

CUT IT FORWARD

By Kim Phagan-Hansel

Foster Care Experience Leads One Woman to Create Nonprofit to Help Others

Vanessa Morrison's home life may have been less than perfect growing up, as her parents struggled with mental health and addiction challenges. But as a young child, her hair, which was typically relaxed and braided, was always cared for by her family. And she never forgot how that pride and beauty was nurtured.

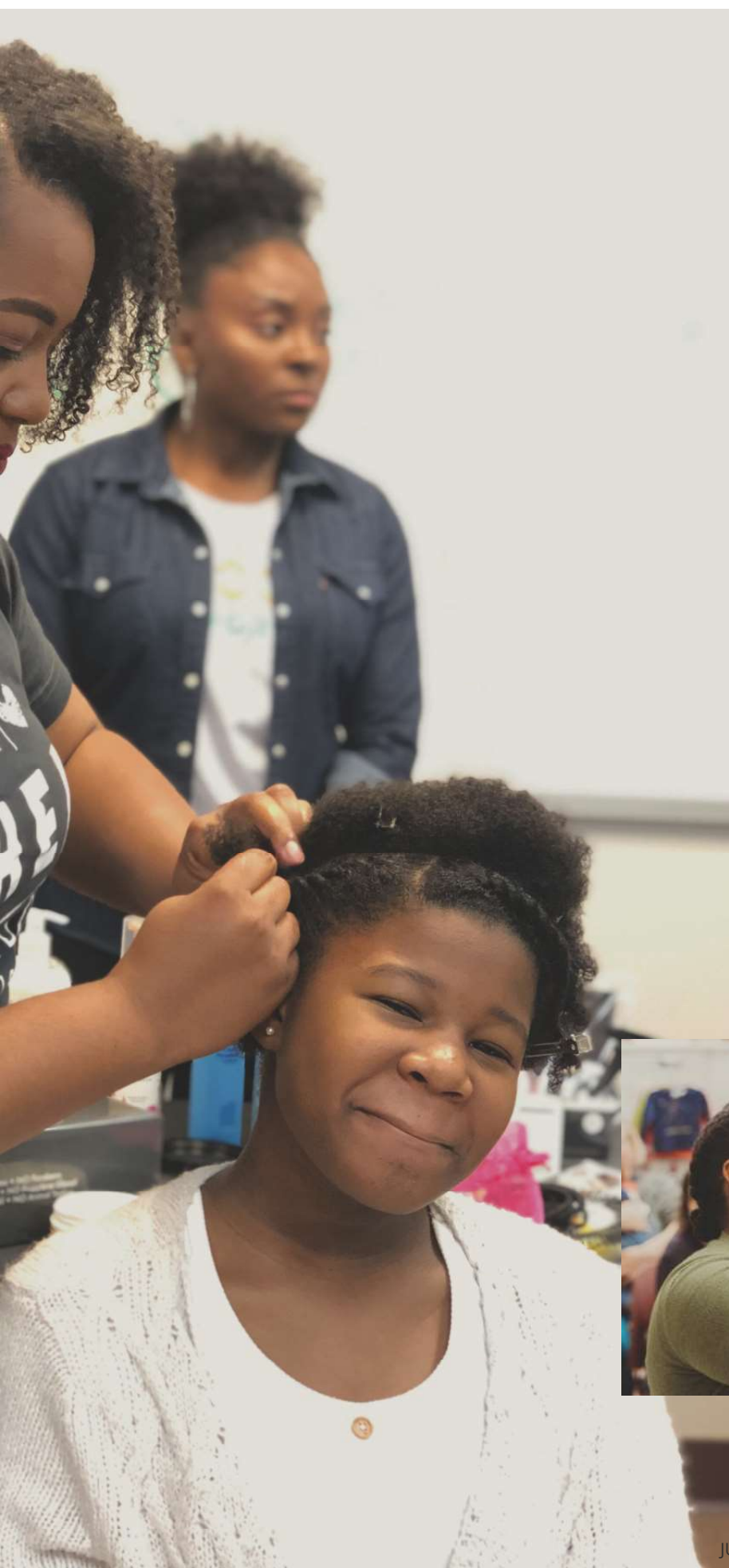
"It was a cultural bonding moment for us with our family members," said Morrison, 32. "In the black community, our hair is our crown. It's part of who we are."

That cultural strength instilled in Morrison by her grandmother and other family members met an early challenge, however, when she entered foster care at age 13 as her parents' lives spiraled out of control. Morrison and her siblings were moved to an Oklahoma group home, where hair and self-care became an afterthought, instead of an integral part of her family's fabric.

Oils, creams and butters "were treated like luxury items," Morrison said of



Photo courtesy of Cut It Forward
Hair care expert Eboni Johnson conducts a hair care workshop with Cut It Forward and their community partners: Pivot: A Turning Point for Youth and Citizen's Caring for Children.



one facility where she lived for several months. Not being able to take care of her hair and skin “was a dehumanizing experience.”

With no people of color working in the group home, the lack of cultural awareness was shocking for Morrison. Against her wishes, she was even required to wear pantyhose to church three times a week — a brand designed for white skin tones. As the weeks in that environment wore on, Morrison said her sense of self-worth plunged, and depression set in. It took four long months before her pleas to her caseworker were finally taken seriously, and she was moved to a foster family where she lived for a year before moving in with her aunt.

Although that experience was almost two decades ago, it has never left Morrison’s memory. And she used it to inspire her life’s work. In 2018, she founded the Oklahoma nonprofit Cut It Forward with her fiancé Bruce Waight, a professional barber and shop owner. Since launching the organization, Morrison has made it her mission to educate foster, adoptive and kinship caregivers about quality hair and skin care for children of color in Oklahoma.



Photo courtesy of Cut It Forward
Hair care expert and blogger Eboni Johnon does a demonstration at a Cut it Forward workshop. She also serves on the organization’s education committee.

Photo courtesy of Cut It Forward
Cut It Forward Board member and cosmetologist Nekesha Griffis does a demonstration during a Cut It Forward workshop. She also owns Mane Results Salon.



“It was a cultural bonding moment for us with our family members. In the black community, our hair is our crown. It’s part of who we are.”

— Vanessa Morrison, founder of Cut It Forward

So far, Cut It Forward has hosted 10 workshops, most of them in partnership with local child welfare agencies.

There are hands-on demonstrations for white families caring for black children’s hair, as well as instruction for older African American caregivers on ways to avoid using relaxers on kinky hair.

The education component for the workshop “is for everyone,” Morrison said, providing a historical and diasporic context to the celebration of African American hair.

Morrison said that unlike her childhood — when the use of chemicals to relax curly hair were more common — there is now far greater pride in natural hair. But that is not always something some caregivers embrace.

“There’s a demographic of older people of color who don’t know how to care for natural, unprocessed hair,” she said, and for those folks her workshops are eye-opening. White caregivers often have their own learning curve.

Because Morrison says families have often shared feelings of shame about not knowing how to properly care for children’s hair, the workshops are formatted to “create a safe space” for questions and open discussion.

Adoptive mom Alex McDougal felt that “safe space” vibe immediately at the workshop she attended in late 2019. She and her husband Ryan, who are both white, adopted Henry, an African American infant at birth in 2018.

“His hair has been a learning curve for us since he was born,” Alex McDougal said. During the workshop she said she “learned 100 things I’d been doing wrong.” But afterward, she said she felt more comfortable meeting his needs.

Since they’ll be adopting Henry’s younger biological sister in August, McDougal is anticipating signing up for more workshops so she can learn some hair care techniques, like braiding.

Families like McDougal’s leave the workshop armed with information on hair care, as well as products to help them.

“It’s helped me feel so much more confident with his hair,” McDougal said.

Cut It Forward also donates products to agencies and shelters that often have tight budgets that make it difficult to keep specialty products on hand, Morrison said.

Education and products for the families are just a piece of Cut It Forward’s mission. Morrison is building a list of licensed professionals who have received trauma-informed training.

Children in foster care have often experienced early childhood traumas that can be easily triggered by sounds, sites and smells. The training provided to licensed cosme-

CARING FOR HAIR TIPS

tologists helps them understand the experiences of the children whose hair and skin they care for, and discover how to minimize any difficulties they may experience in their salon or barbershop.

A barber for about 20 years, Mike Fletcher has seen the difference a good haircut can make in a child's demeanor and how they interact with others. He's welcomed several foster, adoptive and kinship families to his Oklahoma City barbershop Fade Factory since completing the trauma-informed training.

During the training, Fletcher learned the challenges children who've experienced trauma often face when triggered by loud music or noises and how to create a calming environment for them. "I try to show more attention and be more patient with them," Fletcher said.

So far five Oklahoma shops have gone through the trauma-informed training offered through Cut It Forward partner Halo Project, another Oklahoma nonprofit that focuses on training child welfare and other professionals about the needs of vulnerable children.

McDougal has already taken her son, now almost 2, to Rooted in Oklahoma City to get his edges trimmed, and let him get used to going to the barber. She said he desperately needs a follow-up, but COVID-19's closures of salons, at the time this article was written, has delayed their next visit.

Morrison said she's also anxious to start offering workshops again, but in the meantime, families can find tips and other advice on her website. The material has been produced and vetted by former foster youth, including Cut It Forward's seven-member advisory committee.

"This work needs to be guided by the people who've lived through it," Morrison said. •

Because education is empowering, Ericka Chancellor, a cosmetology board examiner in California with a new podcast, *Beyond the Chairs*, offers hair care tips for families as well. Having worked with countless cosmetologists, barbers and clients, Chancellor offers advice that hair care "only becomes a frustrating thing when you don't know what to do with it." That's why she encourages families to find a professional who can offer advice. Their guidance is critical to help caregivers keep from being overwhelmed by their child's hair.

Here are a few things she asks caregivers to consider:

1. While hair comes in a variety of textures and colors, all hair is essentially the same, and needs to be cleaned, moisturized and trimmed regularly.
2. Moisturizing is important — some types of hair will need more moisturizing than others. For thicker hair, a creamy leave-in conditioner can help keep it from becoming tangled. However, over-moisturizing can weigh the hair down.
3. Find a professional. If you're struggling to find hair products, or even with regular maintenance of your child's hair, contact a professional who has broad experience with different hair types. Professionals should be licensed in their state, but Chancellor cautions that finding the right professional for the right hair can also be a process. "If the first thing they do is get intimidated by the hair, that's not the chair you should be sitting in," Chancellor said. "You want to know it's the best person for the job." A stylist who is right for you, may not be right for the child in your care.
4. Use your resources. From searching the internet, to asking the child's extended family for support, families should not feel shy about seeking guidance and support.
5. Avoid exposing young children to chemicals like hair relaxers or perms that go directly on the child's scalp. Hair dyes should only be done by professionals who are trained to keep the chemicals on the hair and off of the scalp. Improper use of chemicals can cause second and third degree burns. Children younger than age 13 should be encouraged to embrace their natural hair.
6. When detangling hair, use a vented hair brush. Keep a moisturizing conditioner handy and consider covering your hair in a scarf or bonnet when sleeping. Short hair needs to be moisturized as well.
7. Keep both wide and fine tooth combs on hand to use for the appropriate task at hand whether brushing through the hair (wide tooth) or parting it (fine tooth).
8. Trim the hair every six to eight weeks. If you use a lot of water on your hair, trim it every six weeks.
9. Use a disinfecting spray on clippers used for short hair styles.
10. Create a consistent hair care routine so a child gets used to the process and doesn't fight you every time it's time to moisturize, cut, brush or style.