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Merry Christmas and Happy Kwanzaa!

Amber Starks, winner of a Spirit of Portland award, at her downtown studio.

PHOTO BY OLIVIA OLIVIA/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Change Agent

Natural hair advocate embodies 'Spirit of Portland'

BY OLIVIA OLIVIA
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Amber Starks stands in her downtown salon contemplating an important decision – where will she expand her explosively popular hair care business? As it is, new clients at Conscious Coils have long waits for their first appointment. She dreams of hiring a new stylist, renting out a larger space, and finally having spots readily and quickly available for the multicultural hair community of Portland.

Starks' wave of new clients come on the heels of her latest success – a Spirit of Portland award she received last month for her passion and hard work to re-write a state law regulating practitioners of traditional natural hair care, the braiding, weaving and locking of hair without the use of chemicals.

Her advocacy has improved the business environment for ethnic-hair stylists, especially African-Americans.

The Portland Spirit award, sponsored annually by the city of Portland, is given to residents who show "outstanding dedication" to improving the local community.

Starks successfully advocated for a bill last year that drew support from both Democrats and Republicans to ease the regulations on 'natural hair care' businesses and change the requirements to operate them.

"It really helped legitimize black salons," Starks says. "I have no shortage of respect for underground hair care too, but I think we ought to be able to own and operate salons, so that we can join the business community and be part of other discussions."

Before the bill passed, Starks was forced to run her business across the Columbia River in Vancouver. She was especially troubled by not being able to help foster children

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