pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 1995
Do not reprint without permission.

If The Shoe Doesn't Fit

transcribed by Gail Steinberg

"Being of color in America is like being forced to wear ill-fitting shoes. Some people adjust to it. It's always uncomfortable on your feet, but you've got to wear it because it's the only shoe you've got. Some people can bear the uncomfort more than others. Some people can block it from their minds, some can't. When you see some acting docile and some acting militant, they have one thing in common: the shoe is uncomfortable."
-Studs Terkel

It was a quiet evening and a small gathering. The group sitting in a circle on metal folding chairs at the community center had come to hear how people think and feel about raising children in a race conscious world.

- Nasoan Sheftel-Gomes is a single biracial graduate student in journalism at thIf e University of California at Berkeley, age 19.
- Rafael Espinoza is Salvadoran, born in El Salvador, who came to the United States on his own at the age of 15. He is now in his 30s, a union leader, the father of three children, and married to a Caucasian woman.
- Aida LaChaux Wadley is an African American woman in her 30s, married to an African American man, the Recruitment Chair of Pact's Board of Directors, mother of two African American children through adoption, and Senior Employment Consultant for Human Resources Department at her company.
- Sarriet Ferdun is an Okinawan and Filipina woman in her 30s, married to a Caucasian man, a member of Pact's Board of Directors, a technical writer, and a new mother through adoption.
- They spoke before an audience of adoptive parents with an enormous thirst to understand.

What makes you feel most connected to your ethnic or racial heritage?

Aida: I grew up in an African American community, Oakland. When I was growing up I went to church, the community center, and community activities. I learned a lot about my culture. Spirituality is important to me. We went to church often and willingly. Oakland was a boundary, all I knew about. What kept me connected? When I went to college I joined a church and a new community. That kept me focused on who I am. Wherever I live, I have a place to connect with the community.

Rafael: The first English word I learned was "wetback." Coming here, I had an identity crisis. At home I laughed about life... here I was so shy, sitting in the corner of the room… isolated…always trying to be a different person…trying to be something that I wasn't. Things changed for me in the '60s. I joined the movement and began working for positive change. That changed my life. I began to re-identify who I was. I began to focus on social justice.

Sarriet: I am half Okinawan and half Filipino. I identify closely with my Okinawan roots. I learned more about that side of myself. My parents tried to mainstream me into American society. Until college. That was when I first began to identify with my background.

Nasoan: I am Jewish and African American. I grew up in the Bay area of California. I had a lot of friends who were mixed. I grew up with the best of both worlds. We celebrated Jewish holidays and I went to temple till I was in 8th grade. We had family gatherings with our African American family. I felt very comfortable until college. Then came the questions of who I was and where I fit in. When I went to college I realized the rest of the world was not like the Bay area.

What about language? Do people expect you to speak your native language? How do you feel about whether you can or not?

Rafael: I understood early that I want and need to identify as a Chicano because in this country they are my people. When I used to speak to a Chicano in Spanish and he answered in English, I was offended. I expected them to speak the language. I want my children to learn Spanish. I want them to be bi-cultural. People who come here who can not adjust to the American culture as well as keeping their own, they have a deep crisis. Sometimes this results in alcohol and drug use.

Sarriet: My parents put me in Japanese Saturday classes and then they pulled me out. Friends convinced them they didn't want me to speak English with a Japanese accent. In college, I took classes to learn Japanese. Now that I know the language, I feel more connected. When I watch films I know the subtitles don't always reflect what is said. I speak an Okinawan dialect which is different than Japanese. I feel really connected to Okinawan culture. People always expect me to be able to speak. Filipinos come up to me and expect me to speak. They accept that I don't because many Filipinos were born here and can't speak the language. My husband has studied the language too, but there is a different expectation for him because he is Caucasian. Whatever he says, right or wrong, people are welcoming. When I make a mistake, there is more of a sense of shame.

Aida: I can relate. I can talk the street language in East Palo Alto. If someone says, "Wassup?" I answer, "Wassupwitchu?" I know I'm more accepted by people I can communicate with. Acknowledgment by other people is important. I feel strongly about going back to the community and being able to relate. African American people are diverse as a group. I speak differently in different situations. My family is Creole and I never learned the language. When we were kids, we used to laugh at the grownups. Now I wish I'd learned. Sometimes his cousins tease my son Jamal. "You sound like a little White boy." I tell him to use his own words and talk the way he wants to talk.

Nasoan: I went to private schools since eighth grade and I had to change my language. I speak differently when I'm around my family. I guess you could call it the chameleon effect.

What stereotypes have you encountered as a person of your race or heritage?

Sarriet: I have heard people call them positive stereotypes: nice, quiet, polite, subservient, traditional, good student, good girl, Asian women stereotypes. I hate when someone says "All Asians look alike." Should I educate the person or ignore the idiot? I do fit some of the stereotypes. I have to distinguish which things are really inherent to my personal being and those I have because that's what people expect me to have. People say, "Oh, you're so good with chopsticks." I say, "It was a skill I had to learn. My husband is as good as me. That's proof you can teach yourself these things."

Rafael: When you speak English with an accent, people think you are ignorant. I learned to be patient. I learned to fight. Once I was in an argument with a lawyer. When I was ahead he said, "What? What? I can't understand you, man" So I switched to Spanish.
He said, "What are you saying?" I said, "You should have listened, man."

Aida: There are too many stereotypes: loud, angry, may not be intelligent enough, obviously knows how to dance and perform. People assume I must be a single mother. They assume I am not educated. There is some truth, a lot of pain behind them. I want to turn them all to positive. I say, "Ask me any questions; I'm not offended." Someone asks, "Why don't your people work?" I try to temper my attitude. Regardless of the opposition, I will not let anyone take who I am from me. I am not going to allow anyone to tell me I'm less than what I am. I can make a difference and I will make a difference. I am Black and I am proud. I want to let people know, White people have had the same experiences. TV and the news is not reality. Don't accept racist jokes. Immediately set the stage for what is okay. Value diversity. Our country is more diverse than it's ever been and we're all going to be here.

Nasoan: Because I'm a journalism student, people assume I'm an affirmative action student. I ask myself am I there because I'm smart or because they needed to fill a quota? I chose this field because I want to educate. A lot of times I'd rather not deal with other people's ignorance. It's an everyday thing for people to come up and say, "What are you?" I hate it when people put their hands in my hair. Then there is the stereotype of the tragic mulatto. When I have relationships with Caucasian men, I have to wonder if they interested in me as an exotic or for myself. I identify as a Black person with a White mother.

What coping skills or strategies do you use to deal with stereotypes and racism?

Aida: Comfort comes from talking with others having the same experiences. When is this ever going to stop? I let go in my community. As much as I can, I brush it off. It's harder for boys than for girls; harder for men than for women.

Sarriet: Finding people to talk to who share the experience. Finding humor to bring down the anger. Trying to constantly do an internal check with myself. Why am I doing this?

Nasoan: There are 20 of us in journalism school. We have a support group, a place to speak out.

How important is your racial or ethnic background to your choices about where you live, your profession, your hobbies, your food preferences, your relationships?

Aida: I chose a good location to raise kids. We wanted a diverse community. I'm grateful that every ethnic group is on our block. Kids and parents get together. We have block parties. I'm learning about other cultures. I take my kids to ethnic events. We go to an African American Baptist Church, my roots. I chose my profession because I want to help others. To give things people never get. I'm touched by impacting other people's lives. I'll try any new food one time. My husband is always saying, "What are you eating now?" I do enjoy trying new things.

Rafael: I live in a multinational environment. I want to be sure my kids get it. I'm trying to teach my kids through music. Music is a key element in my culture and I want to give that to my kids. I'm looking for a diverse church. We never used to eat rice and beans because that was supposed to be poor people's food. Hey, that is the food of my country. Now we love rice and beans and Filipino food. Trying different things is great exposure for the kids.

Sarriet: I wanted to feel comfortable in my neighborhood. We chose a neighborhood with many Asian families. I have a very definite need for diversity which influenced where we should live. I chose to be a technical writer because I was good at it. I chose a Caucasian husband. My parents said, Don't marry a Japanese, he will expect you to be subservient. I always ask myself, is this okay with me? I am also in a performing folk dance group. Many people wonder why I would be in a Turkish folk dance group. I say we share the love of dance.

Nasoan: I will never live in a non-diverse place. I hate to

be stared at unnecessarily or followed around in stores. Of course it happens everywhere, but worse in some places then others. I chose UC Berkeley over Columbia University because I found Columbia to be dominated by White males with no commitment to diversity.

Children have different experiences at different stages of development. Can you look back at how it was for you and identify any stages you might have gone through when racial or ethnic issues were of particular importance?

Aida: In the 60s we spent summers in the South…New Orleans. We wanted to go swimming. I saw the signs that said colored/white. I stood for a long time in front of the water faucet that said "for colored only" and the other one that said, "white." I was unprepared. My parents said, This is the South. That was the first experience that made racial issues real for me. The second was when I was in college. I wanted to be an engineer. My White counselor said Black women don't become engineers; why don't you work in your community - so I did. I became a social worker. I believed him because he was the expert, but if I met up with him today, I'd have a lot of other things to say. We turned it into a positive but I will never forget that experience. Last night I let my son Jamal stay up and watch a program on TV about an 11-year-old. Some kids wanted his jacket. He got a gun. In the end he got killed. The next day Jamal said, "If he had given the coat back, he'd still be here." There is violence everywhere, over clothes... over shoes. Don't shield your kids. Don't let your kids be unprepared like I was.

Rafael: I wanted to go to college. My counselor said, Better forget it. I applied by myself. I got rejected twice, but I got in. I struggled, but I got in.

Sarriet: I grew up in a military community. We shared a common difference. My parents always cried racism but to me it was like crying wolf. Race was not the issue. I classified people as military or civilian. When I went to college I had an identity crisis. It was the first time I was away from my family. I learned the meaning of "banana": yellow on the outside, White on the inside. My counselors never understood. I was feeling pressure from my parents to achieve. My counselors said, Break with them. That was not an ethnic possibility. Then I met a Chinese American man. He was a guide. I first began to feel pride in being an Asian American. He told me, Lamps and rugs are Oriental. You are Asian. I now consider myself an Asian American.

Nasoan: Leaving home and being on my own made my own identity issues emerge. I had dealt with numerous comments as a child; I blew them off and went home to my family where I got support and comfort. But when I went to school on the East Coast I felt very isolated. I didn't join groups. I didn't want to choose sides. Black students saw me hanging out with White kids and shunned me. I didn't join the Black Student Union at first, but later it worked out okay. College was a turning point.

Bill (a White adoptive father): Now I see what taking pride in heritage means. I did not have to fight to claim my background. Because you had to fight, it became a part of you!

What suggestions do you have for parents who want to instill a strong sense of racial pride in their children?

Aida: Kids have a lot of challenges ahead. Lay a foundation of love and self respect that comes through you and the community. They are looking to you. You need to do something about it if people make comments. I am the darkest of 8 kids. Starting at a very early age, my mother said, You are somebody and you are somebody special. There are a lot of barriers for boys. You don't want them to get tagged as having attention deficit disorder. You don't want them to wake up at 15 and feel challenged because they have no answers. Engage them early in activities in the community. Challenge their energy and keep it challenged. The child has to be part of a culture at an early age. Parents can't duck and hide. They have to take care of connecting their children to the community. Extended family members can really help kids. Someone who assures you everything is going to be all right, that you can rely on yourself. Kids need to see it from more than just the parents. Positive feeling needs to come from everyone the child is in contact with.

Nasoan: Give them the sense that there is strength in difference. Being different is a plus. Build on that and give them some kind of spirituality.

Rafael: They have to understand the culture, and history. It's important to pick role models from the child's race and culture. Build a foundation for the future. Teach them how to deal with racism at home. Don't let them be defenseless. Kids have a lot of dreams. Help them develop their dreams. My son wanted to be a fireman when he was little. When his mother died, he wanted to drop out of high school. I said, "Hey, I thought you wanted to be a fireman. You must finish high school to be a fireman" He finished high school. Now he is in college. He may not become a fireman, but I could help him by building on his dream. Also, we must teach our children to hug and be touched, to take and give affection.

Sarriet: My daughter and I have some learning to do together. She is Chinese and Filipina. I know nothing about my Filipina side. Asian American is not sufficient. Different groups have specific identities. We need to connect with our specific cultures.

What makes you feel good?

Aida: People with a great spiritual sense. Kids speaking out of their own pride. Seeing people coming together in a positive way. I am often touched by other African Americans who have so much cultural richness. I am still learning about the culture.

Rafael: I reached a point to accept myself as I was. I had to understand the history of the Chicano people in this country. I became an activist, fighting for people's rights. Everyone needs to have a purpose in life. I know that the work I do could change one person's life, maybe more.

Nasoan: My family makes me feel good. That includes a lot of people. Being able to speak out and be heard makes me feel good.

Sarriet: Coming from two cultures and having to blend them to be successful in this country. I'm an American of Asian decent. I feel good being part of a common group and maintaining my Asian identity. I'm happy I could reconnect.

This article transcribes the dialog at the Pact Awareness Workshop, "Race and Your Child." Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall made every attempt to capture the speakers' words