bold step for many.

"The chop was easy for me," Jones said. "It was dealing with my family members and friends who did not understand why I was doing this. I did my big chop the summer before my senior year in high school. Prior to that my stepmother would do my hair. She would perm it to braid it to make it easier to put weave in it. I hated it!"

You can find Jones these days, working in her studio at 1110 Texas Avenue in Shreveport.

Jones's story is one of too many that recounts the trauma associated with African American hair texture and styles.

African Americans, it seems, are routinely rejected from jobs, schools be-

cause of the texture and style of their hair.

Chronicled on social media, as well as mainstream news, horrifying stories are laid out over and over again.

One story features a young wrestler by the name of Andrew Johnson, who, on an unforgettable day in December 2019, was given an ultimatum by a white referee to either cut his locks or forfeit his match. A white woman using scissors cut them off.

Another story features a Texas teen, DeAndre Arnold, who faced suspension and other disciplinary action for refusing to cut his dreadlocks.

There really are too many to mention here. A quick Google search brings up an unbelievable number of the same kind of traumatizing story.

Legislating Black hair

Though existing federal law prohibits some forms of hair discrimination as a type of racial or national origin discrimination, some federal courts have narrowly construed those protections in a way that allows schools, workplaces, and federally funded institutions to discriminate against people of African descent who wear certain types of natural hairstyles, according to information on U.S. Sen. Cory Booker's (D-NJ), webpage.

Booker, on March 27, reintroduced his bill banning discrimination based on hair textures and hairstyles that are commonly associated with a particular

race or national origin.

Multiple states and local governments have passed laws that prohibit this kind of discrimination. California was the first state to do so in 2019 with the CROWN Act (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair).

Cofounded in 2019 by Dove, the National Urban League, Color of Change, and the Western Center on Law & Poverty, the CROWN Coalition is working to "create a respectful and open world for natural hair" through research, national campaigning and political lobbying, according to information from the CROWN Act website.

Passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2020, if approved by Senate and the president, the CROWN Act becomes law in all 50 states making it illegal to deny employment, educational opportunities based on hair texture, hairstyles like braids, locs, Bantu knots, and twists.

The New Orleans City Council passed the act in December last year.

Concerned about what's been taking place with the countless hair discrimination incidents, Louisiana State Rep. Tammy Phelps sponsored HB189 which prohibits race discrimination based on natural hairstyles such as locs, twists and braids.

"With the CROWN ACT and with our (former) Congressman Cedric Richmond from Louisiana introducing it in the (U.S.) House (of Representatives) in 2019 and the issue with Faith Fennidy was really disturbing," Phelps said of why she proposed the bill.

An 11-year-old New Orleans middle school student at the time, Faith Fennidy was removed from her class at Christ the King Parish School in Terrytown due to her braided hairstyle.

Phelps also had the young wrestler in mind when she proposed the bill, calling those events, "heart-wrenching."

"When the opportunity came, I wanted Louisiana to be at the forefront of something positive in trying to break those laws of discrimination if possible."

The bill is still in the House and has not been assigned to committee as yet. Phelps anticipates the bill will pass in the House and the Senate.

Black women, according to Forbes, are still 80% more likely than white women to feel the need to change their hair from its natural state to fit in, 30% more likely to be made aware of a formal workplace appearance policy, and 1.5 times more likely to be sent home from the workplace because of their hair.

