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Oregon State Legislature
Salem, OR

RE: Senate Hearing for the CROWN Act (HB 2935)

Good morning Chair and committee,

My name is Amber Starks and I own Conscious Coils salon in downtown Portland. It's a natural hair salon specializing in traditional African-American and diasporic African and Black hair care. I started my business in 2013 with the hopes of supporting clients with textured and curly hair. But it has become more than salon. It has become a place of community. A place where all Oregonians are allowed to be free and feel beautiful about their hair and their culture. The salon has become a place where my client-friends, as I call them, are literally and figuratively free to let down their hair and be authentically themselves. This is what I've wanted for them and what I want for all Oregonians, no matter where they are in our State.

But the process of getting all Oregonians this free starts here, today, in committee. I know this because just a few years ago, I was before a similar committee asking legislators to address another law that unintentionally caused hurdles for natural hair stylists like myself. And it was because that law was changed that I am here today, testifying as a state-licensed natural hair stylist and as an example that legislation can have real, tangible benefits and produce meaningful change in every-day Oregonians' lives.

It is because my legislators, former Senator Jackie Dingfelder and former Representative Alyssa Kenny-Geyer, as well as Senator Lew Frederick and a host of co-sponsors listened to me and other constituents that HB3409, the Natural Hair Act passed and now over 130 natural hair stylists currently have a state-issued license that allows us to practice our craft, participate legally in the formal economy, provide for ourselves and our family, and pour into our communities and the State. This is how democracy works!!

And it was through that experience that I learned what democracy really means but specifically what participatory democracy means. I learned that as a citizen of Oregon it is both my right and responsibility to be involved in my government, as I am my government. I learned that if there is a problem in my community that needed to be addressed it sometimes requires both grass root work in addition to legislative action to make change. And that is why I am here today, in support of the Crown Act! Because I believe in bridging community work and legislative action.

The Crown Act is about hair but it is more than that. It is an extension of the work so many of us have been doing around our community's right to self-determination and freedom of expression. It is a refusal of the notion that our hair is unprofessional and distracting or that it is simply our

responsibility to conform in order to be included. Instead, it celebrates the reality that different textures exist and that they are all beautiful and acceptable. The Crown Act also points to the notion that the diverse practices around hair care and styling are important aspects of a community and cultural identity. And it reminds us that those practices are valid and should not be discriminated against simply because they are different or because they disrupt the status quo.

Finally, I believe, the Crown Act also acknowledges the humanity, dignity, and autonomy of every day Oregonians. When passed, it will say to every citizen and guest to our State that no one can deny you access to housing, employment, or service simply because your hair is curly, straight, textured, colored, loc'd, cut short, or however you choose to wear it. It will say to Oregonians, the state of Oregon values you and will stand by you should a businesses, schools, or any organizations choose to deny services or discriminate against you based on hair. It will say that the State of Oregon finds this practice unacceptable and wrong and will fight for you!

Our ask today, as initiators and supporters of this legislation is for you as our legislators to believe us when we say, we experience discrimination and hurdles to employment, housing, schooling, and services simply because of our hair. That we, personally and others from our community are often punished in real and tangible ways and experience violence for simply showing up with our natural hair, curly hair, loc'd hair, braided hair, permed hair, wigs or afros, and other such styles. We ask that you empathize with us as fellow human beings when we are told that our hair is inappropriate or unsuitable. That our hair, as it grows naturally from our heads violates etiquette or certain unrealistic standards which is often code for it does not conform. So as your constituents and as citizens of this State we are asking to be seen, to be valued, and to be protected. We are asking you not only to be on the right side of history but to do right by the present and by all Oregonians.

I ultimately believe that it is our responsibility to speak up and to do something when things are wrong. And that it is us working together, constituents and legislators holding our State accountable when it fails intentionally or unintentionally to protect Oregonians against discriminatory practices that brings about authentic, lasting change. And so again, that is why I am here today. I believe in and am in favor of the Crown Act. And I believe in the power of a participatory democracy.

With that said, I'm looking forward to both this bill passing out of committee and to it being enacted into law here in Oregon.

Thank you for your time and for hearing me.



Amber Starks, Owner
Conscious Coils Natural Hair Salon