

One day, my ballet teacher came to me. He started asking me about my hair and whether it could be fixed. I was like, "I'll get it done," because I guess it was *kind of* all over the place? I really just wanted to go home, but he kept bantering on. He said, "Don't come back to school with dreadlocks* on your head. It's a distraction."

I was trying to keep it together and be really adultish about it, but the damage was already done. I walked out crying. I really couldn't understand how my hair had anything to do with dancing. Later that year, they changed the guidelines from just having your hair tied up, to not having any curls or "ethnic hair."

You have to understand, dance was my life. I've been dancing since I was five. It *still* is my life. I would spend days in my room after school, trying to think about

* Why are dreadlocks or natural hair considered unprofessional, militant, dirty, or distractions? In 2015, actress Zendaya wore dreadlocks to the Academy Awards, and a popular talk show host said that they made her look like "she smells like patchouli oil and weed." A quote by Paulette Caldwell: "I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew that my hair is me, before I lost the right to me, before I knew that the burden of beauty—or lack of it—for an entire race of people could be tied up with my hair and me."

how I could get the dreadlocks out of my hair. I was thinking, should I cut them? I started thinking about other things. How I'm tall, but I'm not pencil-thin. My muscles. My big butt. When I looked in the mirror, I would be like, "I just don't look like this girl, or that one."**

I was almost done with dance, but I had a passion and I wasn't going to let anybody take that from me.

I got there because of my mom, who would always say my hair is beautiful. And also because I heard this pastor talking about how your identity is found in Christ. I was just like, "God thinks I'm beautiful. Bump what *you* have to say." I started the healing process, just remembering that I am God's daughter. And then, I would listen to vibey, soul food music, this album of this girl that was being unapologetically herself. It really came in when I needed it, and when I started telling myself that I'm confident, I'm bold, I'm courageous, those things become my reality. Now, I'll walk around campus, my speaker in my

** In 1957, the KKK burned a cross outside Raven Wilkinson's hotel window; she was one of the first major Black ballerinas. Two generations later, Misty Copeland became the first Black principal dancer of the American Ballet Theatre and was told to "pancake [her] skin a lighter color to fit in with the rest of the company."

bookbag, my shades on, blasting music with like the deadest look on my face, like, *I wish you wouldn't say anything to me*. I strut all around campus and just *embody* confidence daily. It helps me be genuinely confident.

Dance is still my life. It's what I am majoring in in college. But I'm not going to compromise or hate my hair, like I used to. I just appreciate it because it is mine. I like my hair. I finally got to a point where I can rock it just because it's mine.