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October 12, 2011

In Strangers' Glances at Family, Tensions Linger

By **SUSAN SAULNY**

TOMS RIVER, N.J. — “How come she’s so white and you’re so dark?”

The question tore through Heather Greenwood as she was about to check out at a store here one afternoon this summer. Her brown hands were pushing the shopping cart that held her babbling toddler, Noelle, all platinum curls, fair skin and ice-blue eyes.

The woman behind Mrs. Greenwood, who was white, asked once she realized, by the way they were talking, that they were mother and child. “It’s just not possible,” she charged indignantly. “You’re so...dark!”

It was not the first time someone had demanded an explanation from Mrs. Greenwood about her biological daughter, but it was among the more aggressive. Shaken almost to tears, she wanted to flee, to shield her little one from this kind of talk. But after quickly paying the cashier, she managed a reply. “How come?” she said. “Because that’s the way God made us.”

The Greenwood family tree, emblematic of a growing number of American bloodlines, has roots on many continents. Its mix of races — by marriage, adoption and other close relationships — can be challenging to track, sometimes confusing even for the family itself.

For starters: Mrs. Greenwood, 37, is the daughter of a black father and a white mother. She was adopted into a white family as a child. Mrs. Greenwood married a white man with whom she has two daughters. Her son from a previous relationship is half Costa Rican. She also has a half brother who is white, and siblings in her adoptive family who are biracial, among a host of other close relatives — one from as far away as South Korea.

The population of mixed-race Americans like Mrs. Greenwood and her children is growing quickly, driven largely by [immigration](#) and intermarriage. One in seven new marriages is between spouses of different races or ethnicities, for example. And among American children, the multiracial population has increased almost 50 percent, to 4.2 million, since 2000.

But the experiences of mixed-race Americans can be vastly different. Many mixed-race youths say they feel wider acceptance than past generations, particularly on college campuses and in pop culture. Extensive interviews and days spent with the Greenwoods show that, when they are alone, the family strives to be colorblind. But what they face outside their home is another story. People seem to notice nothing but race. Strangers gawk. Make rude and racist comments. Tell offensive jokes. Ask impolite questions.

The Greenwoods' experiences offer a telling glimpse into contemporary race relations, according to sociologists and members of other mixed-race families.

It is a life of small but relentless reminders that old tensions about race remain, said Mrs. Greenwood, a homemaker with training in social work.

“People confront you, and it’s not once in a while, it’s all the time,” she said. “Each time is like a little paper cut, and you might think, ‘Well, that’s not a big deal.’ But imagine a lifetime of that. It hurts.”

Jenifer L. Bratter, an associate sociology professor at Rice University who has studied multiracialism, said that as long as race continued to affect where people live, how much money they make and how they are treated, then multiracial families would be met with double takes. “Unless we solve those issues of inequality in other areas, interracial families are going to be questioned about why they’d cross that line,” she said.

According to Census data, interracial couples have a slightly higher divorce rate than same-race couples — perhaps, sociologists say, because of the heightened stress in their lives as they buck enduring norms. And children in mixed families face the challenge of navigating questions about their identities.

“If we could just go about whatever we’re doing and not be asked anything about our family’s colors,” Mrs. Greenwood said, “that would be a dream.”

A Family’s Story

The colors that strangers find so intriguing when they see the Greenwood family are the result of two generations of intermixing.

Their story begins with Mrs. Greenwood’s adoptive parents, Dolores and Edward Dragan, of Slovak and Polish descent, veterans of Woodstock and the March on Washington, who always knew they wanted to adopt. They were drawn to children who were hardest to place in permanent homes. In the early 1970s, those children were mixed race.

Mrs. Dragan, a retired art teacher, remembers telling her adoption agency that she and her husband, then a principal, would take “any child, any color,” at a time when most people like themselves were looking for healthy white infants.

They adopted two mixed-race children within two years. The family seemed complete until Mr. Dragan came home from school one day and joked to his wife, “I’m in love with another woman.” It was the sprightly 6-year-old Heather, a student. She had been living with foster parents and was up for adoption.

“Holy cow, she just brought the energy into our home,” Mrs. Dragan recalled of their early days together in Flemington, N.J.

As the children grew, the Dragans tried to infuse their world with African-American culture. There were family trips to museums in Washington, as well as beauty salons in Philadelphia, where Mrs. Dragan learned black hairstyling skills.

However, the children were not particularly interested, and do not remember race being a big part of their identities when they were younger. “We were happy to be whoever we thought we were at that time,” Mrs. Greenwood said.

But as she moved into adulthood, she began to identify herself as a black woman of mixed heritage. She also felt more of a connection with whites and Latinos, and had a son, Silas Aguilar, now 18, with a Costa Rican boyfriend. She later married Aaron Greenwood, a computer network engineer who is a descendant of Quakers. A few years ago, they bought a split-level ranch house in Toms River and started a bigger family.

Stinging Insults

The shoulder shrugs about being mixed race within the family are in stark contrast to insults outside the home — too many for the Dragans and the Greenwoods to recount.

But some still sting more than others. On one occasion, a boy on the school bus called young Heather a nigger, and she had no idea what the word meant, so Mrs. Dragan, now 69, got the question over homework one night: “Mom, what’s a nigger?”

Once, on a beach chair at a resort in Florida years ago, a white woman sunning herself next to Mrs. Dragan bemoaned the fact that black children were running around the pool. “Isn’t it awful?” Mrs. Dragan recalled the woman confiding to her.

Within minutes, Mrs. Dragan, ever feisty despite her reserved appearance, had her brood by her side. “I’d like to introduce you to my children,” she told the woman. Awkward silence ensued.

“You know what? She deserved it,” Mrs. Dragan recalled during an interview at her home in Lambertville, N.J. “I figured, why miss an opportunity to embarrass someone if they needed it?”

Sometimes, the racism directed toward the Dragans seemed similar to what a single-race minority family might experience.

When the children were still young, a real estate agent in Flemington warned prospective buyers in her neighborhood about the Dragan household, saying that “there are black people living there, and I feel it’s my duty to let you know.” The people bought the house anyway, and later told the Dragans about the incident, once they had become friends.

“We weren’t blind to the reality of racism,” Mr. Dragan explained, “yet when you get into a situation where it’s your family, it really takes on a different dimension.”

Mrs. Dragan said her life came to revolve around shielding the children: “I was always on my A-game. My antennas were always up. I was aware all the time.”

Fast-forward 30 years, and Mrs. Dragan sees her daughter, Mrs. Greenwood, going through similar episodes with her own children — all because mother and child are not the same color.

“She gets the same stares I got when I was a young mother in the supermarket, with three African-American kids hanging off the cart,” said Mrs. Dragan, whose wisps of blond hair frame a fair-skinned face.

“You sort of put it out of your mind once your children are grown and you think, I just want to relax, that part’s over for now,” she continued. “But I’ve gotten a little more agitated lately.”

She does not like what she is hearing from her daughter these days. A typical story: On the boardwalk at the shore over the summer, Noelle scampered toward the carousel, her parents in tow. Even at 21 months, Noelle is a regular customer, so the ride operator, Risa Ierra, felt free to have a little fun.

“You know this little one isn’t really theirs, right?” Ms. Ierra joked to the other people in line. “Must have been switched at the hospital.”

Since Mr. and Mrs. Greenwood are friendly with her, they said later that they were not offended. But the exchange was typical of remarks Mrs. Greenwood hears often, even from people who seem well-meaning.

“Oh my God! Are they yours? Or are you their nanny?” she said she was often asked. (By contrast, her mother, Mrs. Dragan, was often asked if she was hosting inner-city children as part of a charitable effort.)

“That’s the most common thing I get,” Mrs. Greenwood said of the nanny question. “But I don’t want to go there. I don’t want to justify me being their mother to strangers.”

Humor and Strength

The family has always used humor to cope, but sometimes that is not enough.

When the Dragan children were young, for instance, the family stopped at a restaurant near Disney World and people seemed to drop their forks when they walked in. “Yes, it’s true!” one of the Dragan children yelled. “These folks aren’t from around here!”

At least the family laughed, if no one else did.

Of the constant confrontations, Mrs. Dragan said: “I don’t always feel successful. I feel like I could have thrown my hands up a number of times, with the kids and other people.”

Often, she found the energy to fight. “Other times,” she said, “I locked myself in the house.”

The Dragans concede that at times they felt a strain on their relationship. “There is a lot of stress when people are looking at you and scrutinizing and judging,” Mr. Dragan said. “You might not hear it but you feel it. We felt it. That is stressful for a marriage. You do have to help and reinforce each other. Humor has really gotten us through a lot of heartache.”

Mrs. Greenwood uses the same strategy. She likes T-shirts with messages. She has one that she wears on [St. Patrick’s Day](#): “This is what Irish looks like,” it says, a reference to her biological mother’s lineage. She is thinking about having one made that says, “Yes, I’m the mom.”

Mrs. Greenwood is not ready to have a conversation about race with Sophia, now 7. But Sophia is starting to notice the stares, the jokes, the questions. Mrs. Greenwood feels as though the world is forcing race into her home, which has been a respite from race ever since she was a little girl herself.

“I actually don’t know what to tell Sophia and Noelle when they start asking me, ‘Am I black?’ ” she said.

“If they look in the mirror or to society, they’re not going to be black,” she said, worried about what sort of internal conflicts this might cause.

“I’m afraid she’s going to start questioning who she is, and she shouldn’t have to,” Mrs. Greenwood added.

Mr. Greenwood has already tried something. “I’ve told Sophia that she is a perfect mix of her mommy and daddy,” he said, “but we’re going to have to talk more.”

Silas, Mrs. Greenwood’s half-Latino son from a previous relationship, started to ask race questions around age 7.

“I went up to my mom and said, ‘What am I?’ ” Silas recalled. “And, ‘What are you? Are we the same thing?’ I was just shooting questions. It was like a brain mash. I looked at my family and thought, ‘What is going on here?’ I was just lost. But after a really long explanation, I eventually understood.”

He paused, adding later, “I think my little sisters will be fine.”

Race is not something Silas says he spends a lot of time worrying about. He learned long ago about the family tree, and that he is part black, that his grandmother is Slovakian, his cousin is Asian, and so on — and hardly any of that matters to him.

“Barriers are breaking down,” he said.

For the moment, the matter seems simple enough for Sophia, too. She responds confidently when asked what race she is. “Tan!” says the second-grade student. “Can’t you tell by just looking?”