

Opinion



by

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11 months

Wednesday June 6th 2018

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What marrying an Afro-Caribbean man taught me about prejudice in the Asian community

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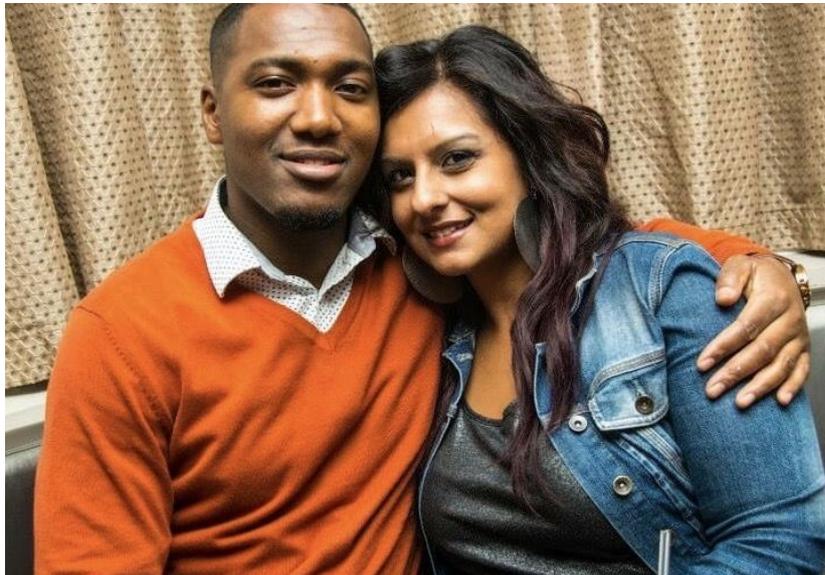
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Puja and her partner Dwayne

Poorna Bell speaks to Puja K McClymont, 37, about overcoming prejudice after finding love.

It was 2008 and I was doing some late night shopping with a friend in Debenhams on Oxford Street. We were having a conversation about customer service - or lack thereof - and we overheard this gorgeous man giving excellent customer service to someone. He sounded very kind, but also cool, so we got talking to him.

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I wanted to ask him out but worried he was out of my league. Then I thought I didn't have anything to lose. His name was Dwayne. We started dating and I learned he was a man who doesn't have a bad bone in his body, someone who always sees the best in people. We could talk about everything, from politics to hip-hop, and after a year I knew he was the one.

There was just one, big problem – none of my family knew we were dating.

I hadn't told them because I was scared of their reaction. Some people in the Asian community are much less accepting of an interracial Afro-Caribbean relationship than of an interracial relationship with a white person.

That it's 'worse' to marry Afro-Caribbean over white within the community is a long-standing prejudice still held by some parts of the young and old generations.

'Some people in the Asian community are much less accepting of an interracial Afro-Caribbean relationship than of an interracial relationship with a white person'

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I didn't want to lose my family - or my future



I introduced Dwayne to a few cousins to begin with, who adored him, and then slowly to some of my 'cooler' aunts. But I had to face the big one: telling my parents. I had no idea how they would react. I didn't want to lose my family but I also didn't want to lose my future.

Two years into dating, I finally told them. Mum was concerned about what other people in the community would say. She stopped talking to me for six months and didn't come to my 30th birthday. Dad tried to understand because he's the 'as long as you are happy' type, but he was concerned about how we would raise any kids we had.

While this was all going on, I had another battle building internally – I had depression. It wasn't related to my situation with my parents, but I was not in a good place. Dwayne was really worried for me. He knew I needed the support of my parents.

'Dwayne was really worried for me. He knew I needed the support of my parents.'

Eventually Mum invited us over to dinner, and as much as she tried to hide it, she enjoyed Dwayne's company. He even made her laugh.

Mum set up a dating profile for me on an Indian matchmaking site



Dwayne met my grandfather who explained to him why there was a prejudice in the community

But it was still hard. Mum refused to openly accept the relationship, and it wasn't helped by the fact that all my Indian friends were engaged and we weren't. Every time I saw her, she would ask my friends to find someone for me. She even had the audacity to set up a profile for me on an Indian matchmaking site, which Dad eventually made her take down.

I would get hassle from other Indian men when we were out partying, who would see me with Dwayne and still flirt with me or tell me to dump him. Some even accused me of disrespecting my own community.

In the middle of all of this, Dwayne met my grandfather who explained to him why there was a prejudice in the community, to try and give him some context. To understand the origins of this stigma, we have to look back at colonial history. Many Asians who settled in Africa absorbed a lot of anti-African propaganda propagated by the British who took them there. This then carries on from generation to generation. Despite being the colonial invaders in India, the British created this deep-seated idea that white is 'good'. It's why, for instance, fair skin in India is still prized above all else.

Just before he passed, my grandfather asked to see both of us. He held our hands tightly and told us to always look after each other, no matter what.

'There was immediately lots of stressful talk at the table about a shotgun wedding. I was emotional, hormonal and I walked out of the restaurant'

We got engaged in July 2015 and told my parents the news. Mum didn't say anything, while Dad said he was happy for us. He promised Mum would come round

eventually.

Two weeks later, we had another announcement to make – we found out we were pregnant. Around that time, it was my mum's 60th birthday, so we took her out to dinner and then gave her, my dad and brother a card with a picture of the scan of our child on the front. I wrote the Indian names my baby would call them when he was older. They were stunned.

Because I was pregnant and not yet married – which is a big deal in the Asian community – there was immediately lots of stressful talk at the table about a shotgun wedding. I was emotional, hormonal and I walked out of the restaurant.

Mum was the first to come and find me. She rubbed my belly and told me not to get upset because it would stress out the baby.

Still a tense point for some



In the end, we had three weddings. The first was a shotgun wedding in a registry office with our immediate family. We then surprised our friends with drinks in a hotel and told them the news. We had a Hindu ceremony at my parents' house, and then the big hoopla wedding at Windsor on the river.

Although we are happily married, our relationship can still be a tense point between some people. We are often stared at, something I notice a lot from older people. On the flip-side though, we've also had people come up to us and be inspired by our openness. Afro-Caribbean men have randomly shaken Dwayne's hand and said: 'Well done brother, I'm proud of your strength to do this.'

My advice for anyone struggling with something similar is that if you have a good partner, stick with it. Remember that your parents have lived, they have loved and they have had kids. It's your time now. I think speaking about it and having the conversation is really important. Let them see your love for each other, and it will hopefully get easier.

'I want to be part of this change and remind Asians about their faith, culture and philosophies that completely contradict this prejudice'

I was willing to give up my entire family for love, and I'm really glad I didn't have to.

I think people are starting to wake up to prejudice within the community, but it's still a process. I want to be part of this change and remind Asians about their faith, culture and philosophies that completely contradict this prejudice. If young people continue to believe their parent's outdated beliefs and values, we will never progress.

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