



THE ENQUIRER

Search This Site:

[Cincinnati.Com](#) | [NKY.com](#) | [Enquirer](#) | [WCPO](#) | [Post](#) | [CiN Weekly](#) | [Community Press & Recorder](#) | [cincyMOMS.com](#) | [Cincinnati USA](#)  
[Home](#) | [Local News](#) | [Sports](#) | [Business](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Life](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Nation/World](#) | [Obituaries](#) | [Archives](#) | [Search](#)

**Life** [Cincinnati.Com](#) » [The Enquirer](#) » [Life](#) » Embracing natural beauty  
 Last Updated: 5:32 am | Friday, February 16, 2007

# Embracing natural beauty

## More African-American women giving their hair a break after years of hair-relaxing treatments

BY LAUREN BISHOP | [LBISHOP@ENQUIRER.COM](mailto:LBISHOP@ENQUIRER.COM)

[Speak Up! Comment on this story](#)

Alicia Keys has done it. So have Lauryn Hill, Macy Gray and India.Arie.

All of those famous women style their hair naturally with braids, Afros, locks and other looks rather than use chemicals to straighten it.

And black women all over the country, including in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, are making the same decision. They're inspired not so much by celebrities, but by a desire to style their hair in a way that is less damaging, easier to maintain and, many believe, more true to themselves.



ADVERTISEMENT According to a 2005 survey of 1,000 women by Pantene - the hair care brand owned by Cincinnati-based Procter & Gamble - 26 percent of the women polled had chemical-free hairstyles, and 28 percent of those with relaxed hair planned to make the transition to natural hair within the next year. And 49 percent of those with relaxed hair said they would consider transitioning but were concerned about styling.

The number of women switching to natural hair is growing because they don't have the time to visit salons as often as once a week to get their hair chemically relaxed, says Ava Robinson, a natural hair care stylist at Salon Favor in West Chester Township. But the transition has an impact beyond just saving time, Robinson says.

"It makes you notice your inner beauty," says Robinson, 42, of Westwood. "It's an attitude. It's a boldness."

The decision can be a difficult one and often requires an initial investment of considerable time and money. But most who have made the transition to natural hair say they have no desire to return to chemically relaxing their hair. Here are some of their stories:



## Anne Erving, 55, West Chester Township

Erving started relaxing her hair at about 18. She decided to stop four years ago.

"I was a victim of my hair all the time," she says. "I was always curling it, always grooming it. And I always liked my natural texture."

So she had her hair put into a set of locks (that term is preferred to dread-

locks, which is considered derogatory because it dates back to when slaves' locked hair was considered dreadful). Then she had her hair cut short and used mousse to style her natural curls before recently deciding to wear locks again.

But Erving braced herself for negative reactions to her locks. Although her sisters and children said they thought it was the best hairstyle she'd ever had, a male friend immediately called her "Aunt Jemima," and her best friend said she hated them. But the comments didn't cause Erving to change her style.

"As I grew as a person, it just got to the point where it didn't matter what they said," she says.

Now, other women at her church will compliment her on her hair, which she plans to wear in locks for the rest of her life.

"I tell people, 'Until the day I die,' " she says.

## Kimberly Byrd, 29, Springfield Township

Byrd was about 10 when her mother first relaxed her hair. Last year, she decided she was tired of getting her hair relaxed every four to six weeks by hairstylists she was never quite satisfied with, and of the damage relaxing was causing, including a receding hairline, breakage and shedding.

But Byrd says she didn't think that natural hair could be pretty until two good friends who had made the transition to natural hair changed her mind. But as a real estate agent and paralegal, Byrd says she was nervous about what people would think of a hairstyle that would be so different from most of her co-workers.

Last May, she decided to take the plunge and do what's known as "the big chop" - cutting off all her chemically relaxed hair so that only her natural hair - which was a few inches long - remained.

"Every day, when I looked in the mirror, it was really hard, but I still felt like I was doing the right thing," she says. "I knew that I was becoming a healthier me. I guess I was also standing for what black women really are, and what we look like. We're beings with thick, natural hair. Our hair is not naturally straight. I wanted to show people that hair could be natural and still be professional."

As her hair has grown out, Byrd says she has enjoyed experimenting with different styles, including twists, braids and cornrows.

"I'm very happy because if I don't want to, I don't have to go to a beauty salon looking for someone to perm my hair after four to five weeks," she says. "I can save money, and my hair is growing fully and not breaking. And I feel beautiful."

### **Tamara Cole, 32, Mason**

In September 2005, Cole was a newlywed who had been relaxing her hair since she was about 7. A software consultant, she was fearful of how natural hair would be received in the corporate world, but a cousin her age who went natural inspired her to do the same.

After a couple of transitional styles, including braids, Cole also did the big chop. Then she wore her hair in twists, in which sections of hair are split into two and twisted around each other.

She got mixed reviews from her husband and other family members who were used to seeing her hair relaxed, but she says she still felt attractive.

"It made me feel like I was being more of an individual than following somebody," she says. "It's what God put on my head. This is what I was born with."

Cole recently had Robinson braid her hair because she's due to give birth to her first child next month, and she wanted a low-maintenance style. If her baby's a girl, Cole says: "I don't plan on relaxing her hair, not at all. I will try to instill in her that her natural state is just as pretty."

### **Tywana Smith, 43, West Chester Township**

In 2002, Smith and her husband, Brian, were frustrated with their inability to find good-quality black hair care products at local stores. So they founded their own Internet-based company, Treasured Locks ([www.treasuredlocks.com](http://www.treasuredlocks.com)).

Treasured Locks sells products for women with both natural and relaxed hair, but Smith found that she was talking with three to five women a day from all over the country who were making the switch to natural hair.

The desire to better relate to her customers was part of the reason Smith decided to make the change to a natural style herself last September. But the bigger reasons, she says, were that she wanted to stop damaging her hair with chemicals and set an example for her daughters, ages 10 and 7.

"It's just amazing the way I have damaged my hair over the years

just to try to fit in," she says. "I've told (my daughters), 'Your natural hair is so beautiful,' but then I was getting (chemical) perms myself."

Smith chose not to do the big chop, saying she didn't think she could handle having hair that was only about half an inch long. So she got a less drastic cut and is wearing extensions that are weaved in with her braided or twisted natural hair until her own hair grows longer.

In the meantime, she says she loves being able to tell her growing number of customers who are transitioning to natural hair that she knows exactly where they're coming from.

"It's becoming a lot more acceptable," she says. "People are opening their eyes to the fact that, 'It's OK to be who I am.' "