

# 'Nappy Hair' book causes furor, teacher removed from class

By Judie Glave

NEW YORK (AP) — A white Brooklyn teacher who gave an acclaimed children's book called "Nappy Hair" to her mostly black and Hispanic third-graders as a lesson in self-esteem was removed from her classroom after parents complained.

"The idea that it is a racist book is ridiculous," said the author, Carolivia Herron, who is black and believes the book should be used to teach racial diversity. "This book is a wonderful celebration of nappy, African-American hair."

The teacher, Ruth Sherman, 27, was transferred out of her classroom at Public School 75 in Bushwick after a group of parents confronted her at a school meeting last week. The district superintendent had to be called to defuse the situation.

"I think they (parents) were somewhat irked by the fact that a teacher used a book with a somewhat provocative title and somewhat provocative passages, although the book, overall, has a positive message," Board of Education spokesman J.D. LaRock said.

The board was not involved in investigating the incident but was watching it closely, he said.

"I don't want to teach in an area where people in the community think they can come out and threaten a teacher," Sherman said last week, after school officials said she could return to work at P.S. 75 despite the controversy.

The 27-year-old teacher was to make her decision before a Monday morning meeting at District 32 offices in Brooklyn. Under the union contract, teachers can request a transfer if they have been threatened.

Sherman said she read the book to her class in September to get them ready for a new team-approach to reading.

"In order to do that successfully, the kids have to like each other and respect each other," she said. "That was the whole point of the lesson, for them to realize and appreciate the differences in each of us."

If she does return, Sherman says she will not change her teaching style.

"I'm a multi-cultural freak," she said, "and if I can find a book that teaches a child about our differences in a positive way and shows us to feel good about our differences then I'm going to do everything I can to use it."

"The term 'nappy' is generally derogatory and not

every parent felt that using a book like 'Nappy Hair' in a classroom setting, although the author was black, was a wise way to go," LaRock said.

Officials believe Miss Sherman "may have used poor judgment" in choosing a book that may offend some people, LaRock said. But he added that no disciplinary action would be taken.

Ron Davis, a spokesman for the United Federation of Teachers, Sherman's union, said the book "was meant to encourage appreciation of our cultural diversity and ethnic uniqueness."

Told in a gospel-like, call-and-response style, the book is about a little girl with the "nappiest, fuzziest, the most screwed up, squeezed up, knotted up" hair. It received rave reviews, including one from *The New York Times*.

Herron, 52, an assistant professor of English at California State University, Chico, said the book is based on a story her 80-something-year-old uncle tells about her at family gatherings. "My uncle is proud of me and it's his way of telling me that," she said. Besides, "I always loved my hair."

Herron has written several books for Random House, and published "Nappy Hair" under its Knopf division at

the urging of many black friends who heard her uncle's recording played at a Smithsonian reading program in Washington.

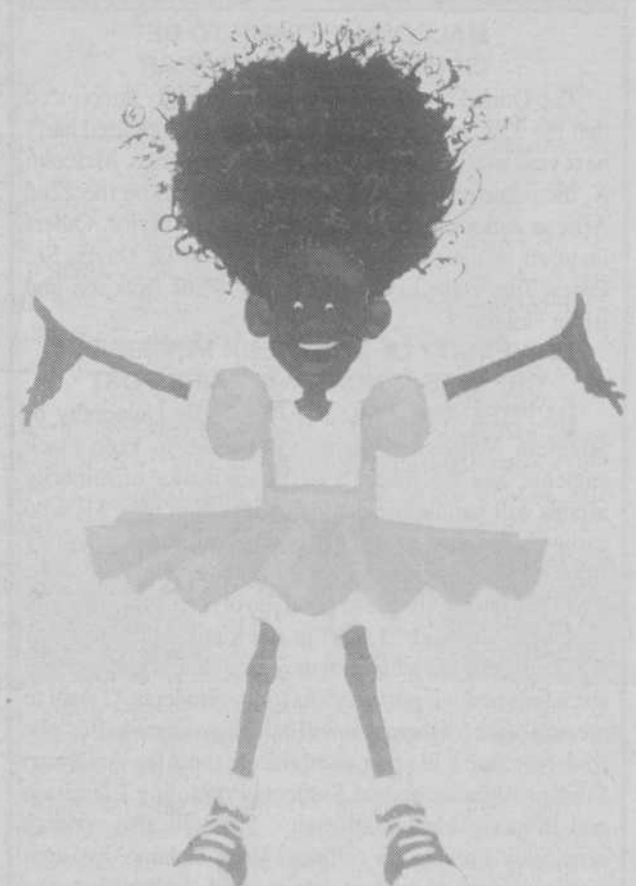
Davis, the union official, said he believed the parents who were angry had not read the entire book. "Some parents saw only a few pages, taken out of context," or heard the title, he said.

He said the furor erupted at the meeting last Monday, called to discuss a new assistant principal, when several parents stood up and began threatening Sherman, shouting things like, "Watch out" and "We're going to get you."

But Terrell Crayton, who is black and has a child in Sherman's class, said the incident was blown out of proportion.

"Yes, I have nappy hair. My kid has nappy hair. Many African Americans have nappy hair, not straight hair. This book was about letting them know that they can be proud of who they are," she told NY1, the all news cable television station.

District Superintendent Felix Vasquez was called to (See *Nappy Hair*, Page 16)



"And she's got the nappiest hair in the world."

*Ain't it the truth.*

Brenda, the main character in the "Nappy Hair" book, was written by Carolivia Herron and illustrated by Joe Cepeda.

## NAACP to again protest high court's hiring record

BALTIMORE (AP) — The NAACP is in the midst of a five-day phone, fax, mail and e-mail barrage of the U.S. Supreme Court protesting the high court's minority hiring record.

"This electronic protest is another step in the NAACP's efforts to dismantle the present unfair system of hiring Supreme Court law clerks," NAACP President Kweisi Mfume said. "It is faulty and should be thrown out in favor of a process that promotes equality for all."

Mfume and 18 others were arrested Oct. 5 during a demonstration by almost 1,000 protesters on the front steps of the Supreme Court. The group was attempting to deliver the resumes of minority law school graduates to the justices. All 19 pleaded guilty to unlawful entry and paid a \$50 fine.

Maximum punishment for the misdemeanor is a 60-day jail term and a fine of \$100.

The National Association for the Advancement of



KWEISI MFUME

Colored People has asked its 1,700 branches across the country to participate in the protest, which began Monday.

The NAACP says minorities account for 7 percent of the 428 law clerks hired since 1972 by sitting justices.

Three justices have never hired an African-American law clerk, and no Native Americans have ever been hired as clerks in the 200-year history of the court.

Of the 428 clerks hired by the nine sitting justices, less than 2 percent have been black, 1 percent were Hispanic and less than 5 percent Asian-American, according to the NAACP.

The positions are highly coveted because clerks help justices research and write decisions. Critics of the high court's hiring practices question whether issues that affect minorities, including affirmative action and immigration policy, can be handled fairly when the pool of clerks is nearly all white.

In May, Chief Justice William Rehnquist turned down a request by minority lawyers to discuss the situation, saying he did not think such a meeting "would serve any useful purpose."

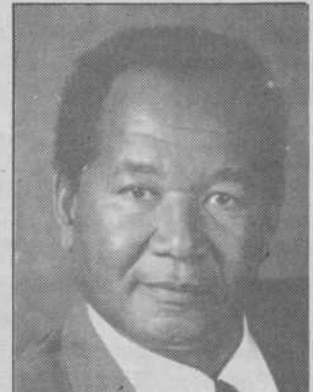
The National Bar Association, which represents 17,000 black attorneys, had extended the invitation to Rehnquist on behalf of a coalition of minority bar association leaders.

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