

# Top black hairstylists reflect on fame, life

## Annual show gives chance for exposure

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Ask Atlanta hairstylist DeShawn Bullard who inspires her, and she can come up with only one name: black hair-care pioneer Madame C.J. Walker.

But Walker, who became the first black female millionaire in America by selling hair-care products, died in 1919. Not much help for a black stylist seeking a mentor in 2007.



**DeShawn Bullard** says it's hard to find mentors in black hair care.

Tress. "We don't have anybody in the black hair care industry."

As the country's top black stylists gather this weekend for the Bronner Brothers hair show at the Georgia World Congress Center, several reflected on struggles that have faced black hair designers hoping to attain a measure of fame in the industry.

Bullard, who regularly styles Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins from the singing group TLC, entered the hair-care industry in 1995. "As far back as I



Courtesy of Ellin LaVar

**Ellin LaVar** styles tennis star **Serena Williams'** hair. "It's all about being a quality stylist," LaVar says. LaVar, of New York, stars in "Hair Trauma," a reality TV series on Women's Entertainment Network.

### BRONNER BROS. SHOW

Bronner Bros. hair show runs Saturday through Tuesday at the Georgia World Congress Center, 285 Andrew Young International Blvd., N.W.

can remember, we were in a cash business where people ... weren't paying taxes." The effect of unrecorded income, however, was that hairstyling for African-Americans didn't appear to be a viable industry.

It hadn't always been that way, said Tené Taylor, cosmetology instructor at Dekalb Technical College. In the 1970s, black stylists began taking

hairstyling from their homes into salons, he said. Some, like the late Olive Lee Benson, wrote educational books for other stylists. Walter Fontaine, of New York, became one of the first black stylists in television, Taylor said. And companies such as Revlon began to hire black stylists to promote products, helping the stylists gain national exposure.

As a young stylist, Floyd Kenyatta, a salon owner and global ambassador for John Paul Mitchell since 1989, had the good fortune of learning the secrets of marketing from executives at Vidal Sassoon. "They would say, if you don't have a product, your name is your product," Kenyatta said. When he changed his given name, Al

Floyd Alston, to the more dynamic Floyd Kenyatta, business doubled. In the late '70s he made his mark in the industry by blow-styling black hair, and when he earned enough to buy a Rolls Royce, he learned he could charge even more.

"I began to see that your name and image determine how people view you. I was doing the same thing, but people treat you the way you look."

Kenyatta decided to launch the Black Hair Olympics, a version of the worldwide hair competition minus the steep entry fees.

Barry Fletcher was one of the success stories, having won the competition in 1983. He went on to win several other prestigious awards. "That kind of catapulted me to the top of the industry," said Fletcher, who has styled celebrities such as Tina Turner, Halle Berry and Eartha Kitt. But the Maryland-based salon owner realized the challenges of being a famous stylist to stars, particularly while maintaining a salon.

Which is one reason why Ellin LaVar, the New York stylist who has worked with Robin Givens, Patti LaBelle and Farrah Fawcett, sticks close to home.

Though LaVar stars in "Hair Trauma," her own reality series on Women's Entertainment Network, and has toured with the likes of Whitney Houston, she has learned, in the end, that being famous may not be the most important thing.

"It's about being a quality stylist," LaVar said. "If you do quality work all the time, the word-of-mouth is going to go. And it's better to have 100 clients than 10 clients."