

**Testimony of Melony Armstrong  
African Hairbraider  
Owner of “Naturally Speaking” Salon, Tupelo, Miss.**

**Before the U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Small Business  
Subcommittee on Contracting and Workforce Hearing**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of this committee.

My name is Melony Armstrong.

It may surprise members of this committee to learn that, not too many years ago, the State of Mississippi demanded that I register my hands with the government.

No, I’m not a secret agent.

But my work has had a powerful impact in the fight for freedom.

Every day across Mississippi, hundreds of low-income families are housed because of my advocacy and hard work. But I don’t run a shelter.

They are clothed through what I’ve done. But I don’t run a second-hand clothing store.

They are fed as a direct result of what I have achieved and continue to achieve. But I don’t run a soup kitchen.

I have transformed the lives of literally hundreds of poor women in my state of Mississippi not because I sought out government assistance for them; rather, because I demanded that the government get out of my way so I could provide for myself and for my family, and so other women around me could do likewise in peace, dignity and prosperity.

What I achieved and what each of these women is now achieving across the American Southeast is happening because of one simple fact: We demanded the government respect our economic liberty—the right to earn an honest living in the occupation of our choice free from unnecessary government regulation.

I am an African hairbraider.

And if a lone braider in Tupelo, Miss., could have such a transformative impact helping to change the law to free so many around me to earn an honest living, imagine what could happen across our nation if state and local governments followed that example.

Not every entrepreneur is a Bill Gates or a Henry Ford. Some are and will remain more humble in the scope of their impact. But that doesn’t mean the impact is not significant in the lives of those around them.

Imagine the creative forces that would be unleashed if government respected the rights of other would-be entrepreneurs who want to braid hair, or drive cabs, or sell flowers by the roadside, or pursue any of a hundred or more occupations that would otherwise be easy to pursue if only the government didn’t

needlessly stop entrepreneurs from doing so for no better reason than to protect the politically powerful from competition.

Each day, I work to demonstrate the power of one entrepreneur.

As my story demonstrates, the power of one entrepreneur can transform not only a life, or an industry or a community; the power of America's entrepreneurs can transform our nation.

African hairbraiding is a skill that has been passed from one generation of women to another for the past 3,000 years of recorded history. For the vast majority of those 100-plus generations, women like me have practiced this craft with no government oversight, with no government-issued license, with no government-imposed demands. We learned from the previous generations by doing, and in so doing, we were free to earn a living for our families.

But even with that history, to open my hairbraiding salon—Naturally Speaking—in Tupelo in 1999, was no easy task; it took not only persistence and hard work, it also took a lawsuit and lobbying. It took all this even though I wanted to practice an occupation that is perfectly legal and perfectly safe.

To get paid to braid hair, many states demand hairbraiders obtain a cosmetology license or other similar license—typically requiring up to 2,100 hours of coursework.

That is more than a year's worth of study, 40 hours a week taking classes from educational institutions that more often than not don't teach braiding in their curriculum.

Let me say that again: the government in many states requires would-be braiders to take thousands of hours of classes that have literally nothing to do with the trade they want to practice.

When I first opened my doors as a hairbraider, I had to earn a "wigology" license (yes, there is such a thing), which required 300 hours of coursework, none of which covered hairbraiding.

To teach others how to braid hair, however, which was my ultimate goal, the state of Mississippi required me to obtain a cosmetology license (another 1,200 hours of classes in addition to the 300 I completed for wigology), then a cosmetology instructor's license (another 2,000 hours of classes) and then apply for a school license—hours I could use more productively running my business, teaching others about braiding, volunteering in my community or nurturing my family. Again, none of the required instruction actually spent any time teaching the student how to braid hair.

In the 3,200 classroom hours it would have taken for me to earn a license to teach hairbraiding, I could instead have become licensed in *all* of the following occupations in Mississippi:

- Emergency medical technician-basic (122 hours plus five emergency runs),
- Emergency medical technician-paramedic (1,638 hours),
- Ambulance driver (8 hours),
- Law enforcement officer (400 hours),
- Firefighter (240 hours),
- Real estate appraiser (75 hours) and
- Hunting education instructor (17 hours).

And that would all take more than 600 hours *less* than obtaining a license to teach braiding.

The group that benefited most from Mississippi’s regulatory regime was the cosmetology establishment. Practicing cosmetologists made up the State Board of Cosmetology and could set the bar for entry to their occupation high (and thereby keep competition to a minimum), and cosmetology schools enjoyed captive customers.

I was not about to submit to such naked economic protectionism. Instead, I decided to take on both the political establishment and the cosmetology regime, which had convinced lawmakers to limit entry into the trade.

In August 2004, I joined with two aspiring hairbraiders, who wanted to learn the business from me, and with the Institute for Justice—a public interest law firm that represented us for free—to file a lawsuit against the state to break down the regulatory walls barring potential entrepreneurs from entering the field.

In the months that followed, I took weekly trips to the state capital of Jackson (a seven-hour round-trip from Tupelo) working to convince legislators to change the law.

We didn’t go to the government seeking a handout. Across the board, braiders are independent individuals who take great pride in providing for themselves and their families through their own handiwork.

In 2005, all of our efforts paid off: Mississippi’s governor signed legislation enabling hairbraiders to practice their occupation without the burdensome government-mandated classes. The only requirements now are that hairbraiders must pay a \$25 fee to register with the state and abide by all relevant health and hygiene codes.

It is rewarding to know that the influence of my work is felt beyond the Tupelo area. Since the restrictions were lifted, more than 800 women provide for themselves as hairbraiders, taking once-underground businesses “legit” and opening new enterprises in places where customer demand was once unmet. And because of the change in Mississippi’s laws, aspiring braiders are moving here from nearby states, including Tennessee, Alabama and Arkansas.

One of the greatest benefits of our success is that it moves aspiring entrepreneurs from the “underground economy” into the “formal economy.” In the underground economy, braiders are forced to operate off the books and out of sight of intimidating and sometimes ruthless regulators who are often out to shut them down to protect the status quo.

Regulators often don’t care about people’s dreams; they only care about enforcing codes, laws and regulations that justify their existence. And as they drive around, looking for the next “scofflaw” to shut down, those lawbreakers (who are nothing more than people trying to work hard to support themselves and provide an otherwise perfectly legal service) must fear that next knock on the door, which could mean losing what they’ve worked for, paying steep fines and, in some cases, even going to jail for practicing their trade.

Freed from needless government-created barriers, I have now gone on to teach more than 125 individuals how to braid hair. No longer blocked from putting industrious individuals to work, I have employed 25 women, enabling them to provide for themselves and their families. For many of these women, the money they earn from braiding represents the first steady paycheck they have earned in their lives.

For years, the government tried to stop me from doing all this good—stop me from reaching my full potential and from helping others to do likewise through the dignity of honest enterprise. In too many

states and in too many occupations across the country, these kinds of government-imposed barriers to earn an honest living still exist.

Thank you for holding this hearing to alert the public to this problem. I hope lawmakers in every state across the country are paying attention and will heed our calls to remove those laws that do nothing but prevent honest competition in trades from coast to coast.

Thank you.

=====

Melony Armstrong is the owner of Naturally Speaking, a hairbraiding salon in Tupelo, Miss. For more information on economic liberty, visit: [www.ij.org/PowerOfOneEntrepreneur](http://www.ij.org/PowerOfOneEntrepreneur).