

Chapel Talk
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February 16, 2022

My hair has been a source of pain, beauty, and personal confusion. Since I was a child, I was taught how much importance my hair held through the experiences I shared with my mother. I'd sit on the ground between her legs as she did my hair, the same way she did with my grandmother. This simple act was a generational experience that made me feel beautiful and allowed me to see how significant hair was for women in the Black community. However, when my mother didn't do my hair, my hair made me feel terrible.

Both of my parents have taught me that the way I present myself, including my hair, alters how society views and treats me. The experiences that my parents had as Black people manifested themselves in the expectations they had for me. My mother wanted my hair neat, brushed, braided—beautiful. My father wanted it straight, natural, professional—beautiful. Consequently, by the time I reached fifth grade, I had no idea how to make my hair beautiful; I believed my worth resided in my coils. My parents' negative opinions about my curls felt like negative comments on who I was. All of the positives they projected onto my curls altered the way I saw myself. I tried my best to search for beauty in my hair and myself; that way, I could be the beautiful they wanted. This misdirected search for beauty went on for years, and it wasn't until I was in a new community that my standard of beauty began to change.

When people first arrive at boarding school, they're afraid of getting homesick or struggling in classes. For weeks, I left my dorm fearful about how I looked. I was worried because there was no one to tell me how to feel about myself. Neither parent was there to deem my hairstyles good enough. Although I struggled with feeling beautiful, I couldn't let fear paralyze me from growing. I took the opportunity to let go of the judgments about my hair, and, for the first time, it felt like my hair no longer defined me.

At SAS, Black women make up a tiny percentage of the population. Though, or perhaps because, there were so few of us, we couldn't help but notice each other and connect. We were united not only through our skin but through our hair. Each girl had such a love for her coils—watching the way they cared for their hair made me begin to love mine. My coils are more than hair or society's judgments; they are the product of time and love. I learned you must become your own type of beautiful.

The lesson that the Black women at St. Andrew's taught me touches on the way I treat myself. I learned that to get to a point where you can feel beautiful, you first have to take the time to care about and recognize how you feel in that moment. I used other people to define how I felt about myself. Once I was away from expectations, I got to know myself. I stopped focusing on my physical boundaries and began to explore my emotional barriers. The journey of figuring out my hair turned out to be a journey of figuring out myself. I am constantly learning about myself and redefining who I am. My hair reflects myself, and both are prone to change—but regardless of their state, I will love them both because my hair is mine—it is me.

The significance of my hair formed as I sat between my mother's legs, as it did for her and every generation of women before. The value of my hair changed once I realized that it was truly my own. The generations of hair in my family—the expectations set in place for my hair—made me value my hair, and understand the sacredness that each woman has for understanding their hair and caring for themselves.