

Good afternoon Committee Chairman and Members of the HGO Committee:

My name is Jordan Bonardi. I am a senior at The Gilman School in Baltimore, and I am here to provide testimony in support of SB531/HB1444.

Each Gilman senior is required to give a speech to the Upper School. When deciding what to share about my high school experience, I was compelled to share my experience growing up of mixed heritage. When I reflected on my life, I realized that much of my identity is defined by my hair. Some argue that hair is a mutable characteristic; and therefore, it cannot be the basis for discrimination. I beg to differ. The first incident of racism I recall occurred when I was 7 years old while swimming at a club pool when a grandmother stopped her grandson from playing with me. The boy and I had similar skin complexions, but my hair was much darker, curlier, and more coarse than the boy I was playing with. I wanted to change my hair, believing that it would allow me to fit in, allow me to play with anyone, without fear.

If I can experience discrimination, due to my hair type, or Andrew Johnson is forced to cut his hair to compete in a wrestling match, or DeAndre Arnold is denied his right to graduate from his high school due to his choice to wear his hair in a natural style of his choosing, then I know that discrimination can occur in the work place.

The NAACP's Legal Defense Fund recently argued that modern-day racial discrimination is not as overt as it was 40 years ago, and that the courts need to recognize that.

"In an age where employment discrimination rarely presents itself in policies that explicitly exclude employees based on skin color, the vitality of Title VII depends on its ability to root out more subtle practices — facially neutral policies, racial proxies, stereotyped thinking — that still operate to disfavor applicants based on their race."

Natural styles worn by African-Americans remain the target of scorn based on long-held stereotypes that natural Black hair is unkempt and unprofessional. For example, the term "dreadlocks" originated from slave traders' descriptions of Africans' hair that had naturally formed into "locks" during the Middle Passage as "dreadful." Dreadlocks. The stereotype that Black natural hairstyles are dirty or unkempt and therefore not appropriate for more formal settings remains unfortunately widespread today. For example, until 2014, the U.S. military banned a number of common Black hairstyles, including cornrows and braids. School administrators and dress codes also often restrict Black natural hairstyles without any consideration for the racial origins and bias involved in the drafting of the policies.

I urge this committee to follow the lead of states such as: California, New York, and New Jersey, as well as, local governments including Montgomery County, MD and Cincinnati, OH in determining that natural hair is a characteristic of race in which a person should be protected from discrimination. I ask that you support the passage of SB531/HB1444. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Jordan T. Bonardi
The Gilman School, Senior
Jack and Jill of America, Inc.
Greater Baltimore County Chapter, Legislative Chair