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By Jeff Gammage
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For adoptees, racial divide still wide

Families may be colorblind, but the world is not. It's a painful lesson for many.

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Phil Bertelsen grew up as the biracial, adopted son of white parents, and there was never a day he didn't feel their profound and enveloping love.

The problem, he said, began when he walked out his front door.

At 13, the white classmate he thought was his girlfriend told him: "Mother doesn't want me going out with niggers."

"I didn't know at the time what that was," Bertelsen said, "let alone that it might be me."

But when he tried to connect with black people, "I was tormented and ridiculed," he said. "I certainly wasn't aware there was a style of behavior or dress or a code of conduct associated with being black."

Bertelsen, 39, was raised in Highland Park, N.J. Today, he is a documentary filmmaker who defines himself through his work, including the autobiographical *Outside Looking In: Transracial Adoption in America*.

"I don't think white families should be able to adopt children of any race with impunity," said Bertelsen, who lives in New York.

Families must be ready to incorporate their new child's culture into their lives, he said. When race and adoption meet, "it's not just about the family unit," he said. "It's a lot of things."

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Adoption today is a rainbow of color and country; thousands of multiracial families are created in the United States each year by the arrival of children from countries such as China, Guatemala, India and Liberia.

Yet it's the pairing of African American children and white parents that stokes the transracial debate and sometimes provokes legal battles, most recently in Chester County.

Why? The answer, experts say, is slavery, the country's primal wound, the issue that has tormented black-white relations for more than three centuries.

Though white people might view interracial adoption as evidence of societal progress, experts say, for many black people it is a painful harkening back to a time when their ancestors were treated as property - and proof that the child-welfare system discourages African American adopters.

"The race issue gets played out right through adoption," said Joseph Crumbley, a Jenkintown family therapist who studies the issue.

In this country, Crumbley and others say, it's hard to be an adopted child, harder to be a transracial adoptee of any color,

and hardest to be an African American child in a white family. Love may be colorblind, but society is not.

Some social workers and educators question whether white families can learn, much less teach, black children the survival skills that African American parents already know.

Last month, a judge denied a white Chester County couple's bid to adopt the black foster child who had lived with them for nearly two years. U.S. District Judge James T. Giles ruled that Randall and Susan Borelly of Uwchlan Township failed to prove that county officials racially discriminated by refusing to let them adopt Kevin, almost 4. The child was placed with Martin and Lisa Blanton of Hershey, who are African American.

Sometimes, it seems the debate over race and adoption grows so loud that the children who walk America's racial fault line go unheard.

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Rodney Williams is almost 30, but in some ways his life hasn't changed since he was a boy.

"People still call me an Oreo, because of the way I talk," he said softly.

Williams, who is African American, was adopted by a white couple three days after his birth. He grew up in Valley Forge and other Philadelphia suburbs, and graduated in 1994 from the Church Farm School in Paoli. As a young man, he said, he tried to talk to his parents about race.

"You get that PC, 'We don't see a difference. Color doesn't exist,' " he said. "When I was young, I believed it. When I got older, I didn't."

Shari Draayer, Rodney's mother, says she started out "determined there would be no difference in our family."

She adopted more children of different races and built a diverse network of friends and interests. Martin Luther King's birthday became a celebration of the civil rights pioneers who had made their family possible.

"I don't know if Rodney ever saw it that way," said Draayer, of King of Prussia. "There were times I felt so impotent. ... No matter how much I read or how many friends I have, I still don't know what it's like to be a black man in America."

Draayer said she encountered white landlords who agreed to rent to her - then balked upon meeting her children. Black social workers told her that having African American children was "the new slavery."

But, she said, she also met many thoughtful people, black and white, who cared not a whit about the race of her 11 children. Most important, said Draayer, a high school teacher, is that her children are growing up as caring individuals who treat people of all races with respect.

The rewards of being a transracial family, she said, "far exceed any of the dilemmas or more painful things."

Her son disagrees. Williams, a manager at a Los Angeles hospital, is still searching for where he fits in.

"Black people think I'm arrogant, because I talk 'proper,' " he said. "White people? 'You're not like most black people.' That's what I get."

As for transracial adoption, "I don't think it's a good thing," he said. "You're already adopted, and then you add on top of that being a different race?"

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The first documented adoption of an African American child by a white family was in 1948 in Minnesota, according to the Adoption History Project at the University of Oregon.

By the mid-'70s, perhaps 12,000 African American children had been adopted by white families, says Ellen Herman, the

project's creator and curator.

The discourse changed in 1972, Herman said, when the National Association of Black Social Workers denounced the practice as "cultural genocide."

The following year, the number of black children adopted into white households dropped 39 percent, to 1,569.

Authorities believe that figure remained static until 1994, when passage of the Multiethnic Placement Act forbade agencies that receive federal money from denying adoptions on the basis of race. Since then, black-white adoptions have increased. A study published by Adoption Quarterly in 2004 estimated that 2,850 African American children were adopted into white families in 2001.

Still, experts say, the general, if unspoken, policy is to try to place children with families of the same race. The exception, said Adam Pertman, executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in New York, is when "the alternative is keeping the kid in foster care."

Sociological studies indicate that transracial adoptees grow up to be well-adjusted. But Herman says no data have answered the essential question: In a society riven by racism, are the placements beneficial to the children?

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She was pushing her children in their stroller, Beth Hall recalls, when a neighbor stopped her to ask: "Do you do a lot of baby-sitting?"

Hall took that as code for something else: Who are you, a white woman, with these different-colored children?

Her 18-month-old African American son was too young to understand the drama playing out above him, but her 3-year-old Latina daughter was listening.

"I think what you're probably asking," Hall calmly told her neighbor, "is: 'How are we related?' And it can be confusing, because we do look different. But we are a family."

Today, her children are teenagers, and Hall is director of Pact, a California adoption alliance that assists children of color. She says that from day one she has talked to her children about race.

Sometimes, it has been hard - like when her son realized that employees trailed him through the aisles in stores. She can't protect her children from reality, Hall said, but it is her obligation to prepare them. "Nobody says, 'I'm going to wait until my kids ask me about crossing the street.' Everyone understands it's life-or-death."

It's the same thing with racism, she said. "Our kids won't be safe if we don't talk to them. Black people understand that. White people don't."

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Bertelsen says he felt - and feels - fortunate to have been adopted. (His parents, who also adopted two Korean children, declined to be interviewed for this article.)

At the time, he was nearly 5 and lived in a black foster home. At first, in his new family and mostly white neighborhood, he was confused. As an adolescent, he associated with white people.

As he grew, "I was no longer the cute biracial child. I was a young black male, and that was threatening to some people." By college, he identified himself as African American.

Over time, he said, he has become less strident. He's about to marry a woman who is half-Japanese and half-Hawaiian.

"I feel a lot richer for having had a multiracial family. Absolutely," Bertelsen said. "It helps me in my work. And I kind of 'get

it' on some level."

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