



*Dedicated to helping LGBT people build and strengthen their families.*

## First Daughters

A friend's e-mail included a picture of Norman Rockwell's painting of Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old African American girl, being escorted to an all-white New Orleans school by federal marshals forty-eight years ago. Below was a photograph of another African American girl. This seven-year-old child, Sasha Obama, walking next to her mother, First Lady Michelle Obama, was being escorted to her first day of school by the Secret Service. Unlike Ruby, Sasha was not threatened by an angry white mob nor was she the only child in her class – left alone because all other parents refused to allow their children to be educated with her.

It's unreasonable for adults, especially older adults who have witnessed similar incidents to expect American children to grasp the enormous progress represented by the images I described above, but, in subtle ways, children – especially children of color – get that something quite remarkable has just happened in America. Though black children don't face angry white mobs on their way to school, racism still impacts their lives. Nevertheless, along with Sasha and Malia Obama, the possibilities for all African American children take a quantum leap.

Nine years ago, while my daughter, Mona, attended a fairly progressive preschool, one of her little white schoolmates told her that she didn't want to play with her because Mona's skin was brown. I spoke with the parents, and we thought that the matter was resolved until it occurred a second time. I had Mona changed to another classroom where she was one of three African American girls, and so she would no longer have to regularly endure this little white girl's opinions about skin color.

Several years later, Mona, now a second grader in an urban public school, where the majority of her classmates were African American, was playing make believe while I read a newspaper. I overheard something about white and brown, and she related an incident to me that happened among children in her class. I asked her if she remembered what had happened when

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she was in preschool, and she answered yes. Next, she proceeded to explain that it doesn't matter what color someone is on the outside. She used the first Broadway play we had seen together as an example to support her position.

"The Beast was good on the inside and that's what matters," she said. I was moved until my daughter added, "It didn't matter that the Beast had brown fur because he had a good heart." Until then, my concern was that my beautiful and bright African American daughter would develop a swelled head, but instead she was learning that one must have other merits to compensate for being brown.

In her book *The Color of Culture*, poet and friend Mona Lake Jones writes that parenting black children, "ain't no easy thing." Even when parents go the extra mile to support and affirm our children there are always challenging experiences to undo our efforts.

A few years ago, Mona and several of her dance buddies auditioned for and got parts in the traveling Moscow Nutcracker. Our kids were the only black performers. A white child mentioned to my friend (another parent) that there were people like my friend (meaning black) at her father's gym and that her father said there was too many of them. The child's mother remained silent. So much for our efforts to broaden our daughters' experience beyond their predominantly African American dance studio.

Two summers ago, Mona and I went for a bike ride, and she wanted to stop at a candy store. I watched our bikes while she went into the store to pick out what she wanted, and then she took a turn watching our bikes. I walked into the store, grabbed a soda from the cooler then scanned the candy counter, looking for Mona's candy. Suddenly, I heard the storeowner shriek, "Hey what are you looking for. Get away from my store." I followed his glare and saw Mona looking in at me from the door. All his wide eye apologies to me didn't give Mona back her innocent afternoon of bike riding to the candy store with her father.

It's been a long and hard forty-eight years since Ruby was escorted into her first grade classroom in New Orleans, and a long and hard forty-five years since four little black girls were killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, and the dust still lingers, but in the blink of an inauguration, something remarkable has happened. I don't know if President Obama will be able to bring about the change that so many of us hope for, but if someone yells, "Hey who are those little black kids running through the White House?" The answer will finally be, "Oh you must mean the president's daughters." And that answer is already a wonderful change.