

Lost & Found

Gianessa Wride was just seven when she lost all the hair on her head from alopecia areata. Now, she's 'rocking the bald' to show that beauty comes from within – and spark important discussions on self-worth in our age of identity

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There aren't many ways to kindly present this information, but here goes: some kids can be jerks. Just total savages, really. Children's novelist LM Montgomery put it best when she wrote, "Children can be the most cruel creatures alive. They have the herd instinct of prejudice against any outsider, and they are merciless in its indulgence." It's no revelation that children can have a taste for brutality, but Montgomery touches on something far more interesting, that some children have a nose for what makes someone different and, therefore, a target. While researchers have found that younger generations are showing a greater capacity for empathy, 12-year-old Gianessa Wride could still be considered one such outsider. In 2020, she received two specially made bald dolls, known as 'Brave Barbie', from the National Alopecia Areata Foundation. Her elated reaction, captured on camera by her mum, went viral. It was the first time she had seen a doll that looked like her.

As we wade through the world of identity and beauty, it feels imperative to listen to younger voices like Gianessa's. Children are only beginning to calibrate how they make sense of the world at this age. They are still undoubtedly targeted by advertising and social media, but their interpretation of the world isn't heavily skewed by opinions or politics that have been years in the making. Sometimes, children's views on beauty can be on the radical side. And these views can be a lesson to us. Of course, Gianessa's health

journey means her voice is particularly valuable. She was seven years old when all the hair on her head, brows and lower lashes began falling out in coin-sized pieces. A few weeks later, she was diagnosed with an autoimmune condition called alopecia areata. In this condition, cells of the immune system attack hair follicles, preventing them from producing hair. This can happen anywhere on the body and to anyone, regardless of their sex, ethnicity, diet or health issues. The hair might return in patches, or fully grow back, but in some cases, the hair loss might be permanent. Alopecia areata isn't entirely understood, but researchers believe the condition is polygenic, in that a number of genes contribute to it.

Grappling with hair loss has made Gianessa swift and exacting in the face of school bullies. We all hope the period leading up to our teens is a time of simplicity, but for Gianessa, they have helped her learn the art of self-defence. "I've been teased multiple times. It is hard. Some kids at school give me disrespectful looks and gestures, call me names or make comments about me being bald," says Gianessa. But she doesn't fall back on insults to locate her bullies' weak spots. Instead, she keeps it simple. She tells them, "I have alopecia. My hair falls out. My body attacks my hair," and then she walks away.

Gianessa has the support of friends, teachers and parents, but she understands that this might not be the case for everyone with alopecia areata, or other health conditions which make them look different. She encourages people to seek support when they can. "Tell someone you trust about the problem and what they can do to help you," says Gianessa.

While she has a strong support system, she feels the issue lies in there being little awareness about the condition. "It's surprising to come across someone who knows what alopecia is. I want people to learn, rather than assuming it's something else. I want them to understand. I want them to ask questions."

Alopecia areata affects around 0.58% of adults in the UK, yet it received little attention until The Slap Heard Around the World (the 94th Academy Awards). At Hollywood's Dolby Theatre in March, Chris Rock made a joke about Jada Pinkett Smith's baldness, resulting from alopecia areata. The comedian compared her hairstyle to Demi Moore's military cut in the 1997 film *Gl Jane*, and before we knew it, Will Smith was up onstage. After the Oscars, Google searches for alopecia increased by 600%. The condition also received significant media attention in the form of alopecia explainers, opinion pieces by people living with alopecia, and articles detailing Pinkett Smith's history with the condition. But as much as the moment might have marked a turning point in alopecia awareness, the condition – and Pinkett Smith – had been used as a punchline.

US Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley, who has been vocal about alopecia since her own diagnosis in 2020, weighed in on Twitter a few days after the Oscars incident. "Our bodies are not public domain. They are not a line in a joke – especially when the transformation is not of our choosing."

For Gianessa, regaining control during an inevitable transformation is an ongoing process. In 2017, she made national news when she turned up to her school's Crazy Hair Day competition with a head of adhesive jewels – and won. A kaleidoscope of owls and flowers – and, moreover, the attitude and confidence that came with it – is what Gianessa now refers to as "making the best of it."

Her dad, Tyler Wride, says his daughter's transition into life with alopecia areata has filled him with pride: "When Nessa was younger, she would say, 'I just want to rock the bald.' For the longest time, she wouldn't cover her hair at all. Even if her head was getting sunburnt, she would still insist on rocking

the bald. It was so cool to see." Since Gianessa's diagnosis five years ago, Tyler has learned the importance of allowing his daughter the freedom to choose

how she presents herself to the world. "If she wants to wear a beanie, or hat, or just be bald, we let her choose how she wants to dress," he says. "We want her to feel comfortable. We don't treat her like she's any different because she doesn't have hair. We praise her for however she looks. She's amazing."

Hair has long been considered a physical symbol of identity, self-expression, culture and beauty – and, with the global haircare market valued at £67bn, there's an intense pressure to continue the dyeing, weaving and hot-oiling in the name of beauty. And this starts

young. When we are little, our parents dictate how we look. They give us braids and bowl haircuts in the name of conformity, convenience and anti-face measures. Then, as we move through childhood, we take those big, brave steps to show off our own personality and style. The feeling of taking a leap of faith on a new haircut and having the courage to show up to school the next day. Who hasn't used the scissors in our pencil case to snip some homemade bangs, or entered into a fearsome melee with a Conair tong and emerged as a crunchy, spiralled mess? Hair is part of growing up. So it's no surprise that a deep sense of shame can be attached to hair loss, particularly in girls and women. It seems that Gianessa has the rare experience of being denied a childhood rite of passage – of misadventures in hair experimentation – yet simultaneously, she faces the most extreme version of it: baldness. "Growing up with alopecia has gotten better over the years," she reflects. "It's pretty easy to live with. But when I first found out that I had alopecia, I was so sad. I'd always loved my hair so much. It was one of my favourite things about me. When I lost it, it hurt so much."

As Gianessa prepares to enter her teens, she's experimenting more with style. "I like using temporary tattoos for my head," she says. "You can be pretty creative with it. These things last for about a month, and you can get flowers, swirls, dots, anything. It's such a fun way to express myself." Before she even started high school, she continued to thoughtfully and creatively evolve her sense of style and self-expression. Facing health challenges from an early age has equipped her with a radical acceptance of her baldness and a rejection of what the cruel kids say, that hair loss means a loss of beauty. "Beauty is always there. It's not just what you look like, it's in the things you say and do – it's the way you treat people. You can be beautiful in so many ways. So keep trying. Keep going."

