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"Ask your father," I said.

"You can be anything you want," he said.

As much as I hate to admit it, Ken handles the question well. Two days passed before I talked with Nadia about it.

"If anyone asks you what you are, say you are biracial. Can you say that?"

"Biracial."

"Say, 'My Mommy is Black and my Daddy is White.'"

"My mommy is Black and ... what am I supposed to say?"

I chuckled. That is a mouthful.

She did as she was told. The little exercise made me feel better, but she hasn't uttered those words since that day.

I know that children of mixed heritage who appear Black often choose to identify themselves as Black. Society helped them decide their race. That's fine, but I wonder whether some parents were heartbroken by those choices.

"By the time Nadia mustered up the courage to ask about her race, I had grown weary of the question."

I know I would be. I am the mother of two biracial little girls. I see myself in them: my curly hair and my brown eyes. I see my husband in them: his skin tone and the bronze highlights in his hair.

If Simone and Nadia identify themselves as White when they are older, I will feel like I failed them as a parent. If they identify themselves as Black, my husband will surely feel left out.

What is clear is that my daughters' lives are diverse. I'm a jazz, funk and R&B kind of girl, and Simone now likes Mary J. Blige so much she requests her music. (Though at first, I did think my child was saying "my garage.")

Ken, meanwhile, tunes his radio to what he calls "Daddy's long-hair stations." He and the girls used to play a game in which they would ask him the artist and title of every song. I say "used

to" because the girls now know most of the classic-rock titles.

Their reaction to Steppenwolf's *Born to Be Wild*? "Turn it up."

They're so young that they're able to appreciate music without the racial overtones. There is no such thing as White music or Black music. It's just music. I'm grateful that, for now, they can listen without prejudice. With any luck, their future will be filled with many more examples. The truth is, this nation is moving toward a day when there will be so many children of so many mixed races and ethnicities that what we now call "race" simply won't matter.

This may be an uncomfortable reality for those who have benefitted from the divisive ways in which we have identified ourselves. But I look forward to the day when my daughters don't have to think about or explain their color, and I hope I see it in my lifetime.

As for all of those questions, few people today doubt Simone and Nadia are mine. It's difficult to do that when one child is clinging to my leg while the other incessantly calls my name. For those who dare go there, I've got this at the ready: "Sure, she's mine. I just found her over there. Isn't she cute?"

Monique Fields writes about race on her blog Honeysmoke.com. She is writing The Color of Their Skin, a memoir about raising her daughters, and has written Golden, a children's book about racial identity. She lives in Alabama with her husband and two daughters.



Top, a display at the Mixed Roots Film & Literary Festival; above, a young Durrow with her brother and father; left, author and Mixed Chicks founder Heidi Durrow.



Mixed Roots Festival

Who knew that going public with the quest to explore *all* of who you are would turn out to be exactly what a bunch of folks were looking for? **By Heidi Durrow**

I'm the daughter of an African-American Air Force serviceman and a White Danish immigrant, and I grew up mostly overseas until I turned 11.

That's when my parents divorced and my siblings and I moved with my mom to a largely African-American neighborhood in the Pacific Northwest. Until then, I think the only Black person I had known was my dad. And I didn't even know he was Black.

In a new town, I was the new kid—a brown-skinned, blue-eyed, curly-haired girl with buck teeth and funny-looking clothes. I didn't understand why people kept asking, "What are you?"

"I'm the very best speller in my whole class," I'd say. And they'd laugh.

As a military family, we were the Americans in the German town we lived in. And when we were stationed in Turkey, we were the Americans in our Turkish town. We were American. When was that not enough?

I learned over the years to answer: "I am Black," when my neighbors asked. And I learned how to be Black in response to criticism ("You talk White") as well as praise ("You have good hair.")

But more important, I became a student of Black literature and of Black history.

Black identity in America, I learned, has always meant being Mixed. It took just one drop to make you three-fifths of a man. So it didn't really matter that I was half-this or half-that: I was Black and I was proud.

Still, my new identity was an uneasy truce with my actual experience. At home, I spoke Danish. I ate Danish foods such as *frikadeller* and *leverpostej*. I danced around the Christmas tree with my family singing "Nu er det jul igen" until we collapsed with laughter. I was Black, but I was also silent about the simple stories that made up my everyday life.

As I grew older, I cycled through many identities. My freshman year of college I toyed with passing as Latina. I studied Spanish. I became the second vice chair of the Hispanic electrical engineering society. If I hadn't switched my major to English after the first term, I might have kept on pretending.

In New York City, after graduation, I realized that I looked Dominican to Dominicans, Bangladeshi to Bangladeshis, Puerto Rican to Puerto Ricans and

Greek to Greeks. There was a vast difference between what people saw me as and the complicated identity that I hid behind my accommodating smile. Because who, after all, has ever heard of an Afro-Viking?

Several years later in New York City, I met Fanshen Cox, another light-skinned, blue-eyed, curly-haired girl with a bifurcated identity like mine, or so I thought. It turned out she claimed all of her identity: She was Jamaican, Cherokee, Blackfoot and Danish. I didn't like her audacity one bit, and yet I was intrigued. Why was she so comfortable being complicated? And who had given her permission to tell the entirety of her story?

We became fast friends and, over the years, often talked about our struggles around identities. Neither of us had any answers, but there was something healing in simply being able to tell someone else ("My mom's White"), and to break the silence ("I love her to pieces"). We

wanted to talk more. Maybe there were others who wanted to talk, too?

Our idea was simple: We'd do a public call-in podcast and share our stories and struggles about being racially and culturally mixed, and let others listen. Two hundred episodes later, *Mixed Chicks Chat* has a loyal following of live chatters and more than 4,000 downloads per month.

As our podcast audience grew, so did the number of requests we received from filmmakers, writers and singers to appear on the show.

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In 2008, we founded the Mixed Roots Film & Literary Festival, a non-profit organization, to showcase these artists and their stories of the Mixed experience with film screenings, readings and workshops. The festival—held each June in Los Angeles at the Japanese American National Museum—attracted about 300 people in the first year. Last year, there were more than 1,000 attendees on the first day, and educator and children's book author Maya Soetoro-Ng spoke, riveting the audience with stories about her multiracial family, which happens to include her brother, President Barack Obama.

Is the festival about Mixed-race pride? No. It's simply a forum to tell stories about the Mixed experience, whether you're the parent of a Mixed kid, part of a blended family or a transracial adoptee.

So now when people ask me, "What are you?" I like to say: "I'm a story. I bet you are, too."

Former attorney and journalist Heidi Durrow is the author of The Girl Who Fell From The Sky, winner of the Belkweather Prize for addressing issues of social justice.

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