

BLACK & WHITE: SHIMON-CRAIG
continued from page 121

also experience bumpy sailing from time to time, especially concerning time: The woman drives me crazy with her tendency to elasticize it. We jokingly refer to her time frame as "island time," "CP time" or "African time," but when it runs up against the exactitude that resides in my Prussian-Belgian genes, the results can be wrenching.

For instance, my idea of arriving at a party on time is getting there to help chop the vegetables and fix the fruit punch; Katrina, on the other hand, enjoys breezing into the affair two hours after the announced starting time. Over the years, I've come to relax my standards a bit, which I philosophize as being good for my character—sort of like drinking castor oil or doing sit-ups, painful but good in the long run. Having been in other long-term relationships, though, I also know it would be a disservice to credit this issue and others solely to our ethnic differences. Both of us brought our own mix of fears, hang-ups and anxieties into our marriage in baggage that was distinctly colorless.

Our families have, on the surface at least, accepted our marriage. We're not in close contact with either side, because they live in the Midwest and on the East Coast. Visits can be awkward, as relations with in-laws commonly are. And when I'm on the South Side of Chicago, I feel the sharp distinction of my Whiteness, just as Katrina feels out of place in the Connecticut suburbs.

Yet I have not worried too much about Chai's mixed heritage and how that will affect his life. Yes, I know that for biracial children the issues of not fitting in with their monoethnic peers and the feelings of having to "choose" between Black and White are real and difficult, but that's part of why Katrina and I live in the East Bay. Here multiracialism is common, and support groups—such as I-Pride—are readily available. Already Chai has several playmates who are of African- and European-American parentage.

And I hope Chai won't be faced with too many situations like the one we experienced at the Kwanzaa celebration in Oakland. Or with awkward moments like the one I faced in the department store, wondering how to reply to the young Black man's comment. Had I been thinking quickly enough, I might have retorted, "If a sister goes White,

you know she's all right!"

But pithy slogans don't make for a lasting relationship or a marriage; trust, support and friendship do—no matter what the color. And I rejoice in finding that combination of attributes with Katrina.

BLACK & WHITE: KATRINA
continued from page 66

could accept that I was in a relationship with a wonderful human being who happened to be White. In my mind, though, I couldn't get beyond my preconceived notion of what color his skin *should* be.

So while walking down the streets of Oakland with Shimon, I found myself on guard, waiting for some brother to give me flack about being with a White boy. For the most part that never happened—and I've also faced minimal overt racism from White people. Don't get me wrong. We have gone on a few trips and found ourselves in Redneckville, but generally Whites don't seem to care about Shimon and me being together. But there are exceptions. A few months ago an elderly White lady turned up her nose, rolled her eyes and said, "Tsk, ts, ts," as we passed her on the street. Shimon was angry and taken aback, but this was one of the few instances in my life where I found bigotry to be funny. I was like "Yeah, in your face, girl!" For once I didn't turn someone else's racism into my problem—and it felt good.

If only all encounters could be so easily dismissed. One of our worst bouts with racism happened when Shimon and I attended a Kwanzaa event sponsored by a local church. While the presenters of the ceremony were describing Umoja (unity), a lady said to me, "Excuse me, sista, can you tell your friend to leave? You can stay but he doesn't belong here." I refused. After she left, someone else came up, followed by another person, and finally, one man who asked us to step outside—if you know what I mean. That was enough for me. I was scared for our safety and shaken up emotionally.

After that incident I retreated from the Black community. Any event or any area that was predominantly Black was off-limits to me, particularly if I was with Shimon. I couldn't deal with the fear of potentially finding myself in another threatening situation. My friends who were "real Black" didn't hear from me quite as much, if at all. I

was angry and pissed at Black people, and I'd come to a place in my life where I saw my people as being as racist as the rest of society. I used to feel compelled to protect the African-American community from bigots and myopic ideas, but because of Shimon, I no longer felt that way.

Instead, I found myself constantly debating Black people who espoused discriminatory beliefs, and I challenged the justification for their racist behavior. One day in the park I spent close to an hour trying to convince a sister (whom I'd never met before) that inclusion of the "multiracial" category on the next U.S. census was important for biracial people. She dismissed it as an opportunity for a bunch of wannabe White people to disclaim their race. Our debate ended when I posed this question: If one parent is Latino and the other is Asian, what race should their child claim? She couldn't answer.

But after giving birth to Chai, I reached a turning point. I stopped isolating myself from the Black community because, honestly, I'm not truly "home" anyplace else. It's still difficult when people I love and respect have disparaging views about my marriage, but I'm not afraid to confront them and remind them it's not their business. Chai's presence helped me resolve that *no one* has the right to impose beliefs, ideas or values on me. It is *my* life, and I must decide for myself what is right.

And in time I know that Chai will have to do the same. My job is to help him develop a strong sense of self in the face of a racist society. Like most people of color, Chai will probably experience some form of prejudice from the White community. And as a biracial person, he'll probably encounter discrimination from the Black community as well. Some African-Americans will label him Black—which denies half of his cultural and biological existence—and others will say he's not Black enough. My hope is that Chai shares my positive feelings about his African side, but I want him to honor himself *fully*—with equal pride in his European heritage.

As for my husband, well, I think that Shimon and I are like two people learning the dance of life—together. Some moves are natural, while others are perfected with time. The problems we face in our marriage are similar to those most couples of the same race have to deal with: He doesn't under-

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 124]