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UNLV Calvert Award

Creative Works Entry

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Wearing Our Crowns

Discrimination has been an issue in America since the dawn of time. We as Americans have found ourselves in an endless cycle of civil unrest. In 2019, many students found themselves being punished for something that was beyond their control, *their hair*. In an article by Veronica Stracqulursi and Rachael Janfaza (*of CNN news*), a seventeen year-old, Dyree Williams, had to stop attending school because of the school's policy to ban twisted/braided hair. In another news article by Fox 4 News written by Alejandro Serrano, De'Andre Arnold of Barbes Hill Independent School found himself in a similar situation with his cousin. Both incidents happened in schools in Texas. The situation with Arnold resulted in a lawsuit as well as a federal judge finding the policy to be discriminatory and the school was forced to stop enforcing it.

In 2019, Dove and the CROWN Coalition created an act that would bar places from discriminating hair texture/type and styles such as, locs, twists, afros, braids, Bantu knots, and cornrows, thus the CROWN Act became the beacon of our project. We were approached for the project by Aaron Mayes, of the Special Collections faculty at the UNLV Lied Library, Claytee White, director and faculty of the Oral History Research Center at UNLV Libraries, as well as Demecina Beehn, UNLV professor, director of Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art, and curator of our exhibition, after we were recommended by our professor, Caralea Cole.

Our main focus was to highlight the individual and how their hair represented their identity. At the beginning of our project, we were mentored by Aaron Mayes where he shared the works of Clinton Wright, a well-known African American photographer who preserved the black experience in Las Vegas during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as Richard Avedon's portrait work in his book, "The American West." We took inspiration from both artists, photographing our models through black and white motifs.

An added element to our work was the history behind the CROWN Act. In preparation for our exhibition, we researched influential court cases through the UNLV database utilizing peer review sources that were for and against discrimination in America. The Civil Rights Act was a prominent piece of legislation that tried to end discrimination of all kinds in America in 1964. The Civil Rights Act only became possible after the proceedings of *Brown v. The Board Of Education*, which overturned the 'separate but equal' clause that was proposed in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case, Dred Scott sued his owner after they entered a state where slavery was illegal. During that time slaves were not seen as protected under the U.S. Constitution so it was overturned. We also included the *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* case (1986) which upheld the Civil Rights Act in a 9-0 decision and helped protect Mechelle Vincent, an African American woman, who was sexually harassed. In various ways all of these court cases demonstrated why the CROWN Act was discussed and how we can protect all Americans through our voices.

Due to the CROWN Act being new, a few issues we ran into were finding credible sources. The bill only recently passed in 2021, making Nevada the 12th state to adopt the act. Dually persistent in nature we both took the initiative to dig deeper into our research, pleasantly discovering the Dove CROWN Act Campaign website. They are a co-funding company of the

Act and proudly promote hair, racial, and body equality. We also incorporated other credible news sites and the recent legal documents that have been filed in regards to the CROWN Act.

Our work included diverse faces and hair types around campus and the community to show how the CROWN Act would impact a wide range of people in our city. Within our portraits we aimed to create thought provoking conversations on how people should be treated and what hair means to them. Taking pride in our project we are humbly contributing to the history of the CROWN Act in Nevada, America, and the world, creating a safe place where we all can wear our crowns with our heads held high.