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The biracial identity

RedEye explore the multiracial experience in Chicago through the eyes of one group

By Tracy Swartz, RedEye

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When she was a teenager, Alisha Saville had trouble defining herself.

As she applied to colleges, she had to mark her race on applications and often didn't fit in any box.

"I never knew what to put down. Sometimes I would leave it blank," said Saville, whose mother is Taiwanese and father is white. "I would never put down Caucasian. That's denying half my heritage."

Saville, 23, had a much easier time last year filling out her census form. She was able to check a box denoting she is both white and Asian.

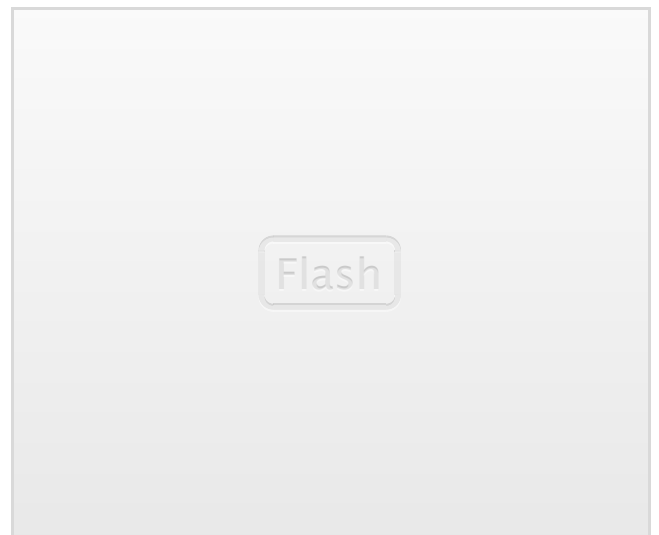
"I thought it was cool that at least I'm able to publicly, on a national form, self-identify as both," Saville said. "There's so many people who fall into that category."

Nationwide, Americans who consider themselves to be more than one race grew about 32 percent from 2000-10, when including the category "Hispanic" as a race. Though the number of multiracial residents in Chicago is down nearly 24 percent compared with a decade ago, Saville is part of a burgeoning multiracial group here—Chicagoans who consider themselves to be white and Asian grew nearly 72 percent during the past decade, according to recently released census data.

This group, about 11,600 residents, is the most populous biracial group in Chicago, surpassing the group of people who consider themselves both white and African-American by almost 3,000 residents. (On the Census form, "Hispanic" is categorized separately from race, so RedEye did not focus on that group for this article.)

Dominic Pacyga, a Columbia College history professor who has studied immigration, and racial and ethnic relations, attributed the increase to a rise in interracial marriages between whites and Asians, which has grown as anti-Asian racism has subsided.

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A Pew Research Center study of U.S. marriages in 2008 found nearly 15 percent of new marriages are interracial or interethnic. (In Illinois, that number was slightly lower at 13 percent.)

Of the 3.8 million adults who married in 2008, 31 percent of Asians, 26 percent of Hispanics, 16 percent of blacks and 9 percent of whites married someone whose race or ethnicity differed from their own, according to the Pew study.

Saville said growing up in Carbondale, "people weren't so sure what to place me as," and confused her for being Hispanic or Mediterranean.

She said since she started working for the Uptown-based Asian American Institute, which tries to empower the Asian-American community through advocacy, she's had several conversations with her co-workers about what it's like "being Asian."

Saville said she hasn't experienced much racism, though there are a few stereotypes she can't shake.

The perception "for Asian populations, is they do things well and they don't speak up a lot," said Saville, who lives in West Town. "Just naturally, I take after my dad. I'm a calmer and more laid-back person. People would attribute it to my Asian heritage sometimes."

Saville said her mother's parents were bewildered at first that her mom chose to marry an American, but now her grandparents welcome her dad as one of their own, including giving him a Chinese name.

Ashley Tsuruda, who also works at the Asian American Institute, and whose father is Japanese and mother is white, said she sees interracial marriage "becoming more of an OK thing."

Tsuruda, 23, said part of the reason the Asian side of her family has no problem with her having a white mother is because her Japanese family has been in the U.S. since before World War II.

But, she said, growing up in Northbrook, people occasionally would stare at her when she ran errands with her mother, who has blond hair and blue eyes.

"There were people who would look at us weird," said Tsuruda, who has black hair and brown eyes. "They'd ask my mother, 'What country did you adopt her from?' And she'd be like, 'Are you serious? That's my child.' "

Tsuruda, who identifies herself as a fifth-generation Asian-American, said it "happens all the time that people aren't exactly sure about what my race is." Tsuruda said people have mistaken her to be Chinese or Korean and one of her brothers to be Hispanic.

Still, Tsuruda said she rarely runs into major problems because she's biracial but like her co-worker Saville, she's struggled with defining her race on important forms. Ultimately, she chose the "Asian" box on her college applications.

"It feels nice that I can now choose both," Tsuruda said.

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