

# SHULY WIGS

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MA: Mr. Amsel

SA: Wednesday, Wendy Williams was here. She's doing a PETA Campaign.

CT: Wendy Williams wears your wigs?

SA: Yes. I'll friend you on Facebook, you'll see everybody. I'll show you Wendy Williams' wig. So he's [associate of Wendy Williams] worked with me. He came in, they're doing a PETA Campaign and they want wigs, just hair of course, so he's coming here at 4 [o'clock] actually today to pick up the wigs that he's chosen for this shoot and then yesterday we had John Turturro, that was exciting, so this whole week things are going on, and now you [are here].

CT: And I hear that Fashion Week is a big part of your life.

SA: Yes, I've done Fashion Week for the last two years and also in Miami, we do the Mercedes Benz Swimsuit...

CT: So can you tell me how you started your business?

SA: Sure, I started my business over 15 years ago, but it was really very mom and pop, it was in my kitchen and then it went into my basement when we moved and it was one customer at a time.

CT: Were you in Brooklyn?

SA: Yes. I always loved beauty and I loved hair so I went and I did a three-month summer course in the city [New York] for styling hair. It had nothing to do with the intricacies of making wigs.

CT: Was it cosmetology-based?

SA: No it was only hairdressing. It was one-on-one by a stylist and it was not even with a certificate. So you can say I was someone who started this off as a hobby but it became something that totally overpowered me, overwhelmed my life, and just sucked me in. Wigs are something...I don't know what it is...naturally, I'm a wig-wearing woman. I'm an Orthodox Jewish...

CT: When did you start wearing wigs?

SA: I started wearing wigs in 1982, my first marriage. Jewish women, when they get married, they cover their hair, it is a religious tradition, it stems from the Talmud. What happens is when a Jewish woman gets married, her hair...how should we say? Her hair gets a different status, it becomes something intimate and it's only for her husband to see. So at home, the women can have very long hair and they don't have to have their hair covered but outside, no other man should see her hair. That doesn't mean that the Jewish-Orthodox woman wants to look dowdy and horrible, that's not at all the case, it's really about covering your hair for your husband. Just like we cover certain parts of our body. We cover up at the chest and we don't wear miniskirts. The status changes. It's really Kabalistic. I don't know if you've heard of Kabala .

CT: [nods yes]

SA: I'm sure you did, it stems a lot from Kabalistic issues, covering one's hair, and that's a whole different angle to the story.

CT: So it's literally just the hair, it doesn't matter what the style is?

SA: Correct.

CT: So it can still be...

SA: Beautiful, long hair. There are people, there are sects in the Jewish-Orthodox, there's modern Orthodox, there's mainstream Orthodox and then there's the Hassidic Ultra Orthodox. Some of the Ultra Orthodox do not wear wigs, they cover their hair with kerchiefs and some that wear wigs, they wear a hat on top, it's sort of a double...to show it [their faith] even more. But the regular standard, modern Orthodox and Orthodox mainstream will cover their hair and that's basically the start and end of it, you can be fashionable, you can look trendy, you're supposed to look beautiful for your husband and the Jewish woman is supposed to represent Judaism in a nice way. It's not about looking dowdy and wearing a helmet on your head at all. Jewish women are not hidden behind veils or anything like that. So it's very, very different.

CT: So do you find that you have two hairstyles? You still maintain your hair for your husband, so does that get styled in a beauty salon or colored.

SA: Absolutely.

CT: Wow.

SA: Many women will have a beautiful head of hair under their wig, some cut it shorter because it's uncomfortable to have so much hair, but generally you're meant to look very, very beautiful for your husband, in the home and out of the home. It just creates a certain intimacy. Marriage is very sacred in

Judaism. Marriage is basically a one-on-one relationship and excluding everybody else, so this part of the things that define it. Marriage and Jewish religion is a sort of aspect of the love between God and mankind, humankind, that we only believe in one God and so it interprets into marriage where it's one woman, one man and the love there is eternal and you know encompasses everything.

CT: Thank you so much for the education. I've heard different variations of that, but I feel what you said is very clear. So when did wigs become a part of your life? Were you told or you knew as a child that I'm eventually going to wear a wig...

SA: Well my mother wore a wig and I knew that when I get married, I'm going to wear one. At the time in the early 1980s, late '70s, wigs were matronly looking, they were not so fashionable. There were a lot of wigs that looked like Jackie Onassis; you know the poufy...the hair that was used was very poor quality. As times progressed, the hair that people are sourcing is better hair, it has more movement, it looks much more natural. We've developed a multi-directional top that you have a scalp and you can move it everywhere, so the styles are endless, you can even do an updo, and you can go through a really fancy red carpet affair and look very, very glamorous with the wig. Also the nets I use are like a stretch cap, it's like a do-rag in a way but firmer and it stretches and molds to the head and that's why people love my wig, they say that it's so, so comfortable. I've had African American women who've had wigs they've bought elsewhere and they come to me and they go, "Oh, the net...it's so delicious. It feels so good." You're wearing it everyday. Eighty percent of my business is Jewish-Orthodox women, who are wearing the wigs all day, everyday and it has to be comfortable, they have to forget it's on their head. One of my ads is "You will be noticed, not your wig." You want the total package, you don't want something looking very "wiggy" on you. So they have to forget it's on their head. The women who are coming to me, a lot of them are career women, they're in the city [New York], they're working in banks, they don't even want anybody to know that they're wearing a wig, they're Jewish and Orthodox so they want to forget something's on their head and it has to be natural and it has to look great for about 5-6 weeks, that's the time frame for wearing it and bringing it in to be serviced again.

CT: So what about when you first started?

SA: When I started, wearing wigs, there was a very limited amount, they were mostly coming from China and they were stiff, steel wool.

CT: Was it processed or even fake hair?

SA: Some of them were fakes and synthetics and then the real hair felt like horsehair, so that means every three months I was throwing away the wig. It was horrible. When you moved, the wig moved with you, there was no movement, like a helmet. When I started working in wigs, I had somebody from Long Island who was making a piece at a time, very, very flat pieces, I met him through somebody else. I started selling hats, I was working for a hat company and I was selling hats to African American women that go to church so I would traipse around the Bronx and Harlem.

CT: You sold hats, like the big....

SA: You know with the feathers, for church-going women. When I moved to America...

CT: How did you get to that culture? That's fascinating.

SA: Yeah, I was working for a hat company, they were manufacturing hats and they wanted a sales girl, so I said, who wears hats? African American girls wear hats for church. I'm going there.

CT: That's an icon in that culture.

SA: Yeah, so I was calling them all over the state and then I left that job and I went to work for another company who were making wigs at the time. I worked for them briefly and I was wholesaling a line of wigs and then I decided to go on my own and that's when I had a Spanish man making pieces for me, he was a wig maker and I sold him one wig at a time. Some (customers) of them were styling the wigs elsewhere and the people who were styling it for them were called sheitel macher. In the Jewish world were saying, "Who's selling these wigs?" We'd like to get some and sell them and that's how my whole-sale started. People were coming to me and it was all home-based businesses.

CT: About what year was this?

SA: I would say about 1999, I started to do this very part-time.

CT: And when did you move into this [store]?

SA: 2007. So all that time, it was a slow build up. I'm a walker, I don't zoom into things. I take things slowly, that's my nature. All the time, improving the product, because the Jewish Orthodox woman is tough client. She wants the hair to look perfect, shiny and vibrant, not synthetic. It should look amazing for 6 weeks. And I've had, and you can quote this, women who've not washed their wigs for 8 months and worn it every day. And then they come in and go, "I need it washed and set." And we ask, "How long [has it been since it was serviced]." [They say] "8 months." So the hair has to be very good for it to look good on somebody for 8 months without washing it. I do not recommend it.

CT: How does that happen? Because it is real hair.

SA: It's real hair.

CT: So how does it not get mucked up with pollution, dirt and...?

SA: I don't know. I don't have an answer. I wouldn't walk around like that

[Shuly's husband]: Well it doesn't look it's best after 8 months, as you can imagine. But it look kind of manageable.

SA: It looks decent.

CT: But they haven't been washing it at home?

SA: No, no, no. I'm talking about a particular customer. She was not washing it at home and I said to her, "You know what, I should just quote you and film you and tape you because you are an ultimate advertisement for me." Because the hair that I'm sourcing is high, high quality. What happens is, when the cuticles are removed from the hair, the hair dies very quickly. The majority of African American women do not know that. So they're buying hair from Korean sellers and the hair is de-cuticleized. Why do they do that? Because it's so much easier for them to ventilate it into the wig. When hair has cuticles...every hair has fish scales on it and it has to be in exactly the right direction so no matting should occur, knotting. So they just take off the cuticles, which look like fish scales and then they can put the hair in any which way, upside down. But I on the other hand do not remove the cuticle so every hair has to be put in carefully, so that means, a woman who is ventilating my hair, if she drops the hair on the

floor, she is not allowed to pick it up and put it back, because she won't know which direction it came from, as it comes from the head. [To her husband] "Do we have any pony tails that we could show her how it comes off people's heads?"

MA: Basically when you cut somebody's hair, this is the hair so it's that way [he shows me the direction of the hair].

CT: So you want to know the direction it came out because that's how it naturally will fall.

MA: Shuly: Exactly. I would create a problem if it was ventilated the wrong way.

CT: So it's called "ventilated."

SA: When the woman put the hair, I'll show you, I have a woman here who does it. When she knots the hair, it's called ventilation into the cap. The empty cap and you're ventilating the hair, one by one.

CT: So where do you get the raw hair?

SA: I have sources, I have a lot of brokers who come to me [and say] "Shuly, I have beautiful hair." And then I check the hair; that, I do myself. I handpick the hair. And the hair that I choose, I pay for. It's more money than just buying in bulk. But that way I have a little more control over the quality that I'm getting.

CT: I don't know if you saw Chris Rock's documentary, "Good Hair?"

SA: Hmm mmm.

CT: Yeah, a lot of people saw that. Pretty amazing. I don't know what you thought about that in terms of the Indian Remy hair, I learned from Minky that you have mostly Russian hair.

SA: Yeah, but I do use South American hair too, Brazilian, Argentinian. This line, I call my "Studio Line." We call it "Luxury on a budget." The hair costs me less, people get the same workmanship. If an African American woman walks in I won't even show her the European hair line because it's too fine for her, she's looking for a coarser texture anyway and it's so much more accessible. I also explain to them, when they're having weaves, how often they have to change it, their scalp is not breathing, this can be removed every single day, so there's less of the sores on the head. They don't have to bang their head (if it itches), they can scratch their head. So I've really learned a lot about the culture and I've worked with many stylists who are African American. The majority of them are.

CT: Would you say about 80% are Orthodox Jewish?

SA: Now I would say about 75/25. It used to be like 100% Jewish, then it turned to 90[%] Jewish, and then alopecia and Chemo patients and then it's turned now, I would say, about 25% African American women and alopecia Chemo and then the rest is Jewish Orthodox women. So I'm getting to be more well known out there, I'm branding myself a certain way and I have lot of beautiful images which I would like to show you as well. But I would like to target the question you have.

CT: Well mostly I would like to hear about you as a businesswoman from starting out to getting to this place, [having your wigs at] Fashion Week. How did that transition happen? Do you know people?

SA: No. A few years back...I have a friend who is a party planner and she's a very fun individual, she's a freak Michael [her husband], she's a freak and I love her because of her freakiness. She's very different. She comes from a Hassidic background, yet she is so amazing and talented, she's done the Emmys. She's done a lot of red carpet affairs. She's done Twilight, the movie. She gets called all the time. So a few years back she called me up and said, "What are you doing tonight Shuly?" I said to her, "Actually I am exhausted, tired and I'm going to bed with a book." She said, "No you're not. You're coming with me to the city [New York], there's a whole party, networking, fashion people...and I'm taking you with because I think it's going to pertain to you." And she took me in my pajamas. I actually had my pajamas on and I just threw a skirt on top. I promise you, this is how I went [laughing]. And she introduced me to a really nice Haitian woman. She's a very, very vibrant, strong personality in the beauty industry. I met her and she sort of liked me right away. She said, "Shuly, you're making wigs and Tammy tells me you're doing such amazing stuff. I've got to meet with you because I know so many people in the beauty industry who use wigs and you've got to start coming to these events and you have to start meeting people. So anytime she was on a shoot, she does nails, she's a nail artist. When she did the charity for Haiti, I attended and we donated some money for Haiti. It was in the Peninsula Hotel. And she started dragging me to all these places and I met a lot of stylists and I would go down to Chelsea Piers to Milk Studios and people got to know about me and low and behold, they came to Brooklyn. That's how it started.

CT: Did you have the netting at that time?

SA: I had already been doing wigs for many years. This store was open. So we're talking about 5 years and I'd met Meredith what [to her husband], no, no, no, 4 years ago? When did start with Eugene?

MA: About the same time.

SA: She introduced me to somebody called Eugene Davis. Eugene Davis is a stylist that was doing Salt-N-Pepa, he was doing Rashida from the Cosby show. He came here and he was flabbergasted at what he saw. He said, "Shuly, I've been around, I've never, ever, ever, seen a salon like this. He just sat here and he wouldn't leave. He said, "Listen, you've got to make me pieces." He lived in London and we started a relationship, I worked with him extensively. He did a fashion show in the Mayfair Hotel in London, and he used all my pieces. So gradually things just....and one stylist sees the other and they come here and they call this "The Candy Store." That's the name the stylists call it.

CT: Very inspiring. So what are your goals for the future?

SA: I have a lot of goals.

MA: We have a lot of goals. It's a slow process. Shuly is doing amazing work with PR [Public Relations]. I was actually in a meeting with 2 guys, we were meeting about different things, propositions. We were discussing what it takes to get a business going with PR and one of the guys, asked who is doing our Facebook page and I said she [Shuly] does. He said it was amazing. I don't even know whether someone could do such a job because in order for that person to do that, one has to understand the business.

[Shuly shows me her Facebook page]

CT: Oh, that's your Facebook page.

SA: I'll show you a lot of pictures just so you can get an idea of the type of wigs that I make and what

can be done. You know Tamar Braxton?

CT: Oh, yes.

SA: She has my wig here.

CT: Are you kidding me? [laughing]

MA: You don't know the half of it. You'd be very surprised.

SA: Here [showing me on the computer], that's my wig. See the reasons stylists love it...this was styled by Pat Sumpter she's a celebrity stylist, and she really is a celebrity stylist, so she loves my pieces and everybody goes crazy about the hair line because it is so natural and yet it's not a lace front, which is very, very rare in the industry.

CT: Right, I know with Beyonce, that was her big thing, that she wore lace front [wigs].

SA: [pointing at the computer screen] This is a wig, believe this or not.

CT: I saw that and wondered why don't they just do that with their hair?

SA: No, no, no, because the girls sometimes, they have very thin hair. They don't want to dye their hair. This is a full wig. This is on Vogue. I can show you a lot of images that we've done.

CT: Well if you'd like to send any to me to include in the archive, I'd be happy to do that. If you want to email them to me.

SA: Right, so again I have a various type of client-base. So people say to me, "So how is it to be an Orthodox Jew and you're like dealing..." I said, "I don't care. I'm here to sell wigs, to provide wigs, to make women beautiful. I don't care who they are."

CT: Well it's surprising, but it kind of makes sense because you're part of a culture that is naturally wearing this product that needs functionality.

SA: I'll show you some beautiful images. This is Mary J. Blige's stylist, and he did this hair. This is one wig. This is all wigs.

CT: Wow. So how do you get the scalp to look so natural? It looks like it's your head.

SA: That's my secret.

CT: Ok, you don't want to tell your secret?

SA: No, no. I can tell you. It's a multi-directional top. It's made with silk. This is a wig. She has very short hair. I can show you a before and after. These images I will never show to my regular customer-base. Some yes. This is my wig, the front cover. That's Eugene Davis in London, that's him too. This is Felix Fischer. He does Elizabeth Hurley, and he's a stylist for Hilary Clinton. That's Dante, that's me, that's Eugene. That's a whole wig. So my wigs have to look amazingly natural.

CT: So about how much are these wigs? Do you rent them out for shows?

SA: Yes, we do. My price point with the Studio Line is very competitive and reasonable, extremely so. There's a stylist now, Timothy Wallace, he's doing "Love and Hip Hop" on VH1. I do not know the show but he's using my wigs. I just told him when they fight please do not let them pull my wigs. That is a no-no.

CT: It's disrespectful to the wig.

SA: Exactly. [laughing]. And then this is when we were on the cover of a magazine. So I like to do a lot of work in the beauty industry because I love beauty. This is one side of my business; the next side is really empowering women. I sometimes have women that come here and they're really in the dumps. I tell women, you look good, you're going to feel good. I think beauty attracts success somehow. You know when you feel good, you're more confident and that confidence will attract success. So I'm a big proponent of that and I push that heavily.

CT: I think the thing that's most surprising to me is not that it looks so natural, but that even, when I was talking to Minky, that it really feels...that it's something you don't just want to take off as soon as you come home.

SA: No, no, no, there are women who just live in it. I deal with women with alopecia that will have 3-4 of these wigs.

CT: So with Tamar's [Braxton] wig, how much would that cost?

SA: \$1,550, here in the salon. It will include a cut, a style, a fitting, highlights and they get a year guarantee if anything goes wrong with the wig, we back it up. So if the hair sheds or it knots, we'll take care of it, we'll fix it.

CT: So are they supposed to comb it? How do they maintain it?

SA: We tell them how to maintain it. And then they bring it here every 5-6 weeks for a wash and set.

CT: And how much is that?

SA: \$50

CT: That's cheaper than extensions.

SA: Yes it is. It's also cheaper the weaves, it's cheaper than a lot of things. I'm fully aware of that. Wendy Raquel Robinson has three of my wigs. What happened was, they did a photo shoot of her with my wigs and she just fell in love. She's from The Game [television show], again I have not met these people personally, though she really wanted to, but I'm here and she's in Atlanta so that's not happening. [looking at her Facebook page] You see a lot of images are with African American women, a lot. So yes, we're not the typical wig salon that caters just to the Jewish client base and that's it. I'm totally out of the box with that. You asked me initially what made me go into wigs, when I first got into wigs, I was looking to improve on the quality of the wig and make the wig as comfortable as it could be for women to wear because we have to wear it literally every day. To wear something every day it has to be sturdy but at the same time, comfortable. And that's a very difficult thing to do. So I would sit there and work on.

CT: So how did you do that?

SA: I worked with a lot of different fabrics to decide what's going to be the best. So literally sitting on a block and working it out...where it's going to end and sending it off, having a prototype, it coming back, not happy, send it back. As my husband will attest, I was up for 6 years in a row 24/7. I think working until 3-4 in the morning every night.

CT: So you patented that?

SA: I have not pat...well don't tell...that's up to...you see I'm the creative director. Anything that has to do with patenting, everything else is him [her husband] so.

CT: Are you worried that somebody will copy it?

SA: Well, I tell my stylists do not give this out. Yesterday to John Turturro, I gave him two empty nets to try on Vanessa, I told him under any circumstances he's not allowed to release those nets, they have to come back to me.

CT: It's a cutthroat business, it seems like if somebody took it apart.

SA: I've had people who have bought my wig to take it apart...they could not do it.

CT: Why not?

MA: That's one of the reasons...I'm not going to say that I'm not...

SA: Yeah, but we should do it

Mr. Shuly: We should do it, however, the way we do that, and the people we work with, it's solely for us.

SA: And I've been there training all the people in the factory what I want so people have tried, but the look is not the same. It's bulkier, it looks more wiggy and it looks more helmet-y, it doesn't sit flush in these areas so you're getting a round effect or a conning effect and they can't get it.

CT: Well it took you 6 years to create it, so...

SA: I made it back and forth, again and again and again and constantly improving all the time and I'm still improving actually. I'm talking to you now you think I'm finished? No. I'm constantly saying this is going to be this way and I want a bigger multi-direction...if somebody wants a really deep side part. I'm constantly looking to improve it. It never ends. You know copying is a form of flattery, but you can't originate it because of what I did, I know my stuff and stylists who have been in the business, maybe longer than me actually, they tell me "This is the Rolls Royce of wigs." So I know that I'm doing something right. But I'm never satisfied. I'm always wanting better. That's my personality. My husband complains about that. "You're never satisfied."

CT: It's hard. I feel the same way, when you're fingerprints are all over it, it can't be duplicated...

SA: Correct.

CT: It doesn't mean it's better or worse...

MA: Actually the piece is a beautiful piece, however it's Shuly's signature in it, it's not even about the wig, it's about her in it, and if you don't have the knowledge that she does, than you can't copy that. Seriously. You have to know...there are so many details involved in putting a wig together, that if you don't pay attention the way that she knows how to do that, it's going to be extremely hard.

CT: So do you have just have the designs or are they manufactured off site?

SA: Some are done here. We do custom pieces here. Somebody comes in and she's having hair loss in a certain area, we will create something here for her. If somebody wants just bangs we'll do that hair for her. When it's a custom piece and I need that much more time, then I'll work on it. Sometimes I'll even create a mold and then I'll send it to my guy and the factory will create it for me. It comes back here, the customer approves it and then we carry on.

CT: If I ever do wear a wig, I would come here.

SA: [laughing]

CT: I had no idea.

SA: I just wanted to show you why they've written about us we're "not your grandma's wig." Because we do all the colors this is ombre where we've lightened the ends so it looks so dramatic and different and some of these girls tell me, you know I walk in the street and I get such compliments and nobody's thinking it's a wig.

CT: So how many stylists do you have here working on wigs?

SA: Usually, it's like this, I have 2 cutters, 2 colorists, 2 stylists, sometimes I style if I have time. Sometimes I feel like cutting so I go back into it a little bit. And 2 girls are blowing. Everybody specializes in what they're doing. I do have...I'm looking for another PR person, I let somebody go. I do most of the PR myself, but I'm looking to hire somebody that is going to help me with the PR because we get a lot of calls that either fall through our fingers or that I can't really do. For instance, Beyonce's stylist, Kithe Brewster called us, he wanted our wigs for his fashion show and I could not do it because I don't have anybody to send down with the wigs. I can't release 20 wigs from here just to anybody, I don't care whose stylist they are. What happens if a wig gets lost? I'm going to come chasing him for the money? So I need to have my people. At the moment, even with NY Fashion Week, I minimized, we're only doing 2 shows because I'm very restricted with staff now. I have to get the right staff together. Change is good and healthy, I'm always looking for better and more professional. I think Minky is very nice, she's very accommodating, she just came on staff, she started a month ago, she's still in training actually.

CT: She knows a lot.

SA: Yeah. Our training is not only about the wigs, it's about how to deal with customers, what our customer service policies are, how we want them to deal with the customer, if a customer is irate and disappointed, how to deal with her, how to diffuse her, how to explain to her that she should not worry. Because a lot of people when they have a wig they're not happy with, they go into a panic because many places just get rid of you. You paid us the money, goodbye. But here it's different. So initially they'll come and attack us. The minute they hear that we'll back them up, they're like "Oh my God, this is so

different. The customer service is so unique.” This is something that you need to train your girls how to do. Usually when people are attacked, they attack back. But I can’t allow my girls to do that. That’s the natural instinct of a human person.

CT: People get passionate over hair.

SA: Right. So I have to teach them that. It takes time and effort. It makes me tired, in fact. [smile]

CT: [laughing] That’s amazing. Is there anything else that you want to share?

SA: I do want to do an amazing project with women who are going through Chemo or alopecia and do an amazing editorial in a big magazine or on a TV show before and after. Show them coming out bald and having them come out with the wig and how they can look so with it, without those old-fashioned ugly wigs, they’re buying from the catalogs for \$40. It’s really an enhancement, a wig is an accessory today, it’s not something that you have to wear, it’s a gorgeous, amazing, accessory. It doesn’t pull your hair out. That’s what I really want to let people know about. And I want to improve women’s lives in that way. There are women as they get older, they lose hair and they don’t feel as sexy as they used to, so they have an option. And the majority of men, I would say 99.9%, if their woman is in weaves, they’re not allowed to touch their hair, but if the woman has a gorgeous wig and then she takes it off at night, the men do not care. Do not care. Do not care. And I’m telling everybody, I have to because one of the editors of Juicy magazine go my wig and I was telling her, get your weaves out, she got her weaves out, I’m going to show you her picture, and she got a wig from me [she looks online]...that’s my wig to in Vogue, on the front cover, isn’t that beautiful?

CT: Amazing.

[We look online at her Facebook page - END]