

TWO WORLDS,

PHOTOS BY JAY BACHEMIN

Back in her home state of Indiana in the summer of 1976, a 22-year-old woman sat talking to her mother at a family wedding reception. She was holding her one-year-old baby girl in her arms, and felt proud as her family and friends doted on her. Then a man approached the table and, pointing to the little girl, asked, "How did you get *her*?"

My mom realized with that question what I and any future children of theirs would face growing up. The stranger had taken one look at my mom, her blonde hair and hazel eyes, and at me, her black-haired, brown-eyed, Chinese baby, and wondered how we had come to be together. "Well, the normal way," was my mom's confused and slightly agitated response. What other answer was there?

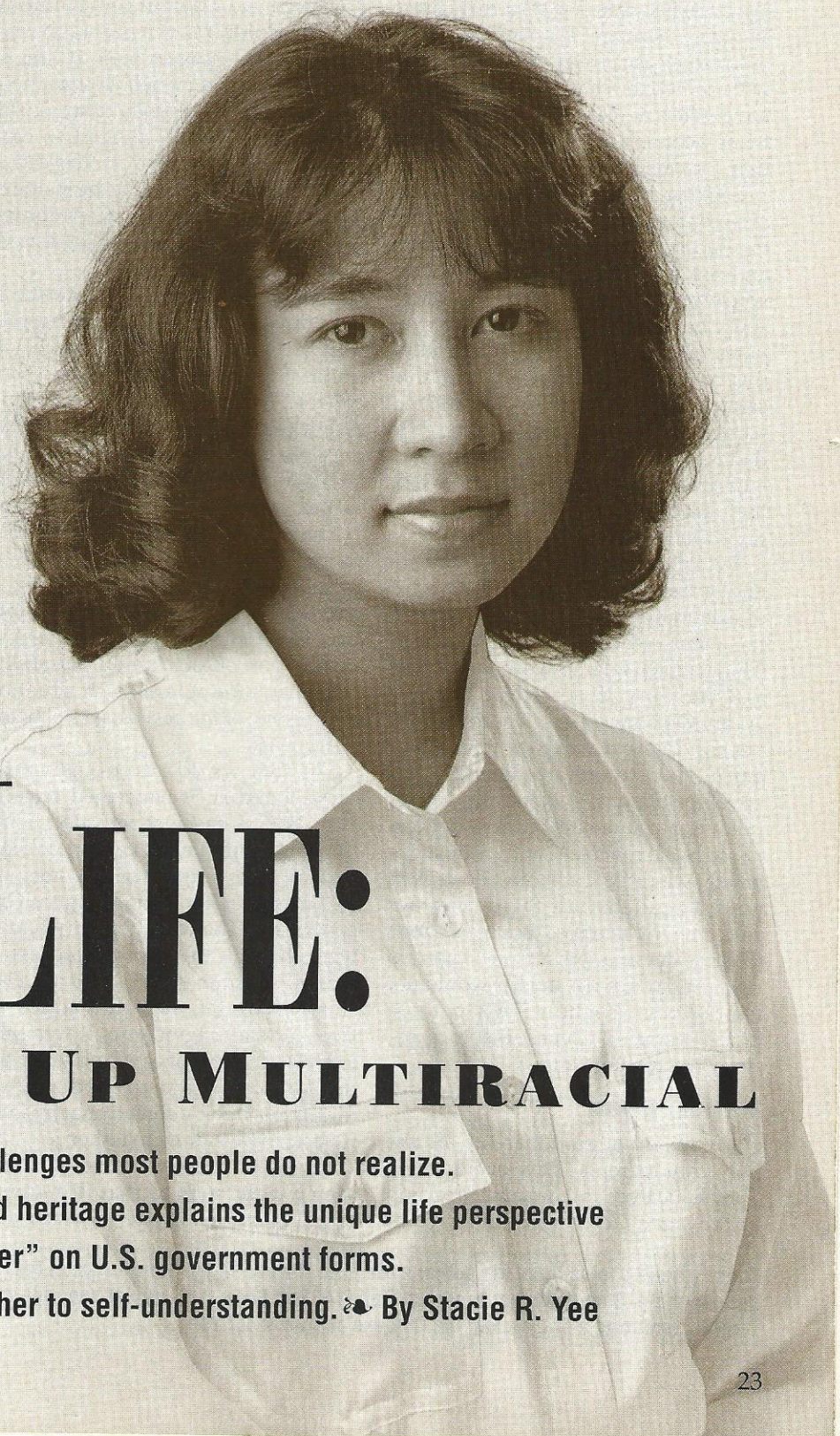
I don't remember the first time Mom told me that story. I know that I was young, and I remember not understanding what the man meant. Why would he say that? What was different about me? I wondered. Those are questions I've continued to ponder all my life.

Part of the problem of growing up multiracial (that's the "official" term, I guess) is that people immediately make assumptions based solely on appearance, names and other details

that do not reveal a true person. For instance, some people look at me and *know* that I'm Chinese. As proud as that makes me, it also hurts because it seems to nullify my German heritage, which is just as much a part of me as my Chinese one.

The most difficult part about being

multiracial is not the challenge of accepting yourself for all that you are, but in figuring out how the next person is going to perceive you. In my 21 years, I have had people ask me where I was from, if I was born in this country and even *what I am*. Being asked what I am made me very angry. I



ONE LIFE:

GROWING UP MULTIRACIAL

Multiracial Americans face challenges most people do not realize.

Here a young woman with mixed heritage explains the unique life perspective of citizens who are labeled "other" on U.S. government forms.

She recounts how faith brought her to self-understanding.  By Stacie R. Yee

wanted to shout, *I'm a human being! What are you?*

A Matter of Perception

It's actually quite amazing how different people see me. I've had friends who didn't realize I was anything other than Caucasian. I've had friends who suspected there was something non-white in my background, but didn't know if it was Native American or Asian or Latin American. Most, however, realized from the start that I have an Asian heritage. It's hard to know what to expect from a first meeting with someone when so many people have different reactions. I never know what people are going to see when they look into my eyes.

Looking Asian has created problems of acceptance and understanding for my dad, who is full-blooded Chinese, and my two younger brothers and I, who are half. We never *felt* particularly Asian because we grew up *white*. My paternal grandparents immigrated to this country from China early in this century and all of their 12 children were born in the United States. My dad was the youngest. Both of his parents died in his early teen years. When they died, most of the Chinese traditions died too.

But I didn't grow up without a Chinese influence. I have fond memories of celebrating the Chinese New Year, the most celebrated of holidays in China, which falls between January 10 and February 19 according to lunar cycles. On New Year's Day, my brothers and I would wake up with a tangerine next to our heads and a red envelope filled with money under our pillows. I also remember my aunt trying to teach me to eat with chopsticks when I was little (I still can't do it, even now). I recall the little Buddha statues adorning my relatives' houses and the Chinese newspapers my uncle used to read. And of course, my life would not have been so delightful if not for those family recipes of Chinese dishes, especially the wonton soup.

Different Worlds

My maternal grandparents are the only grandparents I have ever known. They have lived on the same farm and in the same German, Catholic com-

munity in Indiana all my life. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of days on the farm. I remember playing with my aunt and cousins in the three upstairs bedrooms of the house. I remember climbing trees, feeding chickens and picking berries. I remember Thanksgiving turkeys and family gathered around the tree at Christmas.

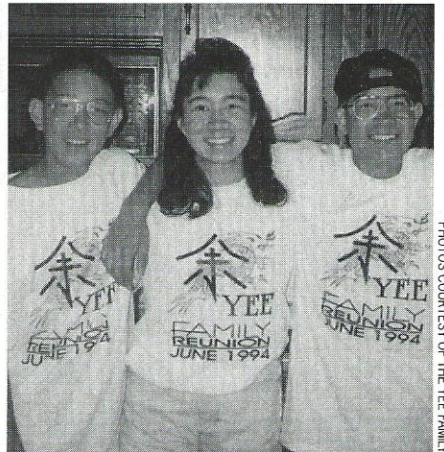
My mom's side of the family has been instrumental in helping me come to terms with the identity questions I've faced as a result of being multiracial. They didn't sit down and give me advice about how to look at life, or how to perceive myself. It was more subtle. My grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins never seemed to care that I looked "different." If they did, it didn't show. I have always been one of them. I was Stacie—granddaughter, niece, cousin. I always felt loved, always comfortable.

My mom's youngest sister, who is only three years older than I, recently told me that she never knew I was multiracial until she grew up and society told her that I was. Of course, it didn't matter and it still doesn't. We are close because we grew up together and admire each other, and it would be that way if I was multiracial or not.

I have always rejoiced in both sides of my family, even though the differences between them were striking. It seemed amazing to be able to fit into two totally different worlds. I feel so much a part of each family. The ability to feel comfortable in each situation may be one of the best aspects of being multiracial.

My two worlds do occasionally come together. It happened once in May 1995. I had just returned home from my sophomore year in college, and my mom's sister was staying with us to recover after having surgery. One night while she was there, my family went through the exciting process of making wonton soup. After my Dad chopped up the meat and added all the necessary ingredients, it was time to crack a couple of eggs and wrap the meat inside the square noodles. It's a messy job, but it's something my family has always done together.

My aunt was amazed! She had never seen a sight such as that (it requires reaching into a huge bowl of meat and



These candid photos trace the author's life from the age of two (top) to 18. In the bottom photo, Stacie and her brothers, Rob (14) and Scott (15), model Yee reunion T-shirts, featuring a dragon and the Chinese character for Yee.

getting egg on your fingers), but she enjoyed herself and our Chinese tradition. I remember feeling great that we were able to share it with her.

Familiar People, Familiar Place

The Church, too, has always been a place where I felt free to be myself completely and where I was accepted as I was. My family has belonged to the same parish since I was a little girl. I feel as if I have grown up in the Church, and with the Church.

I made my first Communion in a little room that was part of an office complex, which served as our church building until funds were available to build one of our own in 1985. In 1989, I was confirmed in the new building, with the same familiar people. St. John Neumann Church in Cincinnati is a place as comfortable to me as home.

My mom is a cantor and sings in the choir, and her beautiful voice has always helped to bring home the message of the Mass. The familiar faces that I see every Sunday are comforting, even if I don't know them personally. The people of the parish are, in a very real way, my family, too. Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve has been very special the past two years as my

grandma and aunt have come to hear my mom sing and my youngest brother play the clarinet. Faith and family come together at church.

I have always known, largely because of my mom's example, how much God loves me, and how important it is to have faith. I have often heard her say that she doesn't know how some people survive without faith. I don't know, either.

Jesus has been a source of great help and support as I was trying to figure out who I was. Regardless of how many reassurances I got from my family or friends when I was struggling, it was the knowledge that I was created in God's image and that Jesus loved me unconditionally that most comforted me.

I figured God made me multiracial for a reason—and who was I to question divine reasoning? My faith sustained me when being multiracial was difficult.

Not That Different

I wasn't teased a lot because of my Asian appearance while in elementary

school, but it did happen. Mostly the kids would pull their eyes back and imitate being Chinese or would try to karate-chop me, figuring I could karate-chop them back. Mostly they would try to imitate the Chinese language as I passed by them.

In the beginning, I didn't understand why they were doing that to me. It hurt me, not just because they were being mean, but because I didn't see myself as different from them. I don't recall ever getting upset or crying over being teased. Maybe I did, but I remember more trying to get even. I pretended it didn't hurt or I denied what they were saying about me. I'd try to find something equally mean to say back to them.

It never seemed fair that I was being teased for something that I could neither control nor recognize in myself.

Questions often bothered me more than being teased. For instance, once while standing with my mom in line for something, a woman asked if I was

The Church has always been a place where I felt free to be myself completely.

adopted. That made me so angry. My mom was *my* mom! That's all there was to it. Who was this woman to deny our biological bond?

In his book *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality and Identity*, Japanese-American writer David Mura writes about how uncomfortable it makes his Caucasian wife to be asked how she got their daughter. "For Susie, the encounters were a challenge to her position as Samantha's biological mother, a negation of an arduous pregnancy and the labor of birth and motherhood." Questions like those are what make going through life multiracial the hardest.

Being teased ended for the most part after junior high school. In high school I did a lot of soul-searching. I tried to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, and what kind of person I wanted to be.

I remember wanting to look like some of the beautiful white actresses on television, to live lives like theirs. I spent a great deal of time looking for inspiration in the wrong places.

I am not sure why I was so con-

cerned with deciding what kind of woman I wanted to be, especially when my friends didn't seem to care anything about it. Perhaps it was partly because for years I had been termed and labeled by everyone but me. I was made fun of for something I didn't feel I was. I looked different, but didn't feel different.

I remember looking in the mirror and trying to see what they saw. I stared at my own reflection and looked deep into my own eyes. I tried to see something Chinese—I couldn't. I couldn't find anything German, either. I was simply me.

Relying on Faith

Once the teasing stopped, I figured that I would finally have some peace. I thought that I had somehow grown out of my multiracial appearance and that people would start looking at me the way I saw myself—just like them.

Fortunately for me, God had a different plan. Being multiracial didn't go away and I hadn't outgrown it. In fact, I was growing *into* it as faith helped me to come to some definite conclusions. Faith in God, in family, in America and in myself helped me to come to a greater understanding of myself and of my place in this world.

I can't pinpoint the beginning of this greater understanding. I think it began around the time that I chose history as a minor in college. Studying the history of America somehow brought me closer to a greater understanding of myself. I had always been interested in the American West and the Civil War, but it wasn't until I actually studied the way that people lived back then that I realized the human condition: the sorrows, joys, trials and tribulations that all human beings share.

I don't know why I didn't immediately recognize that commonality in this century, except that I always related to the apparent simplicity of life and the faith that the communities seemed to share in the past. History prompted me to go beyond what I had previously thought and made me see people as individuals who were shaped by their heritages, but weren't defined by them.

Immigrating to America changed our ancestors' lives. They forged new identities, based not on where they came from but on where they were

going. I related to the pioneer spirit and developed one of my own.

I started to think of myself as if on a journey, as both German and Chinese, but even more as American. I started to define myself by what I felt in my heart and what I knew because of my Catholic faith to be true, that God was watching over me. I am aware that having a Chinese heritage and being Catholic back in earlier centuries would not have been very popular, but that serves to remind me of the importance of the journey I've chosen to undertake.

Being an 'Other'

The Supreme Court decision in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case of 1896 made it clear that if a person is just one eighth of a non-white race, then that is what the person is considered to be. I have never really been able to accept that. One challenge I persistently face is what to mark on forms which ask about race. If I mark *white*, which is more of what I feel, then I'm actually contradicting the Supreme Court decision. If I mark *Asian*, I don't feel that I am acknowledging my entire background. And marking *other* makes me feel less than a person.

Multiracial Americans and their parents are currently lobbying in Washington to get the word *multiracial* put on U.S. Census forms. In *U.S. News and World Report* (April 8, 1996), Susan Graham, mother of a multiracial child, said, "The government doesn't have the right to act as the racial police and tell my child he has to choose one of his parents or else be an *other*." I wholeheartedly support her and those like her. A decision on the issue by the U.S. Census Bureau is expected this year.

Probably the most disturbing words I can hear from someone are generalizations about race or a certain group of people. I can feel my body tense when I hear people demeaning an entire race of human beings based on their experiences with one person. It seems incredibly unfair.

The advantage of being multiracial is in the unique perspective I get on life. It's often easier to empathize with those

who are like you. Being multiracial I feel a bit like everyone. I can understand the challenges that people of other races face. I relate to their distress at not fitting in or feeling that society sees them as different or as a lesser people. As sincere as some people may be in trying to understand, it is impossible to come to a complete understanding of the lives of nonwhite or multiracial Americans without really experiencing it.

I can see, more clearly because I am partly of a nonwhite race, that everyone in this world has feelings. Everyone is important. The saying that a smile means the same in any language is so true. Human dignity is valued highly in the Catholic Church, and it

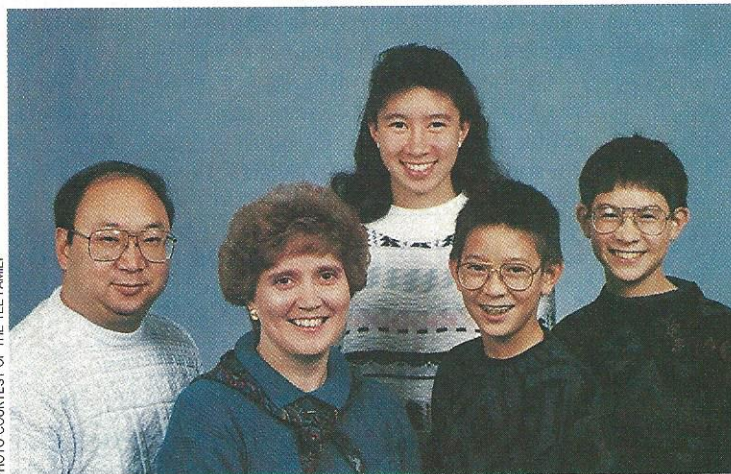


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE YEE FAMILY

In the 1991 St. John Neumann Parish Directory, Gene and Diana Yee appear with their children, whose gifts they consistently affirm.

seems wrong to treat or speak about people with anything less than the utmost dignity.

A History of My Own

Many people in this country can appropriately be called multiracial; very few people are completely one specific race. The difference for me, and others like me, is that when skin color or appearance is not characteristically Caucasian, it becomes more apparent.

David Mura spoke frankly about Asian stereotypes in his book. His children are white and Japanese, and he fears for their future. "The women are exotic, sensual and submissive; the men are houseboys or Chinatown punks..."

As interesting as his narrative was, I must say that I have never faced the Asian stereotype of being exotic and submissive. His book, written about

his own life, just confirmed my belief that experiences differ, that everyone, regardless of race, is unique. My experience is bound to be different from that of other people—multiracial or not.

I am proud of who I am and where I came from, and I attribute that to my parents. They never raised my brothers and me to be different. My mom and dad love each other and the three of us children and we have always known that. Since we were little, we have been told that we were beautiful and talented.

But they didn't raise us just with their hearts. They also made decisions about their lives that would make ours easier. For instance, once they were married they decided to move out of the rural community where my mom grew up and settle in Cincinnati, figuring the city would be more open to us. I believe they were right.

My dad used to tell me that no one but he and my mom could have made me. He said that to make me feel like a special person, and it worked. To be a part of two such extraordinary people is a gift from God, and so is being multiracial. So now when I wonder what people see

when they look into my eyes, I realize that it doesn't matter so much because only in my heart can the real me be found.

Being multiracial puts a different spin on things, makes me look at life through different-colored glasses. In some aspects, it makes living a bit more difficult, and oftentimes painful. But more than that, it gives me the opportunity to experience more of the world. I feel like the embodiment of America—I come with a German history, an Asian history and a collective American history, which is full of mystery, questions and wonder. Because of my faith in Christ, I have a greater faith in the knowledge of who I am, and in living my own life. ■

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