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OTHER VOICES

Rules tie braiders in knots

Ohio has no business regulating art form



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African hair-braiding is a spiritual practice that dates back thousands of years in African communities. Ohio has been trying to license our heritage by requiring us to go to cosmetology school. It's time to change the licensing requirement, and the Ohio legislature is considering a bill to do just that.

I started braiding hair on my dolls and my sister Elvira at a very early age. It was a way of expressing creative power. I never went to school for braiding. I just learned by doing and experimenting, just like everybody else does.

Over time, I realized that this was my calling, what I was born to do. However, to open a braiding center in Ohio requires a managing cosmetologist license, which takes 1,800 hours of classes in cosmetology school. I have spent more than 2,000 hours in cosmetology school, getting a cosmetologist license, a managing cosmetologist license and an instructor's license. In all that time, I learned absolutely nothing about braiding. It wasn't taught. There wasn't even a chapter in the textbook. For black people, cosmetology school is all about altering ourselves and treating our hair with chemicals to change it. All I learned in cosmetology school was how to use chemicals.

In the four years my shop has been open, we have not used any chemical services. I just use the talent and skills I had before I went to school.

Braiding is spiritual art

The difference between braiding and cosmetology is that braiding is an art form. It comes from your spirit and your soul. You can actually recognize the work of individual braiders, just as you can recognize the style of a particular artist. Every braider has her own signature and creates her own styles.

Braiding is a part of African history and culture. It's a part of us. Historically, there were particular braided styles to represent different life events and status. Different braided styles symbolized coming of age, marriage, birth of a new baby, death in the family, leadership roles in the community, different achievements, tribes and regions. Even now, the braided style someone chooses tells a lot about where she is in her life.

It is hard for me to understand why Ohio is claiming the right to license the way we style our hair. For thousands of years we were able to just braid hair and create beauty. Why has it suddenly become illegal? When Ohio licenses hair-braiding, it's as if the state is licensing our lives.

It is our duty as leaders in the African hair-braiding industry to stand strong for our next generation. It is a sin for those in power to take away our tradition and our right to earn a living. Talented young people who are trying to do right, earn an honest living and take care of their families should be able to braid. As long as they are paying their taxes, there is no harm in that.

I know plenty of people who would love to open their own braiding centers, but they are afraid to. If you are raising a family, you don't have time to get arrested or harassed. Who wants to take a year to go to school to learn an occupation they have no interest in practicing?

I went to cosmetology school but that doesn't mean future braiders should be forced to. They should have a choice. It would be fine to require that braiders know some basic sanitation and hygiene, which anyone can learn in a few days. But the state has no business licensing the spiritual art of braiding.

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