

I Am *Knot* My Hair

I remember dazing at this woman's hair as I stood behind her in the African beauty shop. Her long, bronze dreadlocks laid neatly in rows as they hung down the middle of her back. I was fascinated with her hair and at that moment I decided that one day I too would grow dreadlocks. Dreadlocks are a natural hairstyle in which the hair is twisted to look matted or ropelike. As a child I always admired natural hairstyles such as: dreadlocks, twists, afros, etc. I am a natural person who likes natural beauty and I believe hair weaves mask natural beauty. I never would have guessed it would have been such a challenge for me to grow dreadlocks of my own though. I grew up with a professional father who believed women looked better with extensions or straight hair roots in lieu of nappy, kinky, curly roots. My mother is a hair stylist so I figured she would understand my passion for how I desired to change my hair however, she only stressed how I should not change the way my hair appeared (long and straight) along with my father. My father played an active role in my life, but I lived with my mother so his opinion did not matter if I finally made the decision to grow dreadlocks. I can remember begging my mom to allow me to grow my natural hair out so I could grow dreadlocks when I was only about ten years old. Constantly, she would reiterate that I could when I turned eighteen years old because I would be a grown woman and could do whatever I wanted to then. She remained adamant about her decision. I was so upset because I wanted my dreadlocks as soon as possible.

I woke up one morning and decided I had had enough of wearing my hair the way everyone else wanted me to and decided I would cut it off once and for all. Late one night in July 2007, I told my mother that I could not wait until I was eighteen and pleaded for her to cut my hair. She glared at me and told me if I was serious about the whole "dreads thing" I would go in the bathroom and do it myself. I looked her directly in the eyes and said, "Okay, I'll show you

just how serious I am.” I took the stainless steel scissors and went into the bathroom and did what I had wanted to do for years. My hair was already sectioned into two-strand twists so it made it easier for me to cut. I took a deep breath as the words from India Arie’s song “I Am Not My Hair” floated in my mind: “Does the way I wear my hair make me a better person? Does the way I wear my hair make me a better friend?” After answering those questions in my head I based my decision accordingly...and started cutting. I felt like an Olympic runner who had crossed the finish line .2 seconds before her opponent and was overwhelmed with my accomplishment. About ten minutes later I came out of the bathroom holding eleven inches of dark brown and red hi-lighted, twisted hair in my hands. My sisters, brother, and mother looked at my now short, spiked hair in awe with dropped jaws. I asked my mother for a zip-loc bag and calmly laid the hair in the bag then handed it over to her. She asked me why was I giving her the bag, still wide-eyed. I explained that since she wanted the hair so badly that she could have it because I did not want it anymore. My mother was speechless with my attitude but knew I was telling the truth. Although, I *only* cut my hair that night it felt as if I released years of depression by making a decision to do what I had always dreamed of doing.

Luckily, I cut my hair during the summer so I had time to adjust to my new look before school started. When it was time for me to go back to school I asked my mother if she would start my dreadlocks for me. She refused and forced me to pay someone else to do my hair because she despised dreadlocks so. She had always wanted me to run for *Homecoming Queen* and she asked how would I wear my hair across the football field if I was elected into the top three candidates. As if “short” hair was not presentable. When I did get elected into the top three candidates for *Homecoming Queen* my mother sewed extensions on my hair because she refused to allow me to walk across the field with stubby dreadlocks. As I walked across the field in front

of the entire community I felt like a phony person with the extensions instead of my locks. After I won *Homecoming Queen* I wanted to ask my mother if my fellow student body voted for me because they admired my hair. Later, my mother realized how important the way I wore my *own* hair meant to me and had no choice but to accept my decision. She even started to maintain my dreadlocks for me because I proved to her that cutting my hair was not just a phase I was going through, but it was something I had wanted to do for a long time. My mother eventually grew to like my dreadlocks as well and made positive compliments about the way I looked with them. Sometimes you have to go against the grain in order to prove a point.

Constantly, I was criticized about the decision to cut my hair. My aunt, Donna, would always tell me to comb my dreadlocks out and have my mother sew extensions on top of my head. Every time Donna saw me she would explain to me that my dreadlocks looked nasty, were not lady-like, and that I would look more professional if I permed my hair. I was hurt by her remarks because she made comments to me about my hair as if I did not have feelings. The teenagers at Wildwood High would only exasperate the situation. They would ask me the same questions almost EVERYDAY when I returned to school with my new look. Why did you cut your hair? Are you gay now? What did your mom say when you cut your hair? I was upset because I never questioned someone else's desires. Also, the answers to these questions had absolutely nothing to do with any of them. I was already on the basketball team so I guess cutting my hair made me a lesbian now too. Sometimes I am stunned by people's stereotypical potential. My teammates would always tell me that I had long hair (for a black girl) and how they could have never made a decision to do such a thing. I thought to myself, "That is exactly why I am different from a lot of people because I am not afraid of change and I am not afraid to do something that may contradict someone's opinion about me."

Often, I questioned why my parents disapproved of how I wanted to wear my hair. I found it interesting and ironic that this particular *disagreement* was the only thing they seemed to ever *agree* with each other on. My older sister has dreads and she chose the wrong path in life so I assumed that was where my father's stereotype stemmed from when I told him I wanted to grow dreadlocks. Ironically, my father has three daughters and two granddaughters and all of my sisters and myself have dreadlocks and so does one of my nieces. It must irk him for four out of five of the most important women in his life have a hairstyle he despises. My mother knew I wanted to further my career after high school and she believed it would be easier for me to get a job if dreads were not a first impression. I understood her motive, but I did not believe it was true. Before I built up enough courage to make my transformation I sat my mother down to explain to her that there are different ways to wear dreadlocks. I promised her I would maintain my dreadlocks and that they would look presentable at all times. She even made me wait until I got hired for a job to start my dreadlocks. This happens to be the only circumstance where I sort of agreed with my mother because I worked in a pre-dominantly white, retirement community and in order to work in front of the restaurant you had to look and act proper and wear straight hair at all times. My customers would stare at me as if I were an alien from a different planet or something because they were not accustomed to such hair style.

I can remember when I went shopping for my prom dress and my mother asked me how I was going to wear my hair. I explained to her that I was going to wear my dreadlocks (which I had now dyed a bronze-color) to prom. We visited a beauty shop and she bought me this ten inch long wig to wear over my dreads for prom. Once again I felt like a phony person at *my* senior prom. I took my father a prom picture of me and as he admired the long, jet black, straight hair he asked me if I liked the way I looked with my dreads instead of the straight hair. I laughed out

loud and said, "No, I do not like the way I look with my dreads, I LOVE the way I look with my dreads!" I was smiling in the picture but I was anything but happy with the way I appeared. When I came to college I would tell girls how I used to have long hair and they would explain how they could never have done something so drastic to their hair. When they tell me that I feel bold and different, and I appreciate their remarks because I hate being like everybody else: ponytails, quick weaves, and braids. How many girls do you see on this college campus with dreadlocks? However, *my* decision to grow dreadlocks was simply because I love natural hairstyles. Believe it or not, growing my dreadlocks taught me how to be more patient and tolerant with people, due to all the negative point of views I have experienced. I would have never guessed that my decision to grow dreadlocks would have been such a challenge.