

Braving the Taboos

By DAVID DUPRE Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
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Interracial Marriages Are Gradually Increasing Despite the Complex Problems for Both Partners

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SEATTLE — When one of Louise Stone's friends dropped by her home here a few years ago, the conversation turned to blacks dating whites. Mrs. Stone's friend was incensed, charging that "all white girls who go out with black men are trashy" and the black men who date white girls are "niffraff."

At that moment, Raphael and Donna walked in. Raphael is Mrs. Stone's youngest son, and Donna was his date. The Stones are black, and Donna is white.

Raphael's choice of a white girlfriend created an embarrassing moment in the Stone household, "but I was glad it all came out in the open and I found out what other people are thinking," Mrs. Stone recalls. Raphael and Donna now are married, joining the growing number of couples who are braving the taboos and hazards of interracial marriage.

Louise Stone's initial discomfort points up the fact that interracial dating and marriage are no less a problem for black parents than for white. Such marriages until recent years were virtually unheard of, although interracial contacts outside marriage have long been common. (One psychologist and writer on the subject, Gordon W. Allport, estimates that probably 75% of people classed "Negro" have some white ancestry; geneticists estimate that 10% of white Americans have Negro blood, often without knowing it.)

Moderate Increase Expected

Statistics hardly tell the whole story, but they indicate the scope of present mixed marriages. The 1960 census, in a special survey, found 51,409 black-white marriages, or 0.12% of all married couples in the U.S. Census Bureau officials note that some residents didn't report race on the census, and thus this may be a low figure. A similar survey in 1970, though not published yet, is expected to show a moderate increase in interracial marriages, officials say.

The relatively small number of mixed marriages and the gradual nature of the increase baffle many people who assumed such marriages would mushroom as blacks and whites associate more fully in schools, on the job, in housing and in places of public accommodation. Sociologists, however, say this greater association is more than offset by the fact that, as blacks move toward equality, there is less to gain by marrying a white. Many blacks, in fact, lose status among their black friends by taking a white spouse.

"We've been a racist country for 400 years," says sociologist Eli Ginzberg of Columbia. "This and racial pride will prevent many interracial marriages. There are basic constraints on both sides."

For those that do choose to marry outside their race, the problems can be many. Some are obvious, such as opposition from parents, verbal and even physical abuse from relatives and friends, and social ostracism in general. Other problems, such as personality and identity questions, are more complex and torturous.

Sociologists and psychologists generally agree that, in most cases, the difficult thing for

the white spouse to understand is that he or she has become part of the Negro group. Once this is done, they say, then uncertainties and suspicions are overcome and the marriage has a chance to succeed.

There are exceptions to the black orientation of most mixed marriages, most notably when the couple have considerable affluence. Phil and Peggy Johnson of San Francisco tried to keep a foot in each of the cultures, black and white. He's a successful white lawyer and business consultant. He and his wife live in an 11-room house and travel to Europe each summer. They entertain a lot but found that Mr. Johnson's white friends and Mrs. Johnson's black friends didn't mix too well. "Poor blacks and rich whites just don't see eye to eye on too many things," observes Mr. Johnson.

"One Culture or the Other"

The friction over the incompatibility of their friends led the Johnsons to discuss divorce. But the marriage was saved when Mrs. Johnson cut herself off from many of her black friends. "We had to decide to live in one culture or the other," says her husband. "We chose to go white because it offered the most advantages to us." His wife agrees and says they've been happy with that choice.

As in any marriage, there is a singularity to every interracial union. No one couple reflects all the woes or worries of marriage across racial lines, but Donna and Raphael Stone may well typify the route of the young couple today. Donna, now 23, and Raphael, now 24, have been married two years. Their first child just arrived—a boy named Rafael Ali.

They met in the library of the University of Washington when she was a 17-year-old freshman honor student from an exclusive section of Seattle (her father owns a prosperous construction firm) and he was an 18-year-old freshman basketball star (though he is short and stocky) and son of a middle-class insurance broker. They were introduced by a mutual friend, and "we just hit it off well," both say.

Donna anxiously told her parents about Raphael as soon as she started seeing him. "A friend of mine had been secretly going with a black guy," recalls the pretty blonde, blue-eyed Mrs. Stone, "and when her parents found out about it they threw her out of the house and disowned her. I didn't want that to happen to me, so I told my parents about Raphael right away."

Leona Wagner, Donna's mother, says that her first reaction was one of fear. "I was apprehensive because Donna was in a sorority, and I didn't know how this would affect her standing there," she says. "We wanted to know if she was rebelling against us or something like that."

Raphael's mother says that when she first met Donna she didn't think the relationship would develop into anything serious. "After they had been seeing each other for about three months, Raphael started telling us how well Donna's parents had accepted him and that they wanted to meet us," she recalls.

Much in Common

It was a year before the Magners and the Stones finally got together at the Magners' ranch-style suburban home in North Seattle. The Stones found that the Magners had no black acquaintances. But the two families found they had much in common. Both fathers are avid fishermen. All four parents found they also have similar views on race, politics and other serious issues. "The families are so much alike," says Donna's mother, "that it isn't hard to see how the kids got together."

This isn't to say that everything went smoothly for the young couple. When it became obvious they were going to get married, there were some critical moments. But they were both patient. "We went together so long that, if anything was going to happen, it would have happened," says Raphael, who now is in his final year of law school. "We knew we really loved each other and weren't just trying to prove a point or anything like that."

He's aware that pressures on his marriage may increase when he leaves campus. "We're still in a special class," he says. "I'm still in school, so I'm sure the worst is yet to come. Once I buy a home and start practicing law, people will be tougher on us."

Raphael says he is much more guarded than his wife. "I'm very cautious about going places, especially where I'm not known," he says. Little incidents painfully remind the two of them of their color problem. Once, while they stopped near their apartment to mail a letter a man drove by and shouted, "You black son of a bitch." Only Donna's calm restraint prevented Raphael from going after the man.

Many interracial couples complain of police harassment. The Stones say they have shared this misfortune. As an example, they recall that a policeman stopped their car near their apartment here. The officer accused Raphael of speeding, a charge he denied. The policeman then turned to Donna and asked her name. She replied she was Mrs. Stone, Raphael's wife. The policeman, apparently doubting this, insisted on identification despite their strenuous objections. Finally, satisfied with their identity, the officer left.

"If we were both black or both white, we wouldn't have been stopped in the first place," says Raphael with some bitterness.

Four Days of Soul Searching

Donna's mother says that when she realized Donna and Raphael were going to get married it took her four days and four sleepless nights of soul searching to decide what to do. "I had to ask myself if I really meant what I had been teaching my kids about honesty, fairness and equality, or if I was just fronting," she says. "Once I decided to stand behind what I had been preaching and accept Raphael in my own mind, I had no problems."

She adds that it's a different story with a number of her relatives. Some are accepting the marriage because she and her husband have accepted it. "Some are generally accepting it, and some haven't accepted it at all," she says. "They just sort of avoid the whole thing." One of those strongly against the marriage was Mrs. Wagner's mother. She opposed Donna marrying Raphael solely because he was black. "She didn't even want Donna to date blacks," Mrs. Wagner says. As a result, she didn't attend the wedding, but Donna and Raphael have gradually won her over.

Some of the Magners' friends, however, haven't chosen to remain as close as they were before Donna and Raphael first started going with each other. Mrs. Wagner feels that the biggest difficulty facing the parent of a son or daughter marrying out of his or her race is the "what-will-my-friends-think attitude." Mrs. Wagner says she had to decide which was more important, what her friends thought or her daughter's happiness. "I did what I thought was right," she says.

Mrs. Wagner also has understanding for her

counterpart, Mrs. Stone. "I'm sure it would have been easier for her if Donna were black," she says.

Mrs. Stone was skeptical at first. "Personally I had my doubts about them," she says. "I explained to Donna that a lot of things will come to her because she's married to a black man. 'We can take them,' I told her. She has never been prejudiced, so it's hard for her to understand others being that way. I told her there will be times when she'll be accepted as black, but Raphael will never be accepted as white. If he doesn't get promoted over whites, she has to understand that it may be because of her. She most of all had to understand that no matter what she feels about black people, her feelings won't be as deep as ours. You have to live with it before you can say how it feels."

If Donna were black, Mrs. Stone wouldn't have been so concerned nor would she have watched her so closely, she says. "But I had some preconceived notions about whites," she says. "Whites of my generation have their feelings about us, and I have mine about them. But kids today don't see things like that, and I'm glad they don't."

Mrs. Stone's other children—two sons and a daughter—are all married to blacks. "My mother has qualms about marrying white," Raphael adds with a laugh.

The Magners have three other daughters and a son. None of them have ever dated blacks, Mrs. Wagner says. She adds that one of her daughters even has some fear of blacks and the parents of that daughter's husband have had a hard time accepting Raphael.

A Time of Testing

If there ever was a time when Donna and Raphael were really tested it came back in 1967 after they had been going together for a short time. The black separatist movement was intensifying about then, and the bonds between black men and black women became stronger. To some blacks it was in extreme bad taste to be seen with a white person of the opposite sex.

"When black awareness became a key issue, Raphael had to go through a lot," says Donna. "I was really afraid I might lose him."

Raphael agrees it was a difficult period. "If I hadn't known Donna I probably would have been influenced more by the black-power movement," he remarks. "I'm aware and I'm involved, but I just happen to have a white wife."

The most commonly voiced argument against interracial marriage is that the children will be hurt. Some parents in mixed marriages as well as some professional observers believe the problems of the offspring are minimized if the children can be taught to identify themselves with black culture.

"My child will be a Negro," says new-mother Donna with apparent pride. "I wouldn't want it any other way. It would bother me if he were referred to as white. I don't want him to wonder what he is."

Others agree. Carl Springer, a white freelance artist whose wife is black and a native of Kenya, says their three-year-old daughter, Tracy, knows that she belongs to the Negro culture and there is no problem. "As long as Tracy doesn't try to be white and recognizes the fact that she's black, there won't be any unhappy reaction," says the 34-year-old artist. "It's the psychological association that is important."

But Tracy is dark-skinned and has Negroid

features, so the association perhaps is easier. What of the child in a mixed marriage who is fair-skinned? Ann Hopkins, a psychological social worker in San Francisco, is among those who think most children in mixed marriages, whatever their skin color or features, will automatically orient themselves as blacks.

"Most children from a mixed marriage tend to identify black because they feel that they will be accepted more easily by that group," she says. "We live in a society that forces you to choose racial groups."

But there is no certain pattern in anything as fragile as a child's racial identity in a mixed marriage. Consider Barbara and Frank Phillips, a San Francisco couple who look back happily over 19 years of marriage that involved raising two children. Frank is black and a parking garage attendant; his wife is white and a department-store clerk. Their children are both light-skinned with Caucasian features.

A Lifelong Dream Deferred

"Our daughter, Karen, has always felt white and our son, Dennis, has always felt black," says Mrs. Phillips. She adds that she was very disappointed when they both decided to marry whites. Although she expected it of Karen, she always felt Dennis would marry a black girl.

The Phillipses claim that they have never had any real problems, though they're still apprehensive about ever fulfilling a lifelong dream of traveling through the South. "I just don't think they're ready for this kind of thing yet," says Mr. Phillips.

The Phillipses haven't had any serious problems with housing, either. "When we moved into a white neighborhood, the neighbors offered to help us get settled," he says. "But when we lived in a black neighborhood, everybody looked at us funny." They now live in a San Francisco area that is mostly white but has taken integration.

"I was raised with whites and went to school mostly with whites," he continues. "But if I had lived in ghettos and was mistreated like a lot of blacks have been, I would probably have a different outlook. I probably wouldn't have married white."

Almost all people involved in interracial marriages predict the numbers of such marriages will increase. Every such union, they note, has its effect in changing attitudes and often increasing tolerance among people close to the married couple.

"We've sort of bridged a gap," says Mrs. Wagner. "I'm proud of my daughter and myself."