

MOBTOWN BEAT



SK8TR GRLZ: (FROM LEFT) FORMER HAMILTON ELEMENTARY-MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS SKYE BLAIR, SAMANTHA SZUKIEWICZ, AND AMANDA BECRAFT ALLEGE THEY WERE DISCRIMINATED AGAINST BY SCHOOL OFFICIALS BECAUSE OF THEIR APPEARANCE AND ATTITUDES.

EDUCATION

Talking a Blue Streak

FIVE BALTIMORE EIGHTH-GRADERS ARE BANNED FROM THEIR GRADUATION CEREMONY BECAUSE OF THE COLOR OF THEIR HAIR

AFTER HAMILTON ELEMENTARY-MIDDLE SCHOOL VICE Principal Barbara Harahan presented the eighth-grade graduating class of 2003 on Wednesday, June 18, 14-year-old Samantha Szukiewicz's father, Victor Wilson, ascended the stage, grabbed the microphone, and informed the assembled crowd that this was not the entire graduating class. Wilson said that five classmates were missing, including his daughter, all of whom were denied participating in the ceremony because of the color of their hair. Szukiewicz watched from the audience, in tears.

Szukiewicz says she doesn't know why the two-inch blue streak in her naturally brown hair suddenly became a problem, since it had been dyed that way for most of the school year with no

a message from school principal Anthony Barnes. Referring to the Baltimore City schools dress code, Lanier informed the girl that she would be unable to participate in the graduation ceremony if she didn't remove the streak from her hair. Lanier told her that the formality of the event mandated natural-colored hair.

"I wanted to [dye my hair] for me, and I don't think I should have to dye my hair [back] for somebody else," Szukiewicz said during an interview a couple of weeks after the graduation ceremony. "If I was to be in [the ceremony], I wanted to be in it being myself. I still thought I should be in it, even if I do have blue hair."

Devastated and angry, Szukiewicz reported the information to her father. Wilson, also furious, contacted the school's principal, the Baltimore City School Board, and the PTA. But no one, he says, returned his calls.

Principal Barnes says that Szukiewicz and her family were given a choice: Either dye Szukiewicz's hair back to its natural color or don't attend the ceremony. He says he used the citywide school-district handbook as the basis for his decision to keep Szukiewicz out of the graduation ceremony and declined to comment further on the situation.

When contacted by *City Paper*, Vanessa Pyatt, director of public relations for the city school board, said that the Baltimore

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comment from the administration. An honor-roll student, she says she likes science and is looking forward to high school. She also enjoys typical teenager pleasures, like hanging out with her friends and watching them skateboard.

So it came as a surprise to her and her family when, on June 12, Yasmeen Lanier, a teacher at Hamilton, delivered to Szukiewicz

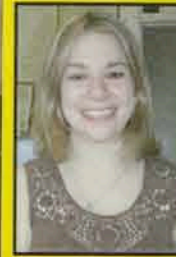
City Schools Student Policies and Procedures Handbook contains no regulations about the color of students' hair. Rather, it states that "students may wear their hair in any style they choose, provided that the hair is kept neat and clean." It does indicate that "no hats, hair rollers, and hair curlers are allowed," but there is no reference to hair color anywhere in the text. Furthermore,

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MOBTOWN BEAT/13

TORI WOODS on middle-school students banned from graduation because of their hair color.

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it prohibits the administrators of individual schools from changing that policy.

"The implementation of the citywide exclusionary dress code should be uniformly applied throughout Baltimore City's secondary schools," according to the handbook. "An individual school may not add to or subtract from the exclusionary dress code."

Pyatt contends that there must have been more mitigating circumstances involved in the decision to keep Szukiewicz out of the graduation ceremony.

Barnes says that there were indeed mitigating circumstances in Szukiewicz's situation—occasions wherein the girl was suspended for insubordination and received warnings for wearing a leather jacket (the wearing of leather is banned in the Baltimore school system), for example.

However, Wilson says that no one mentioned any of this to him or his daughter

when they were told she could not walk in her graduation ceremony. Barnes only brought them up after the fact, he says.

Of the four other students who were not allowed to participate in Hamilton's graduation due to hair color, only two—Amanda Becraft and Skye Blair—could be reached for this story. The families of both of these students say that there were no mitigating circumstances or disciplinary factors that could have contributed to Barnes' decision. Their families say that only hair color (Becraft has bright red hair, and Blair has blue hair) and perhaps their predilection for skateboarding and skater culture was held against them.

"I think it's discrimination," says Edmond Lafferty, Blair's stepfather. He says the administration has a negative attitude toward students who express themselves uniquely. "Skye got into Western [High School] with

blue hair. She made the honor roll with blue hair," he says. "Blue hair doesn't promote anything bad, it promotes individuality. Schools are supposed to care about academics, not be fashion consultants."

Szukiewicz and her father agree. "The education system is supposed to educate," Wilson says. "And when individual expression is taken away from [students], it robs them of so much. It takes away their ability to believe in themselves, their self-esteem. It robs them of their integrity, being told that people who are in power have the right to take your rights away from you."

Lorraine Becraft, Amanda Becraft's mother, says she understands that the school dress code is supposed to help protect students. But she says it's not as if her daughter were "wearing flamboyant clothes with her chest hanging out," which, she adds, "would be distracting." Becraft calls the en-

tire situation "petty" and "ridiculous."

Wilson and Becraft also note that it was only the white, skater kids who were singled out in this situation. They say that many African-American students were allowed to graduate on June 18, despite unnatural hair color—some were allowed to participate with very blonde, bright red, or starkly highlighted hair, they say. "What's the difference between my daughter and them?" Becraft wonders.

Wilson has consulted a lawyer and the American Civil Liberties Union, who asked him to submit a formal complaint in writing for their consideration. He is continuing to reach out to the city school board but so far hasn't received a response.

"It's not about restitution for my daughter," he says. "It is about preventing this from happening to any more kids." ★

TORI WOODS