

Somewhere between brown and white

BY RIKKA BERKAN

RACE, racism and prejudice are not always black and white or, in my Thunder Bay, brown and white, but may lie somewhere in between.

The first time I was called a "Findian," I was four years old and though it sounded playful and was said by an adult, it also sounded wrong to me.

I began to dislike the term the more I heard it, not because I wasn't proud to be Finnish or a so-called "Indian," but the focus on my race made me uncomfortable. Why did it matter what I was?

There were some Finnish people who were quick to point out that I was not "really" Finnish, that I wasn't a "pure" Finn because I had an Aboriginal mother.

This idea perplexed me, because I was also told by several Aboriginal people that I wasn't "really" Aboriginal, because I had a white father. So if I wasn't Finn or Aboriginal, what was I?

At school, other kids would be quick to point out that if I wasn't blond or blue-eyed, how could I be Finn? There were others perplexed at how I was an "Indian" with my white skin.



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Thunder Bay's Anti-Racism Advisory Committee produces this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario.

By the time I was a teenager, I was tired of the questions. My maiden name is Kuoppala and I cannot count how many times I was asked, how did "you" get a name like that? I would say, "From my father," and then get an accusing look like I was lying.

Trying to figure out my nationality became a common game for some of my classmates; I became accustomed to people asking me if I was "Italian" or "Spanish."

I remember one boy in high school who stared at me intently for about a week, then suddenly burst out in class: "What are you — Japanese?" Once again, I politely said,

"No, I am Finnish and Native," to which I was given the most unbelieving glance. This reaction troubled me.

By this time in my life, as many teenagers do, I developed an identity crisis and wondered if I would ever fit into this world. Who was I? What was I?

I eventually learned to accept my differences, to be proud of who I am, and not to focus on what my nationality meant to others. I married a man who had similar experience as mine growing up in Thunder Bay. I had hoped by the time our children would attend school, the world would have changed for the better.

WHEN we bought our first house, our new neighbour asked, in what I assumed was her polite way, if we were "Spanish or something?"

I told her that I was, in fact, Finnish and Aboriginal. She reminded me that I wasn't really "Finn" and neither were my children. I began to get concerned. Was my experience to be my children's experience?

In Grade 2, my son was challenged by another Aboriginal boy who did not believe that my son, with his white skin and green eyes, was Aboriginal like him. Had anything

changed?

In Grade 4, my daughter had a boy "like" her until he found out that she was Aboriginal, then he wanted nothing to do with her. I was floored, because it seemed that for some people, nothing had changed.

I have reflected on these stories and contend that race gives no indication of the quality of a person.

To those who think that they have an inherent right to believe otherwise, I ask a modest question: What does a person's race really have to do with anything? My Finnish and Aboriginal background is a part of what I am, but it is not entirely who I am.

Race, racism and prejudice in Thunder Bay are a complex issue, but one that requires a simple answer — accept people regardless of their similarities or differences.

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