

# Thomas: Taming my natural, curly hair

Black History Month is over, but the struggles of the black girl continue daily. A central part of this struggle is what black girls do to keep our natural hair straight and acceptable to the public.

For many girls like me, it would not be exaggeration to say that I hated my hair. It was thick, unruly and natural.

I hated Sundays when my mother would divide my hair and comb it, and this feeling only got worse as I grew. She'd angrily rake through my hair for hours just to remove the kinks.

She knew that keeping my hair straight was important for me to conform to the 'norm' and to be considered 'acceptable.' The public loathed the natural, curly, black hair, and we had to make them happy.

My mom would use the 'creamy crack' relaxers to tame my hair. Without that, the semblance of straightness we got after long hours of combing would barely see Tuesday, especially in a humid temperature.

Forget that this relaxer may have some dangerous chemicals like alkali and ammonium thioglycolate—the lengths black girls go to be accepted!

I'd watch TV and idolize those who had straight hair as my mother combed vigorously. As much as I hated the Sunday routine, I still wanted to be like the people I saw on TV.

I played with my Barbies, admired their silky straight hair and wondered why I didn't have the same.

As time went by, my mother had to put in more hours at her factory job. That naturally took away our Sunday routines, and

my hair got little attention.

As a compromise, she took me to the salon to get a relaxer. And if you don't know already, relaxing your hair is different from the simple process of washing it.

A relaxed hair is no longer natural—you have to grow it again if you want that naturalness. I was only in third grade, but I fully understood the implication of that decision.

My first relaxer was a distinct experience, one I'll never forget. My mom warned me against scratching my scalp because the relaxer would burn it. I did not listen. The beautician sat me near the washing bowls, then layered the relaxer on my hair like a cake decorator would dollop frosting on a cake.

I had to wait for about 15 minutes, but by five minutes into the process my scalp began to burn. The smell was pungent. I ran to the beautician, who immediately started rinsing the relaxer out of my hair. I felt the water from the nozzle in my hair almost as hard as the tears coming down my face.

She gingerly blow-dried and styled my hair. At the end, my new hair was as long as anything I had never seen before.

The pain from that first process made it hard for me to have another relaxer until fifth grade. This time, too, I experienced a lot of pain. By seventh grade, I started wearing braids.

But my hair remained relaxed—unnatural—and I could remove the protective style and straighten it without complications.

By high school, I knew I needed a new look. Yet I also knew I'd never use relaxers again.

The braids were getting played out, so I started installing sew-in weaves. This is a type of hair extension where wefted hair is sewn onto small, tightly woven braids.

I bought a new weave from the hair store every few months for this process. Typically, I maintained the same center part with straight hair that ranged anywhere between 14 and 24 inches.

Each time my stepmom did my hair and ensured that my sew-ins revolved like clockwork. So I never had a weave that looked like it was struggling to maintain life.

I wore my straight weave until my sophomore year of college. By that time, I had graduated from buying weaves from the hair store to buying bundles from online vendors. Which cost a lot of money.

Eventually, maintaining the sew-in became too expensive, so I decided to take a break. My leave out was extremely heat damaged. That section remained straight while the rest of my hair reverted to curls.

These struggles with my hair and with keeping up appearances have cost me significantly. But I'm excited about my ability to accept my hair the way it is.

I won't lie and say that it doesn't intimidate me sometimes, yet I feel more comfortable with my natural hair. And though I still have a semi-straight section in the front, I love my curls. I realize that it's a distinct characteristic of being African-American.

I slick my edges up with my dynamic duo water and Eco styler gel. I found that the less heat I put in my hair, the more my hair began to grow and flourish. The feeling was like falling in love.

It's inspiring to hear prominent black women in our area talking about wearing their natural hairs. The support of the campus black community also makes it easier for us to accept and wear our curly, natural hairs.

Today, I honestly stopped caring about what other people would think of my curls or about what society considers the 'norm.' How could I truly love myself if I can't accept everything that I came with?

My hair, of course, is like the mane of a lion. It has a texture similar to curly ribbon and is as bold as the afros of the 70s. My hair is thick, unruly and natural, and I love it. I make no apologies for it. Now that's a Black History Month story for you.

*Amber Thomas is a fourth-year marketing and professional sales student.*