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Q&A: Why a Peoria salon owner is bringing the Natural Hair and Loc Conference to town

WCBU | By **Olivia Streeter**

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Charlie Riedel/AP / AP

FILE - Shelly Smith braids hair at her salon, Braid Heaven, Jan. 28, 2020 in Kansas City, Kan. The House on Friday, March 18, 2022, voted 235-to-189 to prohibit discrimination on the basis of hair texture and hairstyles like hair that is tightly coiled, curled, or worn in locs, cornrows, twists, braids, Bantu knots, or Afros. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel, File)

The 2022 Central Illinois Natural Hair & Loc Conference is coming to the GW Carver Community Center in Peoria on May 14.

Aishah Bilal-Ali is the owner of Haradox Hair Care Center, and one of the event's founders. She spoke with WCBU's Olivia Streeter about [the upcoming event](#), and about how her personal journey with her natural hair sparked a desire to encourage other individuals of color to celebrate their natural hair and endorse hair education.

AISHAH BILAL-ALI: I literally grew up, like so many of my African American sisters who had relaxers very early on, pressing curls, chemicals, weaves, braids, you know, kind of whatever, to change what you naturally had.



Hairadox

Aishah Bilal-Ali, owner of Hairadox Hair Care Center in Peoria, and a co-founder of the Central Illinois Natural Hair and Loc Conference.

For me, unfortunately, I have a tighter, drier hair tight. And so those chemicals, they always damaged my hair; it just was no good for my hair. And so my hair was really short, even though I was doing all of that to it to so called protect it and manage it.

So eventually, as I got a little older, I just stopped biting that and just embrace my natural hair. I really have a love affair now with natural hair, in my hair.

OLIVIA STREETER: Why do you think there is such a lack of hair education, and hair knowledge amongst young people, women of color, men of color? Why is that, really? What causes that lack of education?

Well, one is, the standard of education here is really European based. So you know, when we go to hair schools, most of us we learn straight hair right away. You learn chemicals, you learn to process textured hair, right away. Everything, even the mannequins.

Now you can find more kinky hair mannequins, but even those now are kind of Jheri curl when you wet them. But you can at least find more texture in the mannequins now, to be able to practice something closer to your hair type.

But I would say, part of it is the education system itself. Part of it is natural hair and braiding and things like that not really being generally accepted. So therefore, it's not really focused on and taught.

Another thing is, we have continued to treat our hair as if we still have relaxers and straighteners and things like that in it. So there's a learning curve there, even for us who have not worn our natural hair for many years, and understood the different way we have to manage the hair, handle the hair, and the different way we have to use products in our hair.

So there are people like myself, who does always study hair, the textures, what works, what doesn't, and this based on, you know, serving thousands of people per year. You have to be taking these notes; you have to see the differences, the nuances; you have to hear their stories in their lifestyles,

How do we get better representation in society for Black hair, and just for that future generation, so they can feel more comfortable? Would you agree that representation is huge in that aspect?

Representation is always important. Because it doesn't matter what ethnic background, or where you come from, you want to know that there's someone like you. You want to see someone that looks like you, that you can draw from, that you can maybe look up to, maybe, that you can learn from.

It's just been ingrained in us to really be displeased with ourselves in our hair, our bodies, our skin tones and things. So only we can address this issue, no one's going to fix this for us, but us. So therefore, you know, as an individual, just like I had to do, I had to go within my own self and figure out why I was fighting my hair and why I would rather maybe have that job that required me to look outside myself than to maybe take a job where I could be myself.

But I just feel like it's a reclaiming what's yours. And you shouldn't apologize for what you're giving, you shouldn't have to have permission to be who you are, to have your hair, to wear your hair, the way that it grows out of your scalp. We shouldn't need permission.

I think in our communities, with natural hair, we have to fight what the status quo wants us to be like or look like or see. When you look at magazines all day or videos all day, and all you see is straight hair, long hair, you know, cover it up, weave it up, slick it down, you know, control, control, and then you tend to fall in that pattern if you don't try to do something different.

Is there anything else that you want to mention, in terms of information or anything about the event?

We really want to let people know about this event. It's called the Natural Hair and Loc Conference for Central Illinois. It's the first of its kind that I know of. So it's gonna be just an amazing affair right here in central Illinois. We don't have to drive to Chicago and St. Louis and all these other states and places to get information.

We have experts right here, but nobody knows how to find us. You know, nobody knows who's doing micro locks or sister locks or, you know, two strand twist or coils. So we need to bring this community together and build that support. We want to see you. We want to see your natural hair and your life. We want to share that that with not just with the community there but share it with the world to really represent Central Illinois and show that, 'hey we're here. We're staying. We're enjoying ourselves. Our hair looks great.'

Speakers at the 2022 Central Illinois Natural Hair and Loc Conference include Dr. Jessie Dixon-Montgomery, an associate professor at Illinois Wesleyan University; Peoria 1st District Councilmember Denise Jackson; and James Agbara Bryson, CEO of the New Millennium Institute and great-grandnephew of beauty industry pioneer Annie Malone.

[*Click here to learn more about the May 14 event.*](#)