

Pact Family Stories

Black Enough To Be Your Mother? Too White To Be Your Mother? Becoming Seneca's Mothers!



Dakota Brown and Julia Jackson have been together for six and a half years and trying to have a baby for five of those years. With help from Pact, they recently brought home their newborn adopted son, Seneca. Filled with relief—and some disbelief—that they have finally become parents, they sat down with Pact to discuss their journey and what the future holds.

As well as being an attorney, Julia is a practicing artist, and she has used her performances to explore her pain over the loss of control she felt in her attempts to become a parent. Ranging from failed in vitro fertilization (using donor sperm) to becoming a foster parent only to find herself and her partner rejected as “not being the best choice after all” for a little boy they were planning to adopt, each attempt to become a mother seemed to resonate with her other experiences of not fitting anyone’s “ideal.” Julia says, “As a biracial lesbian I have spent my life not quite fitting into other people’s expectations and not feeling like I have had a place where I could be authentically myself. Sometimes I get exhausted from the experience of showing up.”

“Being the mother of a black son—my black father’s first grandson—it feels good. I used to question myself. Am I black enough to be his mother? Am I woman enough to be his mother? Now that seems irrelevant. Meeting and spending time getting to know Seneca’s birth mother was a validation of our shared experience and how that will be important for Seneca...”

“I was talking to my dad,” Julia laughs, “and he was excited and asking what Seneca looks like. ‘Darker than OJ, maybe not Wesley Snipes, probably Donovan McNabb,’ I said, and we both laughed and understood what it means to each of us and to Seneca. I watch him getting darker every day and I am pleased and comfortable with how happy that makes me, even while I find it interesting to watch how different people respond not just to him but to his ever more visible blackness, which says something about who they are.”

Before Seneca’s birth, Dakota wrote about her own fears in her poem *Not From My Body* (on next page). Now she feels less intimidated and more able to say “yes, I am your mother” rather than questioning her role or ability. “You begin with your best-laid plans and then it happens and you find yourself having to defend your space, defend your family.... and everything else goes out the window.”

“So as the white mother of a black son, does my son have more value? Do I have less? Am I still afraid about how to maneuver this? Of course. I know that I will have to defend it, my whiteness, my gayness, my adoptive parent-ness. Is today a day I am willing to educate others or just say “you are irrelevant” and remove them from our life? I feel like he is my kid. Before I was worried about how I would handle it, now I am over that and it is about handling it. I was afraid that the magic might not be there, now I know it is. Ultimately, this is it, he is it. The rest will need to be dealt with. I no longer have time for worrying about other people’s issues, it is all about him.”

At the hospital where Seneca was born, Julia and Dakota saw how race and class inflected their child's birth. The staff at the hospital was all white, while the client population was mostly people of color, many of whom are indigent. The staff perceived Julia as educated, and Dakota as white, so "they would answer our questions when we had questions about Seneca's health, but they were hostile towards the indigent mom who they thought was uneducated. We watched as they would respond to her differently, like she was being 'uppity' for asking questions about her sick baby." At one point the head nurse mentioned that the birth rate in Arizona (where Seneca was born) was going down. Julia asked her why. "Oh I know why," she expounded, "the crackdown on immigration..." She had no understanding of how racist and classist she was being. "We found ourselves silenced," explains Dakota, "feeling afraid to take her on because of her role in caring for our own son and also recognizing this as only a small example of what our life as a family holds."

There is a song by Sweet Honey In The Rock that Dakota found herself thinking about:

We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
until it comes
Until the killing of black men, black
mothers' sons
Is as important as the killing of white men,
white mothers' sons
We who believe in freedom cannot rest

There will be many battles to come. But Dakota and Julia realize that they each bring strength and experience from the struggles they have already faced, and that will give them the tools to help Seneca fight his battles as well. The journey to find each other was a long one, but now Dakota, Julia, and Seneca are together and joyfully celebrating their new life as a family.

Dakota Brown wrote this poem in August 2008, before she and her partner Julia became parents to Seneca, their beautiful African American son, who was born and placed with them for adoption at the end of November 2008.

Not From My Body

By Dakota Brown

**Before I hold you
I will be told by
Others
We don't even know**

**I am too white to be your mother
Black women white women
Tell me in a tall voice
Do you know, you are white**

**I am reminded at a table
We will be different
I am reminded in a letter
I must be aware
I will be different**

I am too white to be your mother

**Am I too white to hold you
Am I too white to know, you
On the first day of the first time,
You do everything**

I can't wait for you to do everything

**Son, inside my body,
I feel the weight of your
Every small breath
Brown baby, my baby
Soft small breath, soft small**

**Breathe
Afraid you will grow up
And tell me
I am too white to be your mother**