Everyone has bad hair days, but not everyone chooses to. The quest for good hair is a tough one, especially if you’re black in Ames.
Her face said it all.

Every stylist in the beauty school salon knew she wasn’t happy with her cut. She wanted French braids or twists in the front. Instead, the white woman who had cut her hair stayed on the side of the chair and watched the 10-year-old African-American girl’s face go from a vacant stare to a disappointing gaze. Her step-grandmother regretfully lurked in the back, as the only African-American beautician in the shop, and offered to fix the young girl’s unfortunate mane in a separate salon she owned.

The young girl left with her step-grandmother but couldn’t help but wonder why everyone else was walking out with a smile on their face. She knew she wouldn’t be back. Frizzy and unfinished, the young girl got her hair redone the next day at the African-American beautician’s salon.

Eleven years later, Natasha Oakley has never gone back to a salon where a white woman has to do her hair. Living in Ames, Oakley still has trouble with people not being able to manage her hair. Instead of choosing a salon in Ames, she drives the hour down to Des Moines to get synthetic hair and either does it herself or has a friend do it.

Synthetic hair is fake hair that can be applied to one’s natural hair: wigs, fake ponytails, extensions — everything is fair game. Oakley opts out of getting her processed or relaxed. When relaxing hair, chemical processes are used to strip the curl out of the hair, which can sometimes be dangerous and painful. Without “white” hair, she is forced to choose these alternatives because she can’t do anything else with it, and neither can anyone else.

Oakley uses a variety of hair care products: olive oil for relaxers, Luster’s Pink Oil Moisturizer, gel, Softee Indian Hemp as hair grease for hair and scalp treatment, Motions shampoo and conditioner products, wrap lotion, Garnier Fructis conditioner and, on occasion, hair spray.

Tonight, she has a red flower positioned in her short dark hair. Its color reflects the spark in her personality. She waves to a friend in the library as she walks over to a computer to send an e-mail. Oakley, an involved student, (three-time Dean’s List honoree and member of three different national honor societies) will graduate in the spring. Before she sits down to take a break after a meeting, she brushes her hand across her tight curls and stops to think about her last four years in Ames.

The relaxing

“There have been black people here in Ames for a long time,” Oakley says, in reference to the lack of salons and barbershops that specialize in African-American hair in town. “If you know there’s a market or a need, why wouldn’t you fill it?”

“It just makes you feel ignored,” she adds, before claiming, “I’m being discriminated against.”

Aside from the daily dilemma with her hair, Oakley, like many people of color in Ames, is constantly reminded that she is in the minority.

“I remember my freshman year when I was standing and waiting for the bus … two white guys in a car came up close and yelled ‘nigger’ and drove off,” Oakley discloses. “I was crushed. I guess I wasn’t surprised. It can happen anywhere. You just don’t expect that to happen.”

A few weeks later, Oakley and her roommate were walking on Welch Avenue when a group of three white men came up to them and started talking about the rapper Twista and hip hop. Although she liked rap music, Oakley was still offended because she and her roommate were African-American.

“A lot of people are how they are because of how they were raised, where they come from. Somewhere along the way, a lot of what we learn and know is what we’ve been taught. But when we reach out, we can learn from other people.”

The parting

Laryssa Clay, 22, is from a small town in Iowa. Also African-American, her hair is short and semi-curly with a bronze tint to it. Like Oakley, she too has been faced with bouts of racism in Ames, from both sides of the spectrum. Whites and African-Americans criticize her because she doesn’t speak as “black” as they say she should. Talking “black” to Clay means talking “ghetto,” and she prefers to speak like she is “educated.”

Clay has encountered her fair share of ignorance. She’s had coworkers ask if her parents are together, assuming she doesn’t know who her father is because she’s African-American or that she has 10 different fathers. With this, many white girls also assume she can’t straighten her hair.

But she can. Clay has the ability to straighten her hair just like the white girls who ask her about it. She has curly hair, and yes, even washes it. Clay knows many people don’t always understand because generally ethnic hair tends to be fine and dry. She does acknowledge if she did wash her hair every day, it would get damaged. This is different than most “white” hair which has to be washed because it gets dirtier quicker.

Clay’s friends are mostly white, but her best friend is African-
American. The two of them used to play sports in high school and were roommates on trips they would take because Clay felt more comfortable with her. It was awkward when Clay would do her hair and have a white girl watching her, asking, “Why are you doing it like that?”

“People think we’re a whole ‘no-ther species just because our skin’s darker,” Clay says. “No, we’re not all the same, but we are all the human race.”

“One thing that bothers me is if a white person walks into a room and says that they’re the only white person in a room with black people ... they never think that it makes me uncomfortable to have been the only black person in that classroom before ... to be in a white town,” she
goes on to say, “Everywhere I go I’m basically the only black person. I get on the bus all the time and I’m the only black person. White people never think about that. When they’re put in a minority spot, it’s uncomfortable for them, but I think about that every single day.”

**the weave**

Clay’s mother had always done her hair until Clay learned how to do it herself in high school. Because of the lack of African-American salons in Iowa, Clay often travels to Illinois. The only white person who she has trusted with her hair is her brother’s wife, who has African-American siblings and children and understands how to take care of the different types of hair. Unless someone is professionally trained and has had practice, people just don’t know how to take care of it. With biracial cousins and a mother who is white, Clay remembers seeing her cousin’s hair after their white grandmother did it—a complete disaster.

Clay waited two years before she found someone to do her hair in Ames, and even then she has to drive to Des Moines to get the products for her hair (although she doesn’t like to). White saleswomen usually tell her to get all kinds of different products that work well for her type of hair, when usually none of them work at all.

To get synthetic hair, she orders it online or makes the drive to Mid-Kay Beauty Supply in Des Moines, really the only mid-Iowa beauty supply store that caters to different types of hair. When she wants variety, she buys a sew-in hair piece, a type of extension, but has to wait until she finds someone to put them in.

**the trimming**

Back at home in Chicago, Robert Bond went to a barbershop where he
learned to cut his own hair, and was doing so by the time he started high school. The barbershop was mostly African-American, but anyone was welcome to stop in for a haircut. The barbers knew how to work all hair types. Around Ames, he’s willing to help people if they need their hair worked on.

With his own pair of clippers and a nearly-buzzed head of hair, he’s had friends who have come to him out of desperation because they got their hair cut in Ames and didn’t like the way it was done. Aside from the fact that Ames has no adequate barbershops, he agrees that other ethnic venues around here could be improved upon. The Baptist church he attends, he recognizes, is completely different than the ones back home, “the music, the preaching, everything.”

“[Not] Having a multi-racial church is not the issue; the issue is that we have a lot of churches here in Ames -- non-denominational, Baptist,” he explains. “Ames in general needs to recognize there’s a diverse crowd here and needs to stop catering to one particular crowd. We need things here to make people feel comfortable.”

the layering

In the 2009 documentary, Good Hair, Chris Rock tries to answer the question of what “good hair” actually is. “Daddy, why don’t I have good hair?” his daughter asks him – similar to Oakley’s childhood experience at the salon.

Dr. Joel Geske, associate professor at the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication and chair of the Diversity Committee at Iowa State, shows the documentary in class. “The biggest issue is a lack of services for African-Americans and the other diverse communities within the city,” says Geske. “It makes you think twice about living [here] if the community as a whole doesn’t have the support services available. It’s one thing to recruit a diverse community to Iowa State, but the bigger issue is being able to retain and keep the people here.”

Geske offers possible solutions to the “problem.” One solution universities throughout the United States have come up with is having beauty salons bring someone in once a week to work on ethnic hair, but Geske notes that even that solution isn’t the right one.

What may seem like a small issue is actually a much larger one. Geske himself had a former colleague have to schedule a hair appointment on a specific weekend just so she would have time to travel to get it done. “When people have to start travelling like that, is when it becomes a larger issue,” Geske says. “We take so much for granted in the dominant culture. Sometimes the choices [for others] are much more limited.”

the styling

Lauren Nelson, 21, is bi-racial. Sitting in Caribou Coffee, her curly hair is pulled up into a composed afro. She feels like it’s obvious to everyone that she’s biracial; it’s always something that’s on her mind. She constantly feels like she has to set a standard. She feels she already stands out because she’s 5 feet 10 inches.

Her parents met in college when her mother started cutting her father’s hair, and now she cuts both his and Nelson’s hair. Besides her mother, Nelson won’t let anyone else touch her hair because of the fear that, not only white people, but no one will know how to handle it. Big and curly, Nelson’s hair can’t be tamed with “black” hair care products because it ends up being too greasy. She washes it every other day, brushes it in the shower with massive amounts of conditioner, dries it for a while, then blow-dries it for twenty minutes and picks it out for both volume and to get it out of her face.

Matching her brown hair, Nelson has big, brown eyes. She runs into a predicament because not only can she not find the right hair care products in Ames, she can’t find makeup to match her skin, either. Tinted moisturizer only comes in dark and really dark.

She envies women with straight hair even though she loves her curls. She is curious as to where women in advertisements get the products for their tight curls because she can’t find any of them, not in Ames anyway.

During the summer, Nelson worked the front desk at a resort in Okoboji, Iowa. Her mother thought it would look more professional if she pulled her hair back. As a journalism student at Iowa State, Nelson began to think -- black women in the media don’t have, big hair so why should she? “I started to think, I wonder if people only see my hair?” she elaborates. “Do I have to change and conform just to not be judged? The first three days of the job, this guy called and later came in and said I sounded white. After that, I wore my hair down and out.”

the reveal

Natasha Oakley’s 21st birthday was in April. Two friends took her to the salon, Beautiful Beginnings, on the southeast side of Des Moines. It was the first time Oakley had set foot in a salon in awhile.

Sitting in the chair surrounded by her friends, Oakley waited as the African-American beautician attached a black and bright-red weave ponytail. The beautician turned the chair slowly and Oakley looked at her long, spiral curls. The young girl with the frizzy hair and once-vacant stare was now looking back at her in the mirror.

She smiled.