



Scientists and Inventors

Lyda D. Newman, Inventor

Written by: Carolyn Mueller

Illustrated by: Nicole Hartfelder



“Are you going to the meeting tonight?” Lyda asked her client, Pearl.

“Why, I’m not so sure,” Pearl answered hesitantly. “Might be hard, with the kids and all.”

Lyda nodded, gathering Pearl’s kinky coils of hair into her practiced hands.

“Well, I’ve got good news for you then,” she answered. “They’re shutting the street next door down from 3-9. The kids can play in the street, and all of the mothers are planning to watch through the windows. I’ll see you there.”

“Well then, I’ll see you there, too” Pearl smiled.

Pearl knew that Lyda made things happen. Lyda was an important organizer for the African American branch of the Women’s Suffrage Party. She’d been working for years to organize their community into a force for women’s voting rights. As both Pearl and Lyda knew well, there’s no better seat to organize a movement from than the swirling chair in the beauty parlor.

Pearl was visiting Lyda for a haircut.

And Lyda knew hair.

The salon was crowded on an early fall day in the San Juan Hill neighborhood of New York City. The two women talked, surrounded by bubbling conversation from all sides. Lyda picked up a hairbrush and ran it through Pearl’s hair. It moved smoothly through Pearl’s curls without catching them or causing any to frizz.

“That hairbrush sure is a miracle, Lyda,” Pearl told her friend. “Tell me again how it works magic on my hair.”

Lyda smiled. The brush she used on Pearl’s hair was not just any ordinary hairbrush – it was her very own invention.

“Well, to start with, the bristles are made of synthetic fibers instead of animal hair,” Lyda told her. “This makes it move more easily through

Black hair. “Then,” Lyda paused for effect, “all you have to do is push this button here,” Lyda demonstrated. “And the top part pops off so that you can clean underneath. Now I can rotate the bristles, so I don’t have to clean the brush completely or use a brand-new brush between clients.”

“Lyda, you sure are a genius,” Pearl told her.

Lyda smiled because she knew it was true. Born around 1885 in Ohio, she had always believed in herself. She never married, which was unusual for that time. She focused on her passions in life, the suffragette movement and working on hair. Lyda had designed her innovative hairbrush and then applied for a U.S. patent. She received patent #614,335 in 1898, only the third Black woman to do so. Her hairbrush design revolutionized the hair care industry. Modern hairbrushes use Lyda’s design to this day.

Lyda saw what many at the time did not, that each woman mattered. From her hair to her vote and voice in government, Lyda felt that every woman was unique. And each one could make a difference.

NEWSPAPER CONNECTIONS

Find an ad for a beauty product in the newspaper, and sketch a way that you could make the product better and/or the package more attractive.