

CONTRIBUTOR

How a Lifetime of Relaxers Lead to Natural Curls and an Entrepreneurial Journey

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By Ceata Lash



My mother started relaxing my hair at the tender age of 10 – it was like a rite-of-passage for girls like my mom and me. It meant you were on your way to becoming a woman in some weird way. I could stop having my hair pressed and start having my hair *relaxed*. I couldn't wait. I remember my mother always complaining I had just too much hair on my head. Lord knows I honestly hated those Saturday night wash, blow-dry and pressing sessions. We both hated giving up three hours of our Saturday, every two to three weeks to do my hair. My mother was always angry, saying my hair held so much heat that it

would burn her fingers. I equally hated all the burnt ears, edges and getting popped in the head for “squirming too much.”

Oh, and how special would be my summers now be since my hair is relaxed. Nuh-uh, no more little girl cornrows with 10,789 different color beads and tin foil on the ends for me. I was a big girl now. I could play sports or swim without my hair swelling up like cotton candy. It was like I had super powers against the humidity. My hair would hang, wet and wavy down my back just like the Caucasian girls at the pool. I thought to myself *how pretty would I be?* The dream of straight hair was one I had ever since I began to notice the difference between my hair and the Caucasian girls in my neighborhood. My hair — the hair the good Lord gave me was deemed ugly, nappy and — that horrible word, *bad*. It was deemed bad mostly by members of my race and family. What a self-esteem builder, right?

What did my hair do to be called bad? How can hair be labeled good or bad when all it does is grow out of your head? I never could understand that. You have no control over the texture; you can't change it. Unfortunately, these same misguided adolescent thoughts still ring true for so many African-American girls today and stick with them long into womanhood.

For the next 20 years, I continued to relax my hair. In elementary school, I wore my hair in a single French braid straight down my back. Mainly, it was to hide the breakage I had from chemical over processing. Always afraid of exposing my new growth, I would relax my hair every four weeks. As a result, my hair fell out at least three times from the chemical burns to my scalp. In high school, I switched to the Salt-N-Pepa asymmetrical-inspired style of the late 1980s. By college, when TLC was the hit girl group, I wore a T-Boz style haircut, all the while continuing to keep my natural curls at bay with chemicals.

“My final decision to go au naturel didn't come as a conscious decision. It came to as an “Aha!” moment.”

It came to as an “Aha!” moment. First, my dandruff and psoriasis were so bad I just began to think it was normal and part of who I was. Treating it with prescription steroid creams and OTC medicated shampoos became the norm for me, mainly because my doctors had me convinced it was just part of my makeup. One time I went longer than my usual four weeks for a touch-up. I noticed the inflammation on my scalp was lessening. The dandruff

and psoriasis I had become accustomed to, began to decrease. I realized I must be allergic to the relaxer. The time with no chemical application to my scalp was allowing it to heal on its own. At that moment I decided to stop relaxing my hair.

Ten years ago, I did the unthinkable for many women at that time....*the Big Chop!* I was scared as H-E-double hockey sticks! My husband was so supportive of my decision, which was a huge relief. For the initial cut, my 3-year-old twin sons and I went to the barbershop together. I'll admit, initially the big chop was not so liberating. I was still struggling to find my place with my naturally curly hair. I wasn't thrilled with the way I looked now. I had no idea how to care for it. And the new hair that was growing from my head actually hurt. I mean it was the kind of pain like "I need to go take a Tylenol because my hair is growing" pain. I thought I was going crazy. So I began wearing braids and soon realized it was putting an incredible amount of stress on my hair and exacerbating my already painful sinus headaches. I had to let the braids go. I found the transition to natural was much more challenging than I originally anticipated, but I refused to go back to using chemical hair straighteners.



A family portrait just after my "Big Chop"!

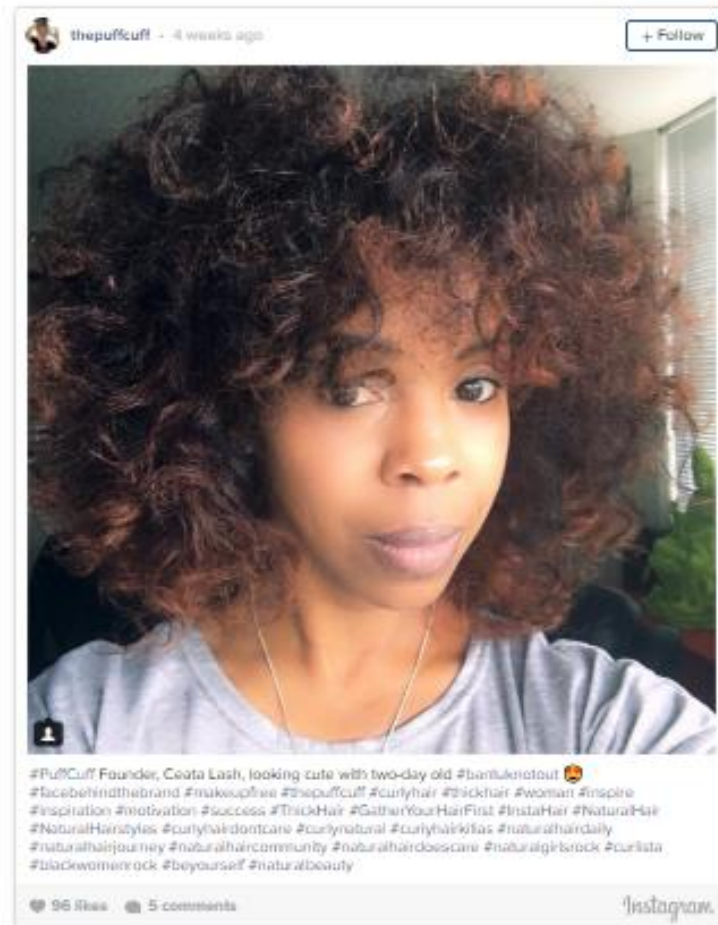
Going Natural — When You Know Better, You Do Better

I went natural at a time when there were no bloggers or YouTube videos to guide you through the transition process. I was left to figure this out on my own. Working in higher education and not feeling too secure in my new look, I felt a puff or bun-like style would be

more appropriate for my workplace. The 70's Afro would garner extra unwanted attention or a slew of stupid questions about what was going on with my hair. The *revolution* was not starting over with me. I began searching for styling tools to hold my natural hair up and achieve that bun or puff. I found 95% of the hair accessories available on the market, are not designed with thick or curly hair in mind. I tried using banana clips, elastic headbands, shoestrings or the leg from a pantyhose to hold my hair — all to no avail. Everything available cinched my hair to the smallest point of resistance, which made for one massive migraine headache by the end of my work day. This issue eventually led to me inventing a hair styling tool known as the [PuffCuff](#). I designed a line of products specifically designed to help style the thick, curly or textured hair of women, men, and kids.

“I realized with the frustrations I experienced during my natural hair journey; I could share this solution with others.”

Lately, I've also found myself researching and writing on topics on my blog that address some of the challenges around natural hair that impact our self-image and health, as it did mine. It took some time, but now I can say I've truly come to love my curls and appreciate my journey since it has led to a hair-confident and healthier version of me.



This post is part of HuffPost's [My Natural Hair Journey](#) blog series. Embracing one's natural hair — especially after years of heavily styling it — can be a truly liberating and exciting experience. It's more than just a "trend." It's a way of life. If you have a story you'd like to share, please email us at MyNaturalHairJourney@huffingtonpost.com.

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