

CURLFEST '20

In this world where laws still have to be passed to protect women of color from discrimination based on their hair, this fest is breaking boundaries for the better. Curlfest may look like another Coachella, yet the purpose behind it is for more significant with a genuine need for acceptance.

Celebrating the magic of natural beauty, Curlfest is an annual event hosted by 'Curly Girl Collective', which came up for the sole reason of uniting everyone who celebrate the boon of having natural crowns.

The Change we needed in the Beauty Industry

It has been a decade of Curlfest events having the limelight, proudly empowering everyone who has been discriminated for their appearance in the past. The experience kick-started with a few seventy e-mail friends sharing their tips n tricks on natural hair care, yet the desire to make it something more arose when all the girlfriends met together at an apartment in Brooklyn, New York. Exchange of tips, products, stories all having the common aspect of unruly hair really proved to be magical for many curlsies today.

One of the co-founders, Charisse Higgens, describes it impeccably and in a gist: "Curlfest means representation, empowerment and the ability to change". The other founders: Tracey Coleman, Melody Henderson, Gia Lowe and Simone Mair along with Higgens started the business of Curly Girl Collective; their mission being the purest: of making women with naturally textured hair feel beautiful, celebrated and appreciated.

After the Brooklyn apartment meet in 2010, the group hosted small events for about three years around New York city. The need for spreading the word and giving the fest a bigger scale became evident when Higgens realised that that beauty comes in a range of shades, shapes, and textures.

Curling 'round the Challenges

For every fest, every visitor dressed up their curls in a whole range of variety: from braids to dreadlocks to going all out! That being said, attire wasn't ignored, and the enthusiasm competes to Coachella. A sense of belonging is always seen around, with young girls resonating with the many women around them, all having similarities in appearances and their upbringings.

With the unexpected pandemic dropping in 2020, The Curly Girl Collective took it as an opportunity to go back to its roots and top it up a notch: turning the fest from e-mails and full-fledged shows, and now tapping into the online realm of virtual festive methods.

Held on 19 September 2020, Curlfest 2020 was filled with inspiration and insights coming from different aspects of life, all surrounded people of colour and varied hair textures. This one-of-a-kind virtual get-together was given its own identity and was marketed as 'The CurlFest Beauty Summit: A Virtual Experience'.

It was not devoid of fun though, dance breaks in between the interviews gave the audience a chance to match the steps to the music from their own homes. The founders believe that 2020's Curlfest has a record-breaking reach compared to the fests organised within the past decade.

The positive 'hype' was created by curating a CurlFest Beauty Summit Gift Bag for all the viewers pricing at \$39 including full-sized various hair products and accessories. The Gift Bag had products from the sponsors of CurlFest: Maui Moisture, Cantu, Honey Curls and many more.

The five hours of virtual fest was organised perfectly with different sections being repeated in a cycle, thus engaging the audience with every change. Each section was given a unique title, and all combined provided every individual something to look forward to.

A section dedicated to familiarise the viewers with the faces behind multi-millionaire brands was targeted at people keen on entrepreneurship. Brains behind the Beauty, as the section name goes, had #girlboss aura all over it, interviewing the coloured leaders of the Beauty Industry.

Sharing her thoughts through the video interview in the event to millions worth of an audience was Janell Stephens, the CEO of Camille Rose. Suited up in her work attire yet being casual enough for light-hearted conversations with the host Simone Mair, Stephens explains how she started her journey to creating a brand: "I started off creating diapers for my kids which would not harm them, and the fragrances I used were my own concoction which got me thinking this should reach out to more people!". Even though she believes that taking the first step is the most important, she also admits that she does have a hard time balancing work and family life. "Manage it the best way that you can" she concludes.

CurlFest definitely cannot truly begin without discussing about maintenance, problems and possibilities when it comes to textured hair. Curl Care is Self Care proved to be a section brimmed with knowledge and open-ended incidences relating to curlsies.

'A Founder's Journey' focused on the five founders of the event. The unscripted pour of emotions from the five Black women really made the audience feel that they belong here. Each woman shared their experience: the problems, fun, the good and the bad which came up while Curly Girl Collective was a work-in-progress. "This woman rushes up to us with her daughter and she's like 'omg I have to talk to you' and I said 'hi' and she goes like 'I drove all the way here from Ohio with my daughter just so she she could see all the other girls with hair like her'...I can't believe it."

The event does not stop at appearance itself. The joy of African culture, from where curls began, is also embraced with Kukuwa Dance Group providing dance breaks in between. The group involved traditional African dance steps into their choreography which was easy enough for all the viewers to follow along.

With the fest reaching far and wide, it definitely shunned the orthodox standards of acceptance. 'Breaking Down Narrow Beauty Standards' focused on the same. Esi Eggleston Bracey explains how she leads the Beauty Business of Unilever in United States and Canada. All conversations happened with both being in their homes, which became a unique sight to behold. The host, Julee Wilson said it aptly, "Even though we cannot be together, we are here in spirit, fighting for the same thing."

Basking two dozen brands under her radar, Bracey mentions "If you think about hair and colour we haven't been involved in the beauty conversation for far too long...they (people) may interview for a job and say 'You can have this job if you get rid of your locks or your braids' and that is discrimination because these grooming policies impact Black men and women".

She further awares everyone about the CROWN Act, which goes against the discrimination against hair, making it a protected trait, similar to race and gender.

Cantu, a famous brand for curlsies sponsored the styling part of the event, 'Creating Perfectly Defined & Hydrated Curls', which took the audience through a step-by-step process of curl formation demonstrated by celebrity hair-stylist, Angela C. Styles. The studio ambience gave the tutorial a professional touch, with off-white walls being a great contrast on the dark hair. A great deal of tips were given by the Styles, "Don't ever be intimidated by your hair, section it off." she says.

Another Beauty Behind the Brains segment had the founder of The Doux, a curl hair-care brand. Henderson complimented Doux, mentioning "I like to think of it (Doux) as pops of colour, vibrant and lots of chrome...it's Andy Warhol meets hip-hop meets beauty (laughs)" and Maya Smith, the founder, agreed with the same, sharing that she wanted the brand to be authentic to her true self and her aesthetic. The hearty conversation about how packaging and the product delivers to its expectations was a real boon for people interested in the business side of curls.

CurlFest however, was not all talk. A surprising refreshment was provided with a rhythmic musical performance by Masego, introduced by the host. The dim ambience completed the Jazz music played by the supporting band with the singer. Known for incorporating saxophone into his music, this fusion was not missed for the vent as well, surely making a mark in the virtual concert.

Simone being the jack of all trades took the responsibility of handling logistics and budget in the Curly Girl Collective. "Turning something which started as a hobby to full-grown businesses has a lot of challenges and hurdles, but I don't think the five of us would be where we are without those challenges." she says. Being one of the founders of CurlFest, she believes it has continued to help her in personal growth, and shares it in her segment of A Founder's Journey, "I have grown to be confident...to sit up straight and stand in my place, like I belong here."

Yet, all this fun and frolic was just the cherry on top to the most interesting segment of it all, 'His Voice/Her Hair' which gave a voice to the debate of whether men have a say on their spouses, daughters or even the way their friend's hair are. Jidenna, an American-Nigerian rapper and activist Mouse Jones shared the positives of the Natural Hair Movement, with American radio personality, Angela Yee agreeing that she always wanted to have straight hair as a child. Shelah Marie, founder of Curvy Curly Conscious mentioned the story of her big chop and transitioning phases, and how by accepting her own natural beauty made her mentally healthier.

In a gist, the online event really helped in bringing people with similar outlooks together spiritually. The lack of physical presence wasn't felt over the joy of communicating thoughts which every viewer must have felt close to heart, promising the giddy emotions next year too.