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## **Black hair and the career climb**

Can your hair prevent you from being hired?

That question, and many others, were the focus of a recent panel discussion entitled “Your Hair, Your Image & Your Career Climb” at Peirce College as part of its Black History Month celebration. The lively 90-minute session was moderated by Sharmain Matlock-Turner, CEO of the Urban Affairs Coalition, and featuring Bruce F. Burton (The Original Pretty Boyz Barber Shop); Thelma Lawson Haylock (director of business services, Pfizer); Markita Morris-Louis (senior vice president, Community Affairs and General Counsel, Clarifi); Jameel Rush, (director of organizational development, Day & Zimmermann); and Temple University professor and author Lori L. Tharps.

Matlock-Turner kicked off the candid conversation by recalling her early life growing up in West Philly adhering to her mother’s rules. During her intro, strands of her amber-colored hair kept falling forward until Matlock-Turner revealed otherwise by ripping off the wig to expose her regular coif of short salt-and-pepper curls. The audience of 70 students exploded in laughter and applause.

Striking a balance between cultural identity and workplace expectations can be a challenge, especially for some African Americans looking to achieve their perfect professional image. “Have you ever looked in the mirror right before that interview?,” said Uva Coles, Peirce College vice president of institutional advancement and strategic partnerships. “We have all been there. I’m sure at some point you’ve been thinking about going to an interview or a workplace event and you’ve had to think, ‘Is my hair all right?’ Is this the right look? Color? Certainly, people can assume that it is a conversation about hair, but is it really? What is it about? It’s about whether or not we fit in and if our hair is going to an obstruction or a barrier for access. That idea of the intersectionality of hair and identity and culture is a nuance conversation that we are privileged to be in and drive today ... Peirce has brought together a diverse panel of professionals to thrust this conversation into the forefront and challenge our cultural norms.”

Each panelist went on to detail their hair biography. Morris-Louis, who has worn her hair natural for 30 years, explained that she’s “had every hairstyle from a Jheri curl to a asymmetrical cut; locs to the waist; a big afro — I have done every single thing, and I have done it in every professional context you can imagine, from a Fortune 500 high-powered law firm where I was the only attorney of color in my entire practice group.”

In noting that men are not immune to hair drama, the Hampton University ban on cornrows and dreadlocks for male business students was cited. “One day I decided to grow my hair longer,” said Rush of his style. “After hurting my head continuously with a

[hair] pick, I decided to just embrace this thing. It's really been an evolution, this 'Nappy 'Fro' is what I call it. It is something that has become a part of my identity, but is something that I like, most of all of it's about how I look and how I come to work and how I come to everything. It has been my journey and how I come here and have come to accept it."

Burton noted the finer points of maintaining a coiffure. "Without my hairstyle, without my clothing I would not be able to enter the rooms that I am entering now," explained Burton. "I am an ex-offender, but you would have never known that: you saw me, you saw my suit, you saw my hairstyle and you were very comfortable with me and wanted to hear what I had to say ... Your hair story is the story that gets you through the door. That's what I do: I get through the door, and I get my clients through the door."

Today, more women of color are choosing to wear their hair in its natural state. For Haylock, a return to natural hair came several years ago with a child's arrival. "When I had a daughter, the hair conversation changed for me," recalled Haylock. "I needed my daughter to understand every day that her hair is her beauty in whatever form that it's in. And so, for me to speak that truth to her, I had to speak that truth to myself. I stopped perming my hair."

For Tharps, the author of "Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America," her hair adventure began when she was a journalism student. "There weren't books or anything about Black hair, but I just knew that for the same reason we can all sit in this room and share, understand and nod our heads was because there was a conversation I was having with my own hair before I would go into certain spaces. I knew that I could talk with any Black person that I have never met before and we could have a conversation about the shared experiences about our hair."