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A SPECIAL BOND

Seeing red

Residents share the ups and downs of life as redheads

BY JANNET WALSH

STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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Redheads turn heads. And we love it. We grew up being teased by our classmates. Today, when we walk down the street or go shopping, people stop and ask to touch our hair - or they just do it.

JANNET WALSH/STAR-BANNER

Riley Grace Mixson, 5, of Ocala, lounges in her bedroom with a few of her favorite pillows and stuffed animals. Riley said she enjoys the attention she gets from being a readhead.

Five-year-old Riley Grace Mixson likes the attention her gorgeous long hair brings and dreams of growing up to be "an American princess."

"I want to stay a redhead - unless they have pink," the Ocala girl said during a recent interview for the Star-Banner's special project on redheads.

This project, which sprang from the childhood taunts and the adult pride I have experienced as a redhead, drew insights from dozens whose hair colors range from champagne to auburn.

Almost everyone said they get noticed. Most were teased in school and later admired for their locks. Some talked about a greater sensitivity to pain and some about a special bond they feel with other redheads.

"And I think that we notice other redheads like we're in some sort of secret society, like a secret club," said Brooke Cole, 26, of Ocala, who matches her hair to Crayola's burnt sienna. "And we bond so much more than with any other hair color, that we just sort of connect no matter what age we are."

"The hair is a beautiful thing," said LuAnne Warren, 42, a mother of three redheaded boys. "Red hair is what makes us stand out." Their whole family, in fact, has red hair, including the father, Michael, and their golden retriever, Jenny.

The parents were taunted when they were children, with jeers like "carrot top" and "red is dead." So they've made it a point of preparing the boys for that and teaching them to have a sense of humor about it.

"We were all made different," LuAnne Warren said. "God has made us with red hair."

Jennifer Gordon, of Ocala, earned a special nickname in school that went with her red hair.

It all started in first grade, when her long tresses caught fire at a birthday party.

"Honestly, from first grade through 12th grade, the boys at school called me 'fireball,'" said the 35-year-old proud mother of a redhead. "I'm sure it was because they remembered me catching fire, but it was also because of my fire-red hair."

Many, when they think of red hair, think of Irish or Scottish people or other northern Europeans. In fact, the gene variations for red hair appear to derive from European populations - as far back as 20,000 to 40,000 years ago, according to an online essay by Jonathan Rees, a researcher at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland.

And the genes show up most often in Celtic countries.

Jamal Fakhoury, a 48-year-old Ocala chiropractor with an office in Crystal River, is a very rare exception, the experts say. His ancestors came from Lebanon and

Palestine.

"It comes down from my family from my grandfathers on both sides," he said. "My grandmother also had red hair. My father had red hair when he was younger and that turned a little bit darker, and now it's a very dignified silver color."

Redheads are a minority, but sometimes they come in large numbers: the Rock family, for example.

Redheads Russell and Linda Rock, who live in the Florida Highlands, have six red-haired children, ages 8 to 21.

That all their children have red hair is no surprise to Stanford University geneticist Barry Starr.

"If both parents are redheads," he said, "they can only pass on the red gene. It's most likely they're going to be red children, but there are going to be exceptions."

Brunettes who have freckles may have one of the two copies of the gene MC1R - that is, melanocortin 1 receptor - that are required for redheadedness, Starr said. So if you have brown hair and freckles you could have children with red hair.

Rees points out that redheads - with our typically fair, freckled skin - are more susceptible to sunburns and skin cancer than people with other skin types.

Many of us feel we're also more sensitive to pain.

"I can remember going to a dentist, sitting in the chair," Russell Rock said, "and finally when the doctor came in he walked into the room, stopped and said, 'Oh, he's a redhead.'

"And I said, 'What does that mean?' And he said, 'You guys bleed a lot, and you have a very low threshold of pain.' "

Brooke Cole heard a similar comment when she was having her baby. She was given extra anesthesia and was told it was because she's a redhead.

Roger B. Fillingim, a professor at the University of Florida College of Dentistry, has looked into the question of redheads and pain, and into whether a certain drug - pentazocine - is more effective as a pain reliever for people with two copies of the gene for red hair. The drug did work better with redheaded women, but not for the men.

It's not clear, he said, that redheads are more sensitive to suffering. For one thing, pain is so complex and is affected by so many factors.

Fillingim said a University of Louisville study did find that redheads are more sensitive to heat and cold. On the other hand, a Dutch study found that true redheads were less sensitive to electrical pain.

He said redheads, at about 5 percent, are a "fairly large part of the population."

But as a girl growing up in Minnesota, a state filled with Scandinavian blondes, I wished I could be "normal" like all my friends. Then I wouldn't be teased - called "carrot top" and "redheaded woodpecker" - at the school bus stop.

I wonder, now, how many of my blonde classmates have dyed their hair red, just wanting to be a redhead like God made me.

Jannet Walsh can be reached at jannet.walsh@starbanner.com or (352) 867-4124.

The Warren family has a total of five redheads, in addition to their reddish-haired golden retriever, Jenny. The family includes parents LuAnne and Michael, and their sons, Jonathan, 3, Paul, 6, and Matthew, 8.

PHOTOS BY JANNET WALSH/STAR-BANNER Jennifer Gordon, 35, and daughter Grace, 5, spend some time together outside the church they attend, First Presbyterian Church in Ocala. As a child, Jennifer earned the nickname "fireball" after her hair caught on fire at a birthday party.

Sam Rock, 21, isn't afraid to show off his bleached red hair. Sam is one of eight redheads in the Rock family.

Peter Prevete, 19, of Ocala had long curly hair before he had to cut it off to play the role of Friar Tuck in Central Florida Community College's "Robin Hood."

Redheaded Minnesota native Jannet Walsh, 41, has been a staff photographer at the

Star-Banner since 1998. She has nearly 18 years of experience as a photojournalist, working at a variety of newspapers in the Midwest, Florida and Europe.

Jannet maintained a NATO portrait contract in Geilenkirchen NATO Air Base, Germany, and other Dutch-language publications. She established her own Dutch registered photo agency while living in Europe. Her greatest personal and career triumph was learning the Dutch language while freelancing with Limburgs Dagblad, a daily newspaper in Herleen, Netherlands.

Now, Jannet lives in Ocala with her dog, Andrew. She enjoys frequenting antique shops and eating at quaint cafes around Florida.

Even though Jannet's parents did not have red hair, a brother, Paul Walsh, who lives in Wisconsin, shares her redheaded trait.

ABOUT THE WRITER AND PHOTOGRAPHER View more photos and listen to personal stories from area redheads on our Web site

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