

Building a Bridge Between Two Cultures:

New York Couple uses their own experiences to create unity between the African and Asian American communities.

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Michael and Jenny King of AAAUnity.
Photo courtesy of Michael King

When Michael and Jenny King of New York first met 15 years ago in college the attraction was mutual, and soon they began dating. Marriage in Hawaii followed shortly after.

To them it didn't matter that he was African American and she Chinese American. Although they have had to deal with the questioning stares, some pretty nasty, their love and the love of their families have helped strengthen their relationship.

And it is their mutual respect and love for each other that propelled Michael and Jenny, both 33, to form the partnership African and Asian American Unity and AAAUnity.com, a website that helps to bring together the African and Asian American communities.

"We created AAAunity.com in the hopes to be a vehicle to allow other Africans and Asians in the U.S. and abroad to have a place they can call their own; an Afro-Asian community, a community of the future," said Michael. "We wanted to give our people a chance to experience the same joy Jen and I experience everyday since the

first day we met."

Added Jenny, through AAAUnity.com "I am able to show other Asian and African people that are either interested or currently in relationships that it's not as uncommon as they may believe, and that I have the chance to offer these people positive images and stories of people just like them."

After much discussion and many sleepless nights, the Kings launched African and Asian American Unity and AAAUnity.com in May of 2004. Since then about 1,700 people visit their site each month and the numbers continue to grow, all without the aid of advertising.

The site is a forum to discuss all types of issues affecting the African and AA communities, whether it is about relationships, community events, entertainment, food, travel, or books. Couples can post their pictures and tell their stories and there's also a store where people can go to buy artwork, bonsai, or African imports.

When Michael and Jenny first started dating in the early 1990s, the Internet was still in its infancy and very few sites discussing unity amongst the African and AA communities existed. In fact most of what they discovered were discussion forums with most comments leaning towards the negative side.

To fill the void, Michael began to learn everything he could about Web site design, pouring over book after book and learning everything he could about designing a Web site. And so far AAAUnity.com has been well received.

AAAUnity.com "has a real positive philosophy," said Michael. "It is clear to our visitors that we stand for something; unity being the primary agenda, but also for the fact that they feel they have a place where they can come and see positive reinforcement of their type of relationships."

"It's like any community comprised of families, friends and acquaintances," he added. "That's how we treat it. In our forums it is like inviting other members of this African and Asian community into our home for discussions, that is why we would not promote nor tolerate negativity in our home ... promoting the celebration of Afro-Asian relationships is the purpose of our forums."

Although it's been more than a decade since Michael and Jenny first fell in love, the Kings still believe there is a need to educate people about mixed race couples and forums like AAAUnity.com go a long way in creating the perfect venue for discussion.

"I can start off by saying that we are an intercultural couple. When we use words like 'race' it is so often associated with separation and differences," said Jenny. "Like any other intercultural couple, we receive our share of stares, snickers and comments. And that hasn't changed much since we've been together, but so what? We are very happy with each other and wouldn't have it any other way."

"There are some out there who are still afraid to profess their like or love for either an African or Asian person; afraid of what their respective families or community would say if they found out," said Michael. "My wife has corresponded with some other Asian women who are in relationships with African American men but are absolutely petrified to profess the love they share with their mate to their friends and family. And I'm talking about grown adults here."

The Kings are hopeful that through Web sites like theirs, people will come to learn more about couples like them and the similarities the African and AA communities share.

"I certainly have noticed a rise in African and Asian couples in the New York area since we first met, but I think more than anything, the difference now is that more people are communicating more about it," said Jenny. "That's the whole thing; communication."

"Both African and Asian people have been plagued by so many unsavory and demeaning stereotypes for such a long time, that's all we knew about each other," she continued. "When we actually take the time to get to know the true person beyond the stereotype, almost all the time African and Asian people get along."

The Kings are now working on their next African and Asian American Unity project: an online dating site for African and AA singles around the world that will be launched shortly called Cocoabutterlove.com.

Although their new project is keeping them busy, the Kings are dedicated to continuing their efforts to build a bridge between the two communities. In fact, both Michael and Jenny believe creating AAAUnity.com has been an invaluable learning experience.

"I can go on and on for days about how much I have learned about Chinese history and culture from being married to my wife, and other Asian cultures as a whole, but the most important thing I've learned is that there really aren't many differences between our people or our communities other than a few cultural standards," said Michael.

"It's funny, but I actually learned to appreciate more about my own culture and community after meeting Michael, since he himself had such a profound interest and understanding of Chinese culture and history," said Jenny. "Ironically, it was Michael's interest in me and my culture that inspired me to appreciate myself and my own culture as well as his." ■



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