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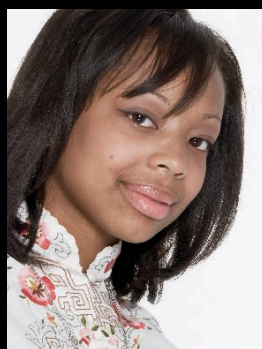




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***THE ANSWER MAY SURPRISE YOU.**

SEVEN GIRLS FORGET THE RULES OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND TALK CANDIDLY ABOUT THE ROLES THAT RACE, ETHNICITY, AND RELIGION PLAY IN THEIR LIVES. THIS IS A CONVERSATION YOU WILL NEVER FORGET.

**BY RENIQUA ALLEN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
STEPHEN LEE**

A few weeks ago I was walking through the streets of Harlem, New York City. My brown skin glowing in the sun, I was sporting a huge, curly Afro; big, gold hoop earrings; and a shirt with an image of a former Black Panther on it. On my iPod, I blasted one of my favorite Nirvana songs, and I had an organic soy shake in one hand and *The New York Times* tucked under my arm. My destination was an exhibit on Pablo Picasso at the Museum of Modern Art. Many would say these images don't work together—a chocolate brown girl on her way to a Picasso exhibit? But I say I was just being me.

When I was little, most of my classmates were black like me. But in 1992, when my mom enrolled me in a mostly white middle school—a private school where she thought I'd get a better education—I developed the same passion for Dave Matthews that I had for Biggie and 'Pac. Like my new white friends, I became obsessed with henna, crepes, Doc Martens, and organic foods. I was psyched about my new interests, but my black friends said I was "acting white." One day in high school, I was dancing around my room to "Alive" by Pearl Jam when one of my elementary school friends busted in for a surprise visit. As I saw her face scrunch up in →

MEET THE GIRLS

These seven high school girls came to the CG! offices for a roundtable on race and culture. Here, a little about each of them:

JENNY YE, 16

New York, NY

RACE/ETHNICITY: Chinese

RELIGION: nonreligious
"I grew up in Chinatown. My parents want me to preserve my culture."



NANCY TRUJILLO, 16

East Elmhurst, NY

RACE/ETHNICITY: Hispanic (Mexican)
RELIGION: Roman Catholic

"I love being Latina. My roots matter to me."



KRISTEN KLIMOWICH, 17

Fair Lawn, NJ

RACE/ETHNICITY: White
RELIGION: Roman Catholic

"I'm part Russian, Italian, and German—a mutt."



NIKI MONTAZARAN, 17

Commack, NY

RACE/ETHNICITY: Persian (Iranian)
RELIGION: Muslim

"Persian is my ethnicity. But I'm an American—that's my nationality."



SARA SAYED, 17

Madison, NJ

RACE/ETHNICITY: Indian
RELIGION: Muslim

"I identify with being Muslim more than being Indian. I've never even been to India."



T.S. DESANDIES, 17

Englewood, NJ

RACE/ETHNICITY: Black
RELIGION: Baptist

"I don't call myself African American. I'm black. My dad has Caribbean roots."



ALLISON BERNSTEIN, 18

Englewood, NJ

RACE/ETHNICITY: White
RELIGION: Orthodox Jewish

"Being Jewish is what defines me the most."



disgust, I ran to flip on a more "street credible" hip-hop station, telling her the Pearl Jam song was on by some random chance. She knew I was lying, and I knew I'd lost cool points with her. That was just one of the many times I felt like I had to choose between the black world and the white one. I was into many aspects of black culture, but I no longer fit the stereotype. Not knowing better, I accepted the idea that I was a "traitor" to my race for liking Green Day and Weezer.

Still, it wasn't just my black friends who had strict ideas of how I should be. Even though my culture was labeled cool by the white kids at school, it didn't stop me from being stereotyped by them too. I remember a few of my white friends telling me that I shouldn't worry about my college applications because affirmative action would get me into any school I wanted. They thought I had it easy because of my darker skin. I wish I could have made them understand how teachers hardly called on me in class unless it was about a "black" issue, or how their parents always asked me if I played basketball, or how when we went to the mall together, I was the one followed by security guards even though they were the ones who stole stuff.

But back then, I didn't speak up about the racial uneasiness I felt. I mean, it wasn't the segregated 1950s or '60s anymore. When I was growing up, Reverend Jesse Jackson was running for president, *The Cosby Show* was the number one sitcom, and the first black man had already gone into space; I thought things were *better*. It wasn't until my senior year of high school—when one of my best friends (who happened to be white) unwittingly used a racial slur—that I realized we still had some *serious* cultural misunderstandings. One day between classes, she ran up to me in the hallway to happily announce, "You're my n****r!" She meant it to be affectionate, to express that we were tight. But I have mixed feelings about *black* people using that term, so I *definitely* wasn't okay with a white person saying it. Right then, a line had been crossed. I lashed out at her, explaining that it was a derogatory term. She apologized profusely—she'd thought using the n-word was okay since Jay-Z had just released his song "Jigga My N****r,"

80% of you don't consider yourself to be prejudiced against certain groups.

77% of you think other people at your school are prejudiced.
—cosmogirl.com poll



making it pretty mainstream. I told her it was still wrong, and she seemed to understand. At least I *hoped* she did.

Beverly Tatum, Ph.D., president of Spelman College in Atlanta and author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, says that it can be hard for people from different groups to understand each other because we're naturally more comfortable around people who look like us. "There has been a lot of social change, but at the same time, many things haven't changed," she says. "In terms of daily interaction, most people grow up in schools and neighborhoods with others like themselves." And these days we're all so concerned about being P.C. that we tend to avoid asking questions about other cultures for fear of sounding racist. But Tatum says that the only thing that will help us debunk our stereotypes about other cultures is to stop walking on eggshells around each other and start *talking*.

That's why CosmoGIRL! invited seven high school girls from diverse backgrounds in the New York area to have an honest conversation about the roles that race, culture, and religion play in their lives. These girls don't represent everyone of their culture—their stories are part of their individual experience. But they were brave enough to open up to each other about their questions, misconceptions, and private thoughts on race. Now it's your turn to hear the dialogue.

DEALING WITH RACE DAY TO DAY

T.S.: My school shares a building with another public school that has mainly black and Hispanic kids. A lot of my friends from my school are afraid to go over to the black side. I'm just like, "I know those kids, and they're not going to do anything to you!" Are your schools more diverse?

JENNY: My school is diverse, but people only hang out with their own racial groups—there are even white, Asian, and black sections of the

THAT'S RENIQUA, THE WRITER OF THIS STORY!



school. The groups aren't *against* each other, so I don't think it's all that negative. No one ever talks about it, though.

KRISTEN: Hearing that really bothers me—I think everyone should be able to get along. My school is mostly white, but there are racial cliques, like the Spanish group or the black group. They put out the vibe that they want to keep to themselves.

ALLISON: It's hard for me to relate—I've always gone to private Jewish schools where everyone's the same. I'm excited for college, where I'll be around a more diverse group.

SARA: I don't have Indian friends, but I can understand how sometimes people want to be with others like them. Like, you want to speak your own language or eat your own food.

ETHNIC MISCONCEPTIONS

NANCY: One thing that people get wrong a lot is using the word Spanish when referring to Hispanics. *Spanish* means someone who is from Spain. *Hispanic* means you're from a Spanish-speaking Latin American country, like Mexico or Ecuador—as opposed to Portuguese-speaking countries, like Brazil, whose people are considered Latino. Some Hispanic people are really particular about the terms Hispanic or Latino. Either is fine by me.

T.S.: I'm really particular about what people call me. Last week some boy called me African, and I got angry. I'm not African; I'm not even African American! My dad's half Trinidadian and half Bajan—from Barbados. My mom's half black and half white but considers herself black.

NIKI: Yeah, people are confused about what I am too—they think Italian or Indian. When they find out I'm Iranian, that's when the terrorist stereotypes start. After 9/11, I was scared to go on an airplane, but my parents planned a trip to Iran to visit relatives. All these kids in my middle school thought it was shady. They'd ask, "What are you going

to do there?" I was like, "I'm setting up plans to bomb your house! What do you *think* I'm going to do? I have 32 first cousins who want to see me!"

JENNY: Did you feel like people treated you differently after 9/11?

NIKI: Yeah. Some people don't realize that just because there are radical people in the world doesn't mean every person from that race or religion is like that. I mean, white people have the Ku Klux Klan, and I don't think all white people are like that. If you're Italian, I don't say you're in the mob.

SARA: I get the terrorist thing too since I'm Muslim. People also have misconceptions of Indians—that we have body odor or are really serious. But my family couldn't be goofier!

JENNY: That serious stereotype goes for Asians too. I think it comes from immigrant culture. My parents were born in China, and when they came here, they had to work so hard just so I could go to a good school and have things they didn't have—they just didn't have *time* to focus on much else.

T.S.: Society has a *lot* of negative ideas about black people. They think all black men walk around wearing one pant leg up or that everyone wants to be a basketball player or a rapper. There are so many black architects and black scientists, but people don't pay attention to them. That's sad.

KRISTEN: I've had people assume I'm racist because I'm white. That's why I usually don't ask questions about someone's race unless it's a friend.

T.S.: People ask me questions, like if my hair is a weave, because they don't think black girls can have long hair—it's actually *not* a weave and we *can* have long hair. Usually I don't mind answering, but it's disappointing that everyone's so naive.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

KRISTEN: I have no problem with dating someone of another race. I haven't yet, but I would.

ALLISON: I haven't either. My parents want me to have Jewish kids, and I want that for myself too.

T.S.: I've dated outside my race. If you're cute, you're cute! But my dad wants me to marry a black man.

NIKI: I really want to marry a Persian Muslim. When I was younger, my dream was to have kids with a blond, white guy. That faded when I started appreciating my culture. We speak Farsi at home, my dad cooks Persian food, we celebrate the Iranian New Year—I don't want to lose all that.

SARA: I agree. I think it would just be easier for my kids if I married a Muslim guy. Like, it wouldn't be an issue if we were going to fast for Ramadan.

JENNY: I'm not sure I agree. Yeah, you may be preserving your culture, but it's also like you're stuck in how you grew up. I wouldn't care if I married a Chinese boy or not, even though my parents want me to.

THE FUTURE OF RACE RELATIONS

ALLISON: I think racism is fading out. I went to visit a friend in Florida, and for some reason she felt like she had to *warn* me that her friends weren't all Jewish and white. I was like, "Good! I'm fine with everyone!" Just because I'm sheltered doesn't mean I'm racist! Do you guys agree?

T.S.: I actually think we've still got a long way to go. I just wish we could all be ourselves more. I'm loud with my friends, but in public, I hold back to avoid being labeled. I always feel like someone's going to say, "Oh, those loud black girls!"

NANCY: For some people, I think it takes really knowing someone of a different race for them to change their old notions. But the thing is, your race only partly defines you. Just because you're a certain race doesn't mean you're a certain way. I think people should keep in mind that we're all humans and all individuals, and just get to know people for who they are. **Q**