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The long and short of it

By **NICOLE BLACK**
Daily Record Columnist

These days, my hair is long because that's how I like it. It wasn't always that way.

Throughout my legal career I've struggled with the issue of how to style my hair and dress appropriately so as to maximize the perception that I am a competent, professional lawyer.

I've been an attorney for more than 14 years now, and have yet to figure out the solution to my dilemma.

While all lawyers necessarily must give some thought to their personal grooming and choice of outfits, it's is a particularly thorny issue for women lawyers.

There is an accepted "lawyer outfit" for men: a gray, navy or black tailored suit, white or blue shirt, a conservative tie and black or brown Oxford shoes.

For women, however, there is no clearly established "lawyer outfit." No matter what you wear, it invites commentary and other lawyers make assumptions about you based on their own personal preferences, over which you have no control.

For example, I've always preferred black and neutral colored suits, since I believe that brightly colored suits are too flashy, thus inappropriate for court. Some male lawyers have offered me the unsolicited observation that I look too "somber and serious," however, and should wear brighter colors.

Additionally, when appearing in court, especially when appearing in front of male judges, I've always taken great care to dress conservatively, with minimal jewelry, knee-length skirt suits — as opposed to shorter skirts or pant suits — conservative pumps and tops that are anything but low cut.

Similarly, for much of my career, I wore my hair in a shorter hairstyle, in a misguided effort to deemphasize my feminine traits.

My rationale behind all of those decisions was based, in part, on comments made by many male lawyers about female lawyers — the gist of those comments being that they found it distracting when women wore their hair long and pushed it out

of their face, or wore short skirts, or low cut shirts or sparkly jewelry ... the list goes on and on.

Eventually, I realized the futility of my efforts to deemphasize my gender. I became pregnant with my first child and quickly realized that it is essentially impossible to downplay your gender when you're pregnant.

So, I gave up even trying. I grew my hair long again because I like it that way. I feel good about that decision, in large part because I have yet to hear of a male lawyer who gave a second thought to his appearance when appearing before a female judge.

I've never heard them say:

- "I tried to downplay my alpha-maleness by wearing a pink tie so she wouldn't feel that I was trying to challenge her."

- "I tried to speak in a softer, slightly higher voice in order to avoid emphasizing my masculinity."

- "I didn't comb my hair over my bald spot when I appeared before her so that: she'd feel superior to me, in that she had more hair than I do, and/or would be repulsed by my baldness and thus not distracted by my manly allure."

- "I pulled out the ol' earring from college and popped it into my left ear, just so that she could relate better to me."

So, for now, my hair is long and I don't plan on changing my hairstyle anytime soon. I might consider it the next time I happen to overhear my male colleagues engaging in lengthy, convoluted discussions regarding appropriate dress when appearing before female judges, much like the conversations my female colleagues and I have had over the years.

I won't, however, hold my breath. And that's the long and short of it.

Nicole Black is of counsel to Fiandach & Fiandach and co-authors Criminal Law in New York, a West-Thomson treatise. She also publishes a popular New York law blog, Sui Generis, nylawblog.typepad.com and a blog devoted to legal humor, Legal Antics, nylawblog.typepad.com/legalantics.

