

OTHER AWARENESS PROJECT - PERSPECTIVE

I would like to thank everyone for choosing to read the background information concerning how I created the Other Awareness Project.

More involved than just your personal association with whatever arbitrary and undefined "racial" name you call yourself, the Other Awareness Project looks at the continued value of using any of these names as valid descriptors of people, based on CURRENT information. The whole project is based on self-identification going forward, not on the things that anyone did wrong in the past. Besides, everyone's job can't be to continue telling the "White" man how wrong he was into perpetuity.

In my opinion, this project is a comedy that draws great inspiration from many seemingly unconnected people such as: Simon Rodia, Christo and Jeanne Claude, Kurt Cobain, El Malik Shabazz, and my all-time single greatest performer Mr. Howlin' Wolf, to name just a few.

I'm trying to show that by answering a few questions, and looking at it from another angle, everyone's basis for answering a question like, "What is your race or ethnicity?" has already changed and continues to change, and it happened a long time BEFORE Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. It is an outdated question based on outdated concepts, ideas that have been proven false and inaccurate by people much smarter than I am. Much of our current society is still based on these outdated and false concepts. In short, we have kept the names that were created when people, not god, created the concept of "races" approximately 600 years ago. Yet, many reputable and unaffiliated organizations have dismissed all the "science" used to support the idea that there are different races of people. Supposedly, this is the information age, this new information is available to everyone with internet access and a computer. "When do the rational, thinking, solutions oriented people replace the agenda driven people, in leading the conversation on the topics of "racism", and what are the next steps for all of us?"

Most of the people who visit my site are very accomplished. They have responsible jobs, are active in their community, are interested in solving problems, and more importantly, willing to do more than just talk about it! Most of the people are within 15 years, plus or minus, my age range. The Other Awareness Project was completely designed, and created by me for you! That's because I think we are the generation(s) that have the best combination of actual experience and resources to end the discussion concerning the so-called perpetual puzzle that is "racism". We are better equipped to separate the current "factual information" from the old "factual information" that continues to be broadcast concerning "racism". If you have spent anytime watching children play, you already know kid's don't have a "racial" problem. It's not a kid's problem to solve! I also don't think the solution to "racism" is incremental and should take another 500 years to solve.

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I guess the next important question this project asks is; "Faced with new information, do you even have the ability to change?" The Other Awareness Project is not an argument. I have been working through various forms of the project since 2003 and have yet to get into one argument. My goal isn't to argue with anyone or even tell them what their mistakes are, or where they are wrong. I respect everyone's intelligence. I'm asking people to find out for themselves what the new information is. When you say something like, "There are 3 dominant divisions of man: Negroid, Mongoloid, and Caucasoid." My first question is, "When was the last time you heard anyone call someone a Mongoloid?" You might want to refresh your browser!

Sifting through the scientific information is an important aspect to the project. Another component of the questions and subsequent discussions is to look at what has actually happened in your life. The point of the project is to let people know that the people and organizations who ask for your "racial" and "ethnic" information are asking you to define yourself, not what other people think you are. This whole process can't go on if you don't participate in it. They ask you your racial information, but they don't ask you to show your work. "How do you still arrive at the conclusion that you are "White", or "Black", or "Hispanic", or anything else arbitrary and undefined based on current information?" Yes, I know people used to identify themselves as whatever by a multitude of old methods, but what does that have to do with you today? "Faced with new information, do you have the ability to change?" If you don't, then no amount of eloquence of speech on my part will make you do anything.

The "beauty" of this whole project is that it is very easy, if you want it to be. It's more about what you have to stop doing, rather than what you have to do. You really don't have to protest or join anything. Sure it helps to buy the DVD's and other stuff, but it isn't required.

Before I start presenting the questions in my project, I would like to talk a little bit concerning everyone's desire to make me "more fully aware", or give me "more food for thought". I listen because just maybe there is something I don't know about being "Black". But, I think I have a pretty good handle on where I "come from".

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Background:

I have been a Pre-Press Manager for Deluxe Check Corporation, a Marketing Operations Manager for ING Advisors, my last corporate position was Director of Operations for News America Marketing. I have many years of experience volunteering in my community with such organizations as: Food Finders (Long Beach, CA); Long Beach Day Nursery (Long Beach, CA); Junior Achievement (Long Beach, CA & Champaign, IL); Big Brother Mentor (Long Beach, CA & Tarrytown, NY); Food From The Hood (Los Angeles, CA); YMCA (San Diego, CA) and a whole bunch more.

The very reason I make time today to volunteer on charity boards and help chaperone my daughter's first grade class, is because I COMPLETELY know where I came from. Both of my parents were born and raised in rural Mississippi. At the time they left, neither one had a high school education. I think my Mom completed the eighth grade, (she did get a GED many years later) My Dad might have completed the sixth grade. My mother used to tell us stories how they had to catch black birds for dinner.

Here are a few unedited excerpts from my uncle, who was born in 1936, concerning the conditions they grew up in rural Mississippi. (In 1959, he became the 135lb Golden Gloves champion) (<http://www.goldengloves.com/history>)

"I am a part of a wonderful and interesting family legacy. My ancestors were from diverse cultural backgrounds: Native American, Anglo-Saxon, and African. Legal or not, accepted or not, love found a way, and racial mixing occurred frequently in the South, and my family was no exception. According to my parents, my grandmother Sue, was of British and Cherokee descent. Her husband, Isaac the second, was the son of Isaac the first. Professedly, Isaac the first was a Cherokee Indian, probably a member of the Eastern band of the Cherokee." Freddie Davis

"My father, mother, and older siblings worked on a cotton plantation owned by a Caucasian man named Kegger. Clearly, child-labor laws had no impact on our employer for my older siblings all worked in the cotton fields. While living in Shaw, at the age of four to five years, I recall my older brothers and sisters working in the fields, chopping and picking cotton in the 1940s. Only my younger sister, Elizabeth, and I did not work in the fields. We were considered too small for this type of work; both of us were less than five years old. Our family worked hard to earn a living and to survive. There were times when mother would take us to the fields with her. I remember playing in the fields until we were happily tired and falling to sleep. Once we were asleep, mother would lay us on her sack and pull us while she continued to work. The truth is, back then, Elizabeth and I thought life was beautiful. We were the two

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youngest children and as a result close. There were others with less than us, so we counted ourselves fortunate for what we had." Freddie Davis

Discussions with my former brother-in-law, reveal that my ex-wife's side of the family can trace lineages other than African, from both parents. My ex-father-in-law can go back to an Irishman named John Mullen Sr., born in Armaugh, Ireland around 1802. (This is an even more interesting story because the son, John Mullen, Jr., who had children by a slave, actually deeded property to his children by the slave. I have personally been out to the tobacco farms where the Mullen's farmed, before the government paid them to stop growing tobacco. Man, I sound like I'm 200 years old!)

I was born in Champaign, IL. My mother was 15 when she had the first of her 8 children, 25 when she had me. I am number 4. We lived in various public housing on the North End of Champaign, the "Black" part of town. It is completely correct to say that without public aid, Big Brother volunteers, teachers and coaches, most of them "White", I could still be pressing license plates somewhere. Angry kid?, yes I was!

Before the fourth grade, we moved without the three older kids to Rantoul, IL, a small town, with an Air Force base. The three reasons we moved were: Rantoul was cheaper, I was getting in fights all the time in Champaign, and I got this ridiculously high IQ score on a test at Colonel Wolfe, a school on the campus of the University of Illinois.

I didn't attend church growing up, I was raised in the Nation of Islam. It's always funny to me when people selectively quote the teachings from the Nation of Islam back to me. My brother and I used to sell Muhammad Speaks (now called the Final Call), bean pies, etc. on the streets of Champaign. We used to drill in the Mosque, on Fourth Street, for hours in preparation for an eventual battle with the "White" man. We would fast for Ramadan, go to Chicago for Savior's Day in February, and not get presents on Christmas!

When I met my biological father, around nine or ten, I thought he was simply the "coolest" guy on the planet! Everything "bad" my mother was trying to keep us away from in Champaign, drugs, gambling, shootings, prostitution, my father was in charge of in Champaign! He always carried a gun and had a pocket full of money! When he was around, as kids we would fight to see who would roll joints for him!

And at the same time, I remember growing up with kids named Fernandez, Padilla, Iocono, Knowles, Fentem, Lipscomb, Gatewood, Williams. Played basketball with kids named Washington, Sprague, Malik, Kopmann, Cheek, Taylor, Bagaasen. On the track teams with kids named Cooper, Bentz, Mace, Siniscalchi. My first significant girl friend wasn't "Black". I can remember all my teachers and coaches: Mr. Robert Peete, Mrs. June Quint, Mrs. Barbara Causland, Mr. Roger

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Hollister, Mr. Dave Brooks, Mr. Hal Summers, Mrs. Peggy Usher, Mr. Roger Quinlan. Mr. Bill Anderson. I listen to some Country music because of working at Roessler Construction Company in the summers. But, most of all, I remember everyone as just people I knew growing up in Rantoul. Seeing people for more than their skin color has already happened for me, as I think it has for most people. In my opinion, It's not our fault that mass media, marketing, entertainment, and government are lagging behind.

In 2002 my daughter was born at the Northern Westchester Regional Hospital in Mount Kisco, NY. I was a Director of Operations for News America Marketing, living in a 5,000+ Sq. foot home in Westchester County, NY; a house that I designed and built. Westchester is the second wealthiest county in New York. Manhattan is first. Bill & Hillary Clinton lived a few miles away in Chappaqua, Martha Stewart in Bedford. Living on the moon, is the only place that could have been any farther from the circumstances that I grew up in as a kid.

My neighbors worked hard to get the homes they had, everyone was concerned about quality education for their children and safe streets. A good portion of my neighbors weren't "White". Many came here from another country precisely to become non-hyphenated Americans. Over the years I have been fortunate to receive invitations to all types of events from people who consider me a friend. I have celebrated St. Patrick's Day in Chicago and New York City, cookouts in South Central LA, a quinceanera in Whittier, CA; Cambodian New Year Festivals in Long Beach, CA, etc. I have met people who completely shatter the stereotype of their supposed "race". I personally know: "White" people who have received degrees in Spanish from a college in St Petersburg, Russia; "Black" people who speak Japanese and live in Japan; "Asian" people who didn't graduate at the top of their class; "Hispanic" folks who are concerned about what happens to America, etc. This project is for them.

I resigned the marketing position so I could move back to Long Beach, CA and do two things: Take care of what could be my only daughter, while we both were young, and complete this project. The reason I volunteer is simple. I know how much my life continues to be positively affected because of people taking the time to do the same for me, when I needed it the most.

With the Other Awareness Project, I'm not looking for people to fight with concerning old "facts" and outdated "information". I'm looking for people to compare current information and current experiences, and then see what else we have to talk about. I personally don't care what other people keep doing "wrong". When I talk to my daughter, I want to emphasize the right things to do! This whole project is for solutions oriented people who not only have the capacity for change, they have the ability to change. The only reason this project works, is because I don't think they are that hard to find.

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The Project:

Volume One of the film portion of the Other Awareness Project, is modeled after an afternoon of golf, or a pick up basketball game. When I play golf it's usually as a single, meaning I don't have a regular group of people that I play with. I go to the course, sign my name and wait to be matched with whomever else has time to play that day. Same thing with basketball, because my schedule is very erratic, I don't have a regular group of people to play with. When I want to play I go to the nearest court and shout, "I got next!". Either I get picked for the next game, or I get to choose the people who are going to play with me. In either case, no one ever asks for my "racial" makeup BEFORE we start playing. (If I miss several shots in a row someone will certainly look at me strange and ask; "Where are you from?") Over the year's I have been involved in many very interesting, completely random conversations with people I never met before, from this country and abroad. I have talked to complete strangers about jobs, family, "race", sex, taxes, everything!

Volume One of the Other Awareness Project is a series of random conversations. I know it is hard to recognize because people don't really have conversations on television anymore. If you know anything about TV production, everything is scripted and so heavily edited that it has become mostly a contest to see who can squeeze in as many "talking points" in the least amount of time as possible. As Americans, we get the majority of our "information" from sound bites, tag lines, and colorful pastel graphics. Because I know how valuable TV time is and the amount of effort put into a national media campaign, I don't believe in "wardrobe malfunctions".

I know the filming isn't exactly perfect, but I think it is important to note that there wasn't a crew of technicians during the tapings. In every interview, with the exception of the first two, it's me and the person(s) being interviewed, that's it! I operated all the cameras, I edited all the footage, I took out the trash! 15 hours of interviews, times three cameras, times six cities, hopefully you can get a sense of the scope and logistics of the film portion of the project.

Another note concerning editing, I know some of the clips can seem "long". That's because I am trying to keep the feel of the conversation, without cutting it up to look like we were saying things we weren't. We didn't have any pre-production meetings, we met each other on camera! I gave everyone an unedited DVD of our interview. These aren't selected interviews of some of the people I interviewed on camera for the project. These are the first 15 who responded to my invitation. (On Craigslist!). I probably shot too many people, but I attempted to get every answer in the final version. I really appreciated everyone for making the time to be involved in this project! I think we had fun during the tapings. Here is a comment from one of the interviewees AFTER seeing early versions of all the pieces put together:

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"Michael is the rarest of men. He has a strong social agenda, but he comes across wise, warm and funny – not as a zealot. He excels at putting people at ease and getting them to talk".

Numerous sources were used in researching the answers to the informational questions in this project. For reasons of efficiency and to help everyone stay focused on the topic, all the answers can be found on the wikipedia.org website. I also chose wikipedia because it is the fastest way to post your own information if you feel the answer given is incorrect.

One last note: This project became a film project because I noticed that when I would talk with people who called themselves "White", they would say, "I understand what you are saying, but what do "Black" people think about what you are saying?" I would talk with people who called themselves "Black" and they would say, " I completely understand what you are saying, but you will never get "White" people to go for something like that. I thought, "Really?" "Let's give it a shot!"

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Contact Information:

Other Awareness Project
Michael James Brown
P.O. Box 18318
Long Beach, CA 90807-8318

Website:
<http://www.otherawarenessproject.com>

Email:
mjb@otherawarenessproject.com

Facebook:
<http://www.facebook.com/home.php#/group.php?gid=28769086765>

You Tube:
<http://www.youtube.com/OAProject>