**Are Dreadlocks Protected under Title VII?**

Christopher Polk was a delivery employee for FedEx

when he watched a Lord Jamal music video rapping

about Rastafarian beliefs in the sanctity of dreadlocks.

Such dreadlocks, permanently interlocked strands of hair,

were worn by African chieftains 6,000 years ago. Polk

became a Rastafarian and grew shoulder-length locks to

symbolize his new religious path. Dreadlocks are now

quite fashionable and worn by many who do not practice

Rastafarianism.

But Polk’s new hairstyle violated FedEx grooming

policy of a “reasonable style.” After several internal rounds

of problem solving, FedEx ordered Polk to cut his hair

or be assigned to a job with no direct customer contact

and lower pay. He refused and was terminated. He sued

under Title VII, claiming religious discrimination. Six

other FedEx employees lost their jobs for the same reason.

These are not isolated cases. Police departments, prison

authorities, retailers, and schools have also been sued after

refusing to allow dreadlocks that are not covered at work.

In general, courts have allowed employers to impose

their own grooming standards providing that such standards

are applied uniformly or fairly. For example, when Afros

were all the rage, an employer could be accused of not applying

a grooming policy fairly if Afros were banned but

long hair or ponytails were allowed for men. But there was

no religious basis to these hairstyle cases. Although limited,

the legal track record for hairstyles based on religion

versus grooming policy is more favorable to plaintiffs like

Mr. Polk. For example, Sikh men have won lawsuits based

on their religion that requires them to wear their beards.