

# The Battle of the Braid Brigade

Two Women Just Want a Legal Living Twisting Hair. But They Say the State Makes It Impossible.

By LENA WILLIAMS

**A**T Walton High School in the Bronx, Andrean Russell was the student her peers went to when they wanted their hair braided.

Over the years, her clientele grew, along with her reputation as a skilled braider. Relatives and friends have sat patiently at Ms. Russell's knee for hours while she weaved African-inspired braids into hair once styled with straightening chemicals.

Last year, Ms. Russell began seriously thinking about turning her weekend passion into a career. "I began doing research to see what I needed to obtain a license to braid hair professionally," said Ms. Russell, 23, who is a legal secretary and part-time student at Bronx Community College.

The answer was not what she expected: a course of study at a cost of thousands of dollars and 900 hours.

"Nine hundred hours!" Ms. Russell said with a trace of indignation in her voice. "I don't see the need for all those hours of training when all I want to do is braid hair. Something I've done since I was a teenager."

Under a 1992 state law, natural hair stylists must complete a 900-hour cosmetology curriculum covering everything from chemical hair treatments and pedicures to shaving to receive a state license. The law has been sharply criticized by prospective hair braiders like Ms. Russell, who wonder why they should be subject to hundreds of classroom hours devoted to hot pressing and curling, or haircutting and shaping, disciplines that do not apply to braiding.

Ms. Russell says the requirements are excessive to the point that the state is depriving her of a civil right — to pursue the occupation of her choice. She and Bonnie Best, a 30-year-old part-time braider in Cambria Heights, Queens, have filed a lawsuit that seeks to revise the licensing rules.

"Of the 900 hours required by the state, only 250 are devoted to braiding techniques," said Mark W. Smith, the lawyer who took on the case after conversations with Carla Brown, a professional braider who teaches a braiding course at York College in Jamaica, Queens. "But here's the catch. The cosmetology schools aren't offering the courses, and those who are qualified



Thomas Dailor for The New York Times

Mark W. Smith says his hair-braiding clients, Andrean Russell (left) and Bonnie Best, are being denied the right to choose a career.

to teach it, like Ms. Brown, haven't been certified by the state to do so."

The lawsuit is likely to draw considerable interest in a bustling cottage industry of stylists catering to the growing popularity of African-inspired braids among black women. Braiding shops seem to have cropped up overnight along 125th Street in Harlem and Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. They are supplemented by the braiders, from high-school students to unemployed women to working professionals, who run informal styling operations in their homes, bartering their services for everything from cash to clothing.

In many cases, the stylists are African or Caribbean immigrants who use skills learned in their homelands to eke out a living in America. In other cases, they are young women who, like Ms. Russell, styled hair for friends and expanded to take on other clients. Many may be unaware of the licensing requirements. But Mr. Smith noted that even for those who want to satisfy the state requirements, it is impossible, because no privately run cosmetology school in New York offers a program or course of study that includes the required 900-hour curriculum.

"In fact, no person has ever completed the 900-hour curriculum," Mr. Smith said. "The only individuals who possess natural hair styling licenses are those who were grandfathered into the law when it was first created four years ago."

Gwen Lee, a spokeswoman for the New York Secretary of State, Alexander F. Treadwell, who is named as a defendant in the case, said she could not comment on matters under litigation. The Secretary of State's office oversees and controls the New York Division of Licensing, which issues

natural hair styling licenses and created the requirements and curriculum for licensing. State officials had 30 days to respond to the complaint, which was filed on Jan. 6.

The case is but one of several involving hair braiders in more than half a dozen states. They are using legal weapons and political pressure to challenge laws that require anyone offering natural hair-care services to the public to complete lengthy and expensive programs at certified cosmetology schools.

In the last two years, Tennessee, Texas, Florida and the District of Columbia have created separate braiders' licenses, according to Taalib-Din Uqdah, the executive director of the American Hairbraiders and Natural Hair Care Association. Several other states, including Louisiana, Michigan and Illinois, are said to be considering similar laws. Although licensing laws for braiders vary from state to state, all require some basic hair-care training, from 16 hours in Florida to 1,500 hours in California.

Most braiders agree that training is necessary, especially courses devoted to recognizing scalp disorders and other health-related issues. But many question the government's right to sanction their craft, which has traditionally been learned from friends or relatives.

Government officials argue that the proliferation of braiding salons raises questions about sanitary practices and professional accountability; oversight is necessary, they argue, to protect dissatisfied customers. Partly with those concerns in mind, the State Legislature wrote language into the cosmetology law in 1992 that specifically requires braiders to be licensed, as are barbers and other hair stylists.

A "grandfather clause" in the law ex-

empted licensed cosmetologists and hair salons that existed before 1992.

Members of the cosmetology industry, which had lobbied for tighter controls on braiders, applauded the new measures.

"If we have to take a minimum of 1,200 curriculum hours and pay up to \$10,000 to learn our trade, why shouldn't braiders?" said Barbara G., a black cosmetologist who asked that her full name not be used, expressing concern that her comments might create tension in the mid-town Manhattan salon where she works alongside braiders.

The number of individuals practicing African-style braiding in New York is unknown. But Mr. Smith and others say the current law has had the perverse effect of driving more braiding services into the "underground" economy, where government lacks the opportunity or ability to reasonably regulate the industry.

"Ms. Russell and Ms. Best are taking this action because they don't want to hide or braid hair undercover," Mr. Smith said. "They also don't want to break the law."

"By bringing suit we hope to force the state to create reasonable regulations that take into account the safety of the community without taking away economic opportunity for braiders."

Ms. Best, who has a bachelor of arts degree in engineering, didn't know how to braid until she enrolled in Ms. Brown's braiding class last year. Now, she would like to supplement her income as a braider, but says she cannot afford to spend the \$6,000 to \$10,000 it costs to enroll in cosmetology school.

"And I wouldn't dream of operating without a license," Ms. Best said. "I don't want to have to hide from the authorities or do it undercover."

## LAW

### Styling Statute

State law requires 900 hours of training in 15 subjects to receive a natural hair styling license. The bulk of the curriculum covers three courses:

Hair sculpting	<b>250 hours</b>
Haircutting and shaping	<b>200</b>
Hair styling	<b>160</b>

The curriculum also includes:

- Scalp and hair applications **35 hours**
- Shampoos and rinses, chemistry as applied to natural hair styling **20 hours each**
- Scalp disorders and diseases, hair analysis, hair pieces **10 hours each**
- Shaving **12 hours**

Source: New York Department of State