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# Love and Family

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**T**ogether 33 years, Karen Wilson and Bill Sims are just like most couples you know. They live in a nice house in Queens, N.Y. They struggle with the day-to-day realities of life in a big city. They work hard at their jobs — she's a corporate manager; he's a blues musician. And as parents, they have worked hard — and continue to work hard — to give their two children a strong sense of self, values and responsibility.

Last September, Wilson and Sims and their now-grown daughters Chaney and Cicily were the focus of a 10-part PBS documentary, *An American Love Story*, that ultimately portrayed this family as a truly typical family. Of course, national attention came because, to many eyes, this family isn't typical at all: Wilson is Caucasian; Sims is African American.

The Wilson-Sims family endured a lot over the years, and the documentary covered their lives in depth: the difficulties the young couple faced when they first started dating in the late '60s; the small-

town harassment that frightened them and ultimately pushed them to move to an ethnically diverse big city; the challenges involved in helping their daughters determine their own place in the world. But ultimately, what resonates is the day-to-day stuff.

If we are married, we know the stress everyday existence can place on a relationship. If we are parents, we worry how our children will be accepted by their peers. Those who saw the documentary probably did so to get a look at an interracial family. What they probably walked away with was a sense that, though the Wilson-Sims might differ from the norm, at least on the outside, on the inside, they were a very ordinary American family.

Of course, we don't have to look to television to see mixed-race couples. Since the historic *Loving vs. Virginia* Supreme Court case overturned the ban against interracial marriage in 1967 — ironically, the same year Karen Wilson met Bill Sims — the number of so-called mixed marriages has grown.

In 1960, the U.S. Census reported that out of 40,491,000 total marriages, 149,000 involved a black person married to a white person. The 1970 Census, which came just three years after *Loving vs. Virginia*, showed that out of 44,598,000 marriages, 310,000 — more than double the figure reported a decade before — were between an African American and a Caucasian. The Census Bureau's most recent Current Population Survey (CPS), from 1998, shows 55,305,000 marriages — 1,348,000 of them involve black and white spouses.

Similarly, more and more children are of a different race than one or both of their parents. The 1998 CPS reports that although 95.9 percent of children are designated as being the same race as both their mother and their father, 4.1 percent — nearly 2 million kids — are not.

But, though statistics are nice and indisputable, one really doesn't need to see statistics to know this. (Did the folks who lived near Monticello in the early 1800s really need DNA evidence to

notice the strong resemblance between plantation-owning founding father Thomas Jefferson and the children of his slave, Sally Hemings?) A stroll through Baltimore's neighborhoods, especially areas known for being well-integrated, reveals that, though most people still pair off traditionally, more and more men and

taught by their parents, will tease children they consider different.

One biracial family interviewed for this article pulled out at the last minute for just that reason. The couple, who has four children, mentioned to the wife's grandmother that they were involved in an upcoming *JUBILEE* report on interracial

"Ultimately, we felt we had to do it," adds her husband of 22 years, Arschel. "We are a pretty average family, and there are those who need to see that interracial families are, first and foremost, families."

And to all appearances, the Moreells are an average family. Arschel works for WJZ-TV; he's a technical specialist, which means he's responsible for the station's master control, making sure all on-air content is in place before the television signal hits the transmitter. Cathy is a teacher at Roland Park Elementary/Middle School. Both share a commitment to their faith and sing in the gospel choir of their church, St. James' Episcopal in West Baltimore's Lafayette Square.

They have two children, Arschel III, who recently turned 12, and 10-year-old Amanda; Cathy was a stay-at-home mom until the kids were of school age. Clearly, the Moreells are proud of their kids. "They're very close. They protect each other, take care of each other. They have their disagreements, but they're there for each other," Cathy says.

As normal as the Moreells are, many people would have a problem hearing

that, 27 years ago, a white woman looked across the room in an Iowa tavern, laid eyes on a black man, and thought to herself, "This is the man you're going to marry." But that is what happened when Cathy first saw Arschel Morell Jr.

This was the young Baltimorean's first night in Iowa. In 1973, he earned an associate's degree in communication arts from the Community College of Baltimore and knew he didn't want to go to a large college. So he headed west, to tiny Parsons College. Though he wasn't a drinker, he figured a bar would be a good place to meet people. And, before long, he found himself talking for hours with the woman who would, five years later, become his wife.

Getting to that point took some time, however. After one semester at Parsons, the school lost its accreditation and was shut down. Before long, Arschel returned to Iowa to attend Simpson College in Indianola, a town just outside of Des Moines that then boasted about 8,000 residents. Cathy had a job running the local Pizza

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By Natalie Davis

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women are finding love in black and white — and in other colors too. A visit to most any school will introduce you to kids who aren't black or brown or white, but a mixture of ethnicities, cultures and races that, on the one hand, makes them stand out from the black and white faces around them, but on the other, makes no difference at all.

Of course, to many people — even in the year 2000 — the skin color of one's mate and one's children makes a colossal difference. Though most would not condone the thinking of individuals and organizations that subscribe to the theory that "race-mixing" is a sin punishable by death, many seemingly reasonable people do have a problem with love crossing the color line. In many cases, people will stare at mixed-race couples walking together or dining in a restaurant. Some might approach the African-American mother of a biracial child and ask, point-blank, if the father is white — it happened to me when my daughter, now 11, was an infant. And sometimes even kids, carefully

couples. Before long, the grandmother, along with assorted uncles, aunts, and other relatives, convinced the pair that participating in this article would bring unwanted attention to the family and, most importantly, to their children. "We really want to be seen just as everyone else," the apologetic wife said by way of explanation. "Speaking in a magazine and using our names would just make everybody talk about something we're trying not to make a big deal about."

It's a point well-taken. But the fact is that there are increasing numbers of interracial marriages each year as well as a growing number of transracial adoptions. If, in the year 2000, there are people uneasy about discussing their lives or unwilling to discuss a growing reality, chances are it means the subject needs airing.

"We had to consider this carefully too," says Cathy Morell. "We had to decide whether it was wise for us to expose ourselves and expose our children."

Hut ("It was considered a big restaurant," she laughs) and Arschel attended school while also working as a sports broadcaster at the local radio station.

"What was really cool about us is that we were an interracial couple that nobody bothered," Cathy recalls. "Everybody knew us, and we were just regular people to them. Arschel did a lot of high school and college sports games, so the coaches knew him and people in town knew him. We were well known and well liked." Before long, they'd moved in together — they rented an attic in a huge house owned by a supportive local couple.

Cathy and Arschel remember their two years together in Indianola as a "very good time." But there was a major challenge: Cathy's parents were not happy that their daughter was dating a black man. When the couple finally decided to marry, her parents were in no mood to celebrate. "But I had to do what I knew was the right thing to do," Cathy insists. "I had to marry the man I loved. And we really haven't experienced a lot of problems."

Yet, they admit they went into the marriage only after giving the matter a great deal of thought. Both had dated others of different races before, but considering a lifetime partnership forced them to consider the consequences

they might face.

"There are people on both sides who would rather see us unhappy or not living than see us together," Arschel says. "I said we had to be careful because there are people who don't want us to be happy. I knew Cathy wanted to have kids — we ended up waiting 10 years — but we had to think about that too. Hopefully if we love them enough, it won't be a big issue."

Of course, there have been some troubles. There are sometimes gawking

people straining to get a glimpse of the couple. "I usually stare back, depends on my mood," Arschel says. "Most people ignore us. And if they don't, that is their problem. This is somebody I care about and fell in love with. I'm okay with it, she's okay with it. What does anything else matter?"

Cathy agrees with her husband. "It's all about the way you carry yourself. If you act like 'I'm different,' you ask for whatever happens out there," she says.

"Arschel and I don't love each other

because of the color of our skin, but because of who we are and what we've become. That's more important than anything else, and that's how we treat each other. So yes, we get a look here, a look there. I know people treat me differently sometimes because they're unsure about me. But if they know me, who I'm married to and who is around me shouldn't matter."

But to some, it does matter. Arschel recalls attending a conference and being confronted directly. "I met a white guy who told me he didn't like the fact that Cathy and I were together. But he had to admit that he liked us individually," he says. "You can't do anything about that. I'm not with my wife to change anyone's attitude. I'm a bottom-line kind of guy, and the bottom line is I'm with her because I care about her."

### THE BOONDOCKS

by AARON MCGRUDER



The subject of interracial families and racial identity is a recurring story line in the nationally syndicated comic strip, *The Boondocks*, created by Columbia's Aaron McGruder. Reprinted by permission, Universal Press Syndicate.

## Linking Interracially

The days when interracial families had to go it alone are gone. The Internet provides a wealth of resources for those in need of support, guidance or basic information on keeping it together in a racist society. If you're in a mixed-race family and looking for others in similar situations, the following organizations and networks may be useful to you.

#### **INTERracialFamily.com** [www.interracialfamily.com](http://www.interracialfamily.com)

This Web site for people "with an open mind and heart" is packed with information for interracial and intercultural families. Included are channels addressing a number of topics, such as Couples (includes advice on relationship issues, planning a family and pregnancy); Kids' Korner (links to games, Public Broadcasting System and Nickelodeon youth-oriented television shows and Web sites by kids in interracial families); Family & Parenting (advice and tips on dealing with parenting issues); and more. Those looking for community and conversation can find it in the site's message forum and chat room. There is also online shopping, free e-mail accounts and Web site hosting under the [interracialfamily.com](http://interracialfamily.com) domain.

#### **Interracial Voice** [www.webcom.com/~intvoice/](http://www.webcom.com/~intvoice/)

This bimonthly online magazine bills itself as the Voice of Conscience of the Global Mixed-Race/Interracial Movement, an independent, information-oriented, networking newsjournal dedicated to serving the mixed-race/interracial community. Some of the articles in the latest edition include hard-hitting editorials addressing racism, racial identity, the politics of "mixed races" and custody issues. The site also provides links to interracial family resources, research sites and more. Interracial Voice mounted a protest against Census 2000 — the magazine unsuccessfully fought to have a biracial/multiracial identity designation included in the census.



Laughter can sometimes ease the pain of enduring prejudice. The Morells recall a long-ago, late-night visit to a roadside inn between Iowa's Martinsdale-St. Mary's and Indianola. Arschel had been working a game that evening, and he and Cathy were driving home. Along the way, they realized that they were hungry. "I said, 'Let's stop at the roadside inn,'" Arschel says. Cathy replied that no, it wasn't safe. Since Arschel was driving, they stopped. "I swear we went in and the jukebox stopped," he says.

"Cathy wanted to leave, but I said, 'No, we're going to eat.'" Inside, they placed their order with the waitress and decided to play a game of pool while waiting for their meal. "I could feel people looking at us the entire time," Arschel continues. "And then, right before our meal came, in came the Martinsdale-St. Mary's girls' basketball team. They sat down, and I recognized their coach — he and I had had lunch together. And he remembered me, and said, 'Hey girls, it's Arschel Morell, the guy I talked to this weekend!' He introduced me to the girls and I talked to the girls like I knew them."

"Suddenly, everything became normal, and all because that coach talked to Arschel. I'd been scared to death. I could see the headline: 'Couple Found Dead in the Back of a Ditch,'" Cathy says with an

uneasy laugh. "But this didn't happen often. We didn't go places where we wouldn't be welcome. When we went to the bar, we'd go where the college kids hung out, not where the townspeople went. We were very clear about where we chose to be."

Arschel sounds almost apologetic. "It sounds like we limit ourselves, but some battles you don't need to fight. Just keep on going. If people want to show their ignorance, keep on going. That's the kind of attitude you have to have to sustain

yourself in the relationship. If you let everything get to you, you shouldn't be in the relationship in the first place. It's a question of why you're in the relationship. Is it to get attention? Is it to make a political statement? Or is it because you're in love? Cathy and I decided to be together because we wanted to be together."

The thickest of skin can still feel mighty thin when one's precious children are involved. The Morells say they have warned Arschel III and Amanda about prejudice and about the realities.

"From time to time we talk about it; we try to keep it general and age-appropriate," Arschel says. "Questions like: How are your classmates? Are there any problems? There are a number of biracial kids at Roland Park, at least one in Amanda's immediate peer group. I don't think it's been an issue. There was a near-thing with our son, one incident where a kid was showing off. We took care of that — we talked to his parents at school. The kid understood that, in no uncertain terms, [his behavior was] not acceptable."

"Arschel and Amanda are both very positive children," says their mother, "and that's mostly because they've been raised in a positive atmosphere. They are really nice kids. They know they are loved and cared about, and they care about others. But yes, they know prejudice exists."

### THE BOONDOCKS

by AARON MCGRUDER



sidebar continued...

#### **Will and Chandra's Page** [www.concentric.net/~Meyer94/](http://www.concentric.net/~Meyer94/)

"Love sees no color" is the watchword at Will and Chandra's Page. This Web site, developed by an interracial couple, shares the story of their family. There are delightful wedding and couple shots, as well as photos of the couple's two kids. Also included are resource links for interracial families, an interracial photo gallery, an e-mail list for interracial families and, for those inclined to chat on the 'Net, a list of interracial couples who have ICQ numbers.

#### **International Interracial Association** [www.i3n.net](http://www.i3n.net)

The IIA exists to promote intercultural and interracial harmony around the world. Founded in 1995, the association is open to all who have an interest in improving racial and cultural unity through supportive discussion of interracial/cultural people, those involved in interracial and intercultural relationships, families that have adopted children of other races and/or cultures, and those interested in the subject matter. The site offers discussion forums, event information, resource links and success stories of those who have made it through the particular challenges that face mixed-race families.

#### **The Multiracial Activist** [www.multiracial.com](http://www.multiracial.com)

This online magazine describes itself as an activist journal covering civil rights and issues of interest to biracial/multiracial individuals, interracial couples/families and transracial adoptees. Its goals include abolishing racial divisions and providing a voice for biracial and multiracial people in the civil-rights arena. Included on the site are resource links, government information, activism opportunities, discussion forums, chat, free e-mail and more.

#### **Interrace Haven** [www.austin.quik.com/~crusader/rhaven.html](http://www.austin.quik.com/~crusader/rhaven.html)

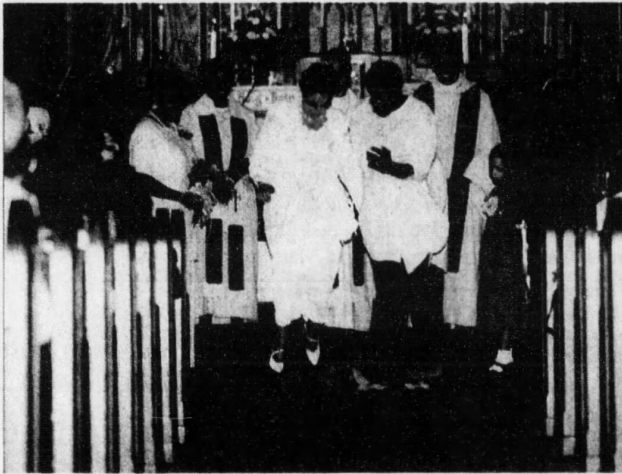
Site owner Allen Steadman says Interrace Haven is "not just a Web site . . . it's a community." Here, people in interracial relationships, biracial and multiracial individuals and those supportive of interracial families are invited to network with like-minded people. The site offers positive, kid-friendly space for children; opportunities for adults to find pen pals; lists of resources and member Web sites; and a photo gallery featuring happy interracial couples and families.

— N.D.

All in all, however, the Morells are a normal family. They attend church together as a family and stress the importance of a relationship with God. The parents spend quality time with their children and share childrearing duties. They remember their wedding fondly and still sound excited about renewing their vows on their 20th anniversary two years ago. Amanda takes ballet and flute lessons. Young Arschel earned a purple belt in karate before taking a hiatus; his parents hope the avid Pokemon fan will be back in training soon.

The kids attend the same school where their mother teaches, which allows them to travel to-and-fro together. They swim at a nearby swim club. And, as a family, they are involved, although not as much as they'd like, in their neighborhood association.

Through 22 years of marriage, five years together before that, two careers, and two children, Cathy and Arschel Morell have seen their share of ups and




When the Morells renewed their wedding vows two years ago, they "jumped the broom," incorporating an African-American slave tradition.

downs. They admit their marriage is strong and loving, but not perfect — "but no one's is," Cathy says. And the same is true of their own families: Arschel's family is very supportive of the couple, as are Cathy's brothers and sister. Arschel's sister was maid of honor at the couple's wedding and at their renewal of vows, and the couple has vacationed with one of Cathy's brothers in Florida.

But Cathy's mother, who still lives in

Iowa, is a sticking point. "She doesn't think I'm happy. It was really hard for them to accept the relationship. They never truly embraced it. But I can't make them like my husband, and I wouldn't want to try." Still, Cathy's mother has visited the Morells, even if she wasn't wild about the neighborhood in which they live.

"We live simply. We live the life we choose to live and we live in a community where we choose to be," Cathy says matter-of-factly. "People have been supportive of us. They love our children."

She stops and pauses while considering her family and their life. "This has not been a difficult life for us," she says. "Arschel and I have really been blessed." 

*Natalie Davis is associate editor at Baltimore's City Paper, and thinks miscegenation should be an Olympic sport.*



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