

Disorder left local woman balding, depressed until she decide to redefine beauty

By ANGEL N. ROSS
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LOUISVILLE, Ky. -- What is normal?

That's the question former Mansfield resident Julia Mack-Crittendon found herself asking after she lost her hair due to the autoimmune disease, alopecia areata.



"They are round patches that show up on your scalp," Mack-Crittendon said. "They are very painful and sensitive."

According to the National Alopecia Areata Foundation, alopecia areata is a disorder in which certain hair follicles are targeted by the body's own immune system. The evidence is that T-cell lymphocytes cluster around these follicles, causing inflammation and subsequent hair loss.

"This common but very challenging and capricious disease affects approximately 1.7 percent of the population overall, including more than 5 million people in the United States alone," the Foundation's Web site, www alopeciaareata.com, reports.

The disease is not hereditary, and also occurs in children. Male and female victims can lose hair on their heads and elsewhere.

The Mansfield Senior High School graduate started losing her hair in 2002, six months after giving birth to her daughter, Scotlyn.

"I was under a lot of stress. I had just had a baby, I was in a couple of car accidents and my doctor had put me on a different birth control pill," she said. "There was a lot of stuff going on in my body, so my doctor took me off all of the medicines I was on."

After numerous tests by an endocrinologist, she was diagnosed with alopecia areata. Because of her hair loss, Mack-Crittendon said she was depressed for about a year.

"I felt like I was dying," she said. "I thought the prettiness was gone and that I wouldn't look the same."

"I didn't look like other females. I thought I was losing my feminine side when I lost my hair."

In an effort to stimulate the hair follicles, Mack-Crittendon had to endure painful cortisone shots to her scalp every four weeks.

"Each time I went back though, there was another spot," she said.

Mack-Crittendon said she can tell when she is about to have an episode because her scalp will get tender and itch. She said her mother, Linda Johnson, and husband, Dwayne Crittendon, were crucial in helping her get through her depression.

"(My husband) told me my hair didn't make me who I am," she said. "He said, 'it's just hair, I love you.' I was the person he married. He didn't marry my hair."



Mack-Crittendon still wore wigs and wraps to cover her head.

"I had about 20 wigs," she said.

By December 2006, her hair grew back and was styled in dreadlocks. By May, most of it had fallen out again.

"That's when I went to the barber and told him to cut it all off," she said. "I felt empowered because I was able to choose when my hair came off."

In June, Mack-Crittendon went to Chicago to see the play, "The Color

Purple." She went bald publicly for the first time.

"This is me, take me as I am," she said she told herself before going to the play. "I got a lot of positive feedback. People thought I had cancer, but actually it was a way for me to tell people about alopecia."

Changing her situation to a positive, Mack-Crittendon, has started a Web site called BBiBBy -- Bold Beauty is Being Beautifully You.

"BBiBBy is an organization that's celebrating the beauty of women, and women who struggle with self love, inner peace, self acceptance and self-esteem," the Web site reads. "BBiBBy is also glorifying the beauty of bald women. Women who may have alopecia, an auto-immune deficiency, and those going through treatment due to cancer."

The Web site informs readers about the disorder and her struggles with it. It provides links and e-mail addresses for extra support.

Mack-Crittendon is filming a documentary titled "What is Normal?" about her life with alopecia and exploring what beauty means to women.

"My goal is to educate women, women's groups and children," she said. "I want them to be able to look at themselves in different lights and accept themselves instead of an appearance."

