



Television Race Initiative

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A series
by Jennifer Fox

An American Love Story



FACILITATORS GUIDE

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I am thrilled to think of this wonderful guide in the hands of outreach professionals and facilitators of community dialogue. It has been my dream since the inception of this series to see it used by people across the country to open a dialogue on the myriad issues it raises, such as race, family, identity, childrearing, health, gender roles, work, creating enduring relationships and love. It has also been my deep hope that the series will be used to heighten people's awareness of how stories are told in the media and how this affects the way we see ourselves and our place in society. I am grateful for the sensitive writing of Faith Rogow and the vision and perseverance of the TRI staff for making *An American Love Story* accessible to those who want to take this opportunity to examine some of the critical topics of our lives and times.

Jennifer Fox
Director/Producer/Camera



We are honored that you have chosen this series for your outreach efforts and hope that some part of it will spark discussion in your community. Hopefully, with your help, others will discover that all of us experience joy, pain, obstacles and opportunities in our lives, regardless of skin color. However, if nothing else, we want everyone to walk away with the feeling of love and the power it holds. What

we believe to be the most important lesson of this film is that love can build a bridge of communication that knows no boundaries.

*The Wilson-Sims
Family*



An American Love Story

It was an explosive year, 1967. On television, American viewers were exposed to their first interracial kiss — between Captain Kirk and Lieutenant Uhura on the Starship Enterprise. At the movies, Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy grappled with their daughter's desire to marry Sidney Poitier in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Supreme Court justices finally overturned state laws, some in place since colonial times, that prohibited blacks and whites from marrying. And in Ohio, Karen Wilson met Bill Sims.

An American Love Story chronicles a year and a half in the life of Karen Wilson, Bill Sims and their two daughters, Cicily and Chaney. Told in 10 one-hour episodes, the story of this marriage between a white woman and a black man testifies to the extraordinary courage required to make this marriage work, as well as to the ordinary struggles most couples face over money, health, work, children, personalities, and perspectives. It also explores the experiences of Cicily and Chaney, coming of age in a society that continually pressures them to choose between black and white.

About This Guide

Because at its core *An American Love Story* is about the dynamics of family life, and because everyone has experienced family in some way, this film has the potential to reach every viewer on some level. In many cases, discussion will flow naturally as people share their reactions. As a facilitator, you have an opportunity to create a setting that is safe enough for people to deeply share what touches them about this extraordinary film. This kind of sharing becomes the basis for connection and, ultimately, the inspiration for action.

No one group is expected to discuss all the issues raised in the film or in these pages. Rather, the guide should serve as a starting point to help people explore their own experiences, then find in those experiences a bridge that traverses difference and leads to greater understanding.

The following pages summarize the 10 episodes and list topics that are featured in each episode. Suggested discussion starters — sparks — are based on specific scenes. Selected quotes on the side are reminders of important moments in the series and also can be used as discussion starters.



Bill, Karen, Cicily and Chaney

NATIONAL PARTNERS

Facing History and Ourselves
16 Hurd Road
Brookline, MA 02146
www.facing.org

Facing History and Ourselves is a national educational and teacher-training organization whose mission is to encourage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism in order to promote a more humane and informed citizenry.

National Conference for
Community and Justice (NCCJ)
475 Park Avenue South, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10016
www.nccj.org

NCCJ is a human relations organization dedicated to fighting bias, bigotry, and racism in America. NCCJ promotes understanding and respect among all races, religions, and cultures through advocacy, conflict resolution, and education.

Association of American Colleges
and Universities (AAC&U)
1818 R Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20009
www.aacu-edu.org

AAC&U is a national association committed to making the aims of liberal learning a vigorous and constant influence on institutional purpose and educational practice in higher education.

YWCA of the USA
350 Fifth Avenue, Suite 301
New York, NY 10118
www.ywca.org

The YWCA of the USA is dedicated to the empowerment of women and girls and to the elimination of racism. The 363 member associations provide safety, shelter, job training, child care, physical fitness programs, counseling, and social, health, and educational services to millions of women and girls and their communities annually. The YWCA has historically implemented community-wide dialogues and initiatives on issues of racism.



WHO WILL BE INTERESTED IN AN AMERICAN LOVE STORY?

As with any complex story, this family's experiences will reach a wide variety of people on many different levels. In some, it will evoke memories of childhood and their own family dynamics. Others may respond to the contrast of life in small towns vs. urban areas, or to problems with health or alcoholism. For still others, the struggle to be a good parent, especially the need to let go of a child fighting to find an independent identity, will resonate most strongly.

To borrow a concept from poet and philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa, the Wilson-Sims are people living in a "Borderland." Like many interracial couples, they have crossed boundaries that others deemed insurmountable, even sacred, and so find themselves living simultaneously in more than one world. As pioneers, they are forced to be strong, creative and flexible in ways that will touch anyone who has lived in a "borderland," be it based on geography, sexuality, gender, language, or, as in this case, race.

In seeking outreach partners, you may want to look for groups whose members have lived in a "borderland," or you may want to find groups that focus on:

- biracial identity or experience
- African American identity
- intermarriage
- parenting
- marriage counseling/ couples
- college life
- discrimination



Cicily and Chaney

Challenges and Opportunities

If you are skeptical about people watching all 10 hours of *An American Love Story*, or if you're just not sure how to do outreach for a program that extends over a full week of prime-time viewing, here are some points to consider:

- *The drama of life is engaging.* As with a favorite program, people who watch the beginning are likely to tune in again to see how things turn out.
- *This is a once-in-a-generation experience.* In 1973 with *An American Family*, cameras went into an "average" American home to document the inner workings of the Loud family, revealing a life that exploded myths about American families. That explosion reverberated for years. Now we have *An American Love Story*. By doing outreach around this event, you are offering people a chance to participate in a unique, historical moment.
- *The film models an openness to dialogue and understanding.* As participants in the making of this film, the Wilson-Sims family members are incredibly open and willing to share. This is a valuable example in a country where few have been willing to speak honestly about race and racism. The family members also model how to accept each other's differences without setting pre-conditions or even fully understanding each other. In fact, they acknowledge that they can never completely understand one another, but they never let that fact diminish their commitment to trying — or to loving one another.
- *TV that is different can make a difference.* The form of this film can serve to challenge viewers in positive ways. *An American Love Story*, purposefully paced more slowly than most television, gives viewers time to ponder the action and appreciate that real life is too complex to fit neatly into 22-minute episodes.

Note: People who tune in expecting typical television fare may be thrown off by the pace of An American Love Story. You can increase viewers' engagement with the film by letting them know ahead of time what to expect.

This film also differs from the common talk show or court show portrayal of families. The primary job of audiences of these shows is to make judgments about the guests. Such snap judgments rarely promote reflective dialogue or understanding. For many Americans, however, these shows provide the only — or at least the most common — look at real families on TV. *An American Love Story* gives viewers an opportunity to think reflectively about the lives of a family, challenging them not to judge but to learn.

- *Each episode contains gems of wisdom.* Though it is possible to watch individual episodes, the more we watch, the more we learn. And the more we learn, the more we increase the possibilities of finding common ground with our neighbors.

Turning Objections into Opportunities for Discussion

Few things evoke more feelings in Americans than family. Our beliefs about love, loyalty, parenting, and identity are among our most deeply held values. *An American Love Story* adds race to this potent mix. Some people will respond strongly, and the response may not be entirely positive. Below are potential issues and suggestions for ways to use them as discussion sparks:

- *Intermarriage is wrong.* Some people will adhere to this opinion on the basis of pure prejudice. Because prejudice is, by definition, illogical, it is rarely productive to attempt to engage such people in dialogue. However, for many, opposition to intermarriage is based on a belief that it threatens the survival of their people. You can use this belief to ask: How do we define "people"? Is "people" different from "culture"? What role does marriage play in sustaining a people? Might intermarriage strengthen a people? How does opposition to intermarriage affect the children of intermarriage? Is it possible to envision a completely fair, equal society without being open to intermarriage?
- *Promoting biracial identity threatens the already tenuous rights of minority groups.* Recent debates about adding a "biracial" category on the U.S. census have brought this issue into sharp focus. If the number of people now counted as minorities falls because people identify themselves as biracial or multiracial, financial resources available for traditionally defined minority communities are likely to decrease. Of course, *An American Love Story* is not responsible for Congressional decisions about census policy, but its focus on Cicily's struggle to find a comfortable identity puts a personal face on the debate. What does it mean for Cicily to have to check off "black" or "white" on the forms she fills out? What are the implications for others when an individual insists on identifying as biracial? Can people identify as biracial in their personal life but identify as black when making political choices? How can one object to biracial identity on political grounds and, at the same time, accept someone like Cicily for who she is? How does this debate relate to the claim of many scholars that race is a false category to begin with? (See, for example, anthropologist Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America*, Westview Press, 1998.)
- *This film reinforces negative stereotypes about black men.* Some people will see parts of Bill's life as less than exemplary. He fathered children as a teen-ager and was not around to raise them much of the time. Rather than working a traditional job, he chose to pursue a music career. At times, he abused alcohol. On the other hand, we also see Bill as a loving father to Cicily and Chaney, a dedicated and talented musician, a devoted husband to



Karen and Cicily, Prospect, Ohio, 1972

PREPARING THE GROUP

Discussions are always more productive when participants feel safe and comfortable. As you think about how to create that kind of environment, consider the following:

- Where will you hold your event? Do the people you hope to attract have a way to get there? Is the space accessible? Is it "neutral" territory or will some people feel more comfortable than others entering the building?
- Is the room comfortable? Are the chairs set up so people can see each other? Can people hear each other?
- How well do group members know each other? Is this a new conversation for them or are they simply continuing a topic they've already been discussing? Do you need to provide time for introductions? Besides names, what might people need to know about each other to help them feel comfortable? Do you need to provide name tags?
- How big is the group? Is it so big that some people will feel too intimidated to speak? If so, have you planned some small group or partner time as part of the discussion format?
- Have you planned a discussion format that gives everyone a chance to be heard? What strategies will you use to keep one or two people from dominating the discussion? How will people take turns or indicate that they wish to speak?
- What ground rules will you establish to facilitate open, productive dialogue? How will you involve the group in setting those ground rules? Do you need to remind people to speak in first person? Do you need to remind participants that this is sensitive subject matter and to respect each other?



BEFORE/AFTER WATCHING THE FILM. . .

To help participants identify and articulate how *An American Love Story* affects them, suggest they keep in mind some or all of the following questions as they watch the film:

- Do you hear expressions of wisdom?
- Do you see examples of courage?
- Where do you see love being expressed?
- What reflects your own life experiences?
- Do you see anything that surprises you?
- Do you see anything that infuriates you?
- What insights did you take away from this film?
- What enables this family to survive, even thrive, in the face of adversity?

With these questions as a framework, you can begin a post-viewing discussion by asking people to share their answers and consider why they think they noticed those specific things.

You might also try posting or reading aloud a quote before you view the film. Compare responses to the quote before and after viewing. Other ideas for using guide questions include:

- Before the broadcast, print one or more general questions in your newsletter or station guide. Your PBS station could solicit answers in an on-air follow-up, on a Web site, or on an answering machine (transcribe the answers and print them in the next edition of your publication).
- Use guide questions as the basis for a "Talk of the Nation"-type forum on a local radio talk show. Each day, discuss the previous evening's show.
- Ask your local newspaper(s) to invite responses to selected guide questions via e-mail or a phone answering machine, then share responses as part of its community coverage.
- Print selected quotes from the film in your newsletter or air them on your PBS station. Invite response before and after *An American Love Story* airs and compare responses.

Karen. To simply say that Bill is a real person, however, and that the film merely presents his life in all its complexity, avoids a number of issues raised by the statement about negative stereotypes:

- ◇ *What is the role of documentaries?* The subject matter of this film is real and, like all documentaries, is the filmmaker's re-presentation of that reality. What is the difference between "objective" and "real"? Should documentaries include only people who represent the "ideal" characteristics of their race (or religion or ethnicity)? Can the documentarian make a film about a person engaged in behavior that is easily stereotyped without reinforcing the stereotype?
- ◇ *What role does the media play in our perception of groups of people with whom we are not personally familiar?* If there were more diverse portrayals of black men in the media, would it be harder to see Bill as a stereotype and easier to see him as an individual?
- ◇ *Why might people focus on Bill's negative instead of his positive side?* Does the reinforcement of negative stereotypes come from the film or from the habits of people living in a racist society or from both?
- ◇ *How are people's lives affected by the repetition of stereotypes?* What concerns might people have about Bill's portrayal? What stereotypes persist about black men and what is the source of their strength?

Because of the issues raised in *An American Love Story*, and because the film has been widely publicized, it can become an easy target for people who are uncomfortable with the topic of race and racism in America. Well-planned outreach that uses the film to confront the issues that arise in your community, and that creates a safe environment in which to work through those issues, can provide a substantive answer to criticism.

Note: Significant debate exists around definitions of terms such as "race," "racism," "biracial," and even "family." Early on, you may want to invite participants to share their definitions or clarify what they mean when they use the words to ensure that they understand one another.



Bill Sims

"Welcome to America"

EPISODE 1

On the occasion of their anniversary, Bill Sims and Karen Wilson recall how their relationship began in a climate of great resistance. After more than two decades together, they reflect on the strength of their marriage and their hopes for their daughters Cicily and Chaney. A family trip to pick up Cicily at elite Colgate University provides the backdrop for a look at where members of an interracial family fit into a world sharply divided into black and white.

Major Topics

racial prejudice
racial identity
parenting

Additional Topics

regional diversity (New York City vs. Upstate)
marriage
white privilege

Discussion Sparks

- Cicily describes her perception of how others judge her family's choices: "People think my family is so weird. Just being an interracial couple, people don't understand why they're together. How could she be so stupid to want to be with this man? Why is he with her? They had plenty of chances not to do what they did. If they didn't love each other it wouldn't have lasted." Do you agree that the strength of Bill and Karen's love justified/justifies their choices?
- Bill tells the story of his father's prediction that his best childhood friend, who was white, would inevitably call him "nigger" by 7th grade, when they started "liking girls." Despite Bill's initial skepticism, his father's prediction came true. If Bill were growing up today, do you think it likely that the prediction would still be accurate? What might perpetuate this pattern? What insight does it provide about the sources and staying power of discrimination?
- Bill and Karen comment on having met in the late 1960s: "We were living proof of the times. . . . This is the future. Get with it. . . . The world thought the world was going to change." How do you think the political and social climate influenced their relationship?
- Karen recalls, "Every time Bill would come to town they'd throw him in jail." Did you face opposition to any people you dated? What was the source of the opposition? How did it affect the relationship?
- Chaney reacts to the regional differences: Everyone at Colgate University seems so friendly compared to people in New York City, she observes. Despite this, where do you think Chaney feels more comfortable? Why?



Bill and Karen

SELECTED QUOTES

Karen: "All places are the same as far as prejudice goes."

Karen: "Everybody wants to give more to their kid than they have. Everybody wants their kid to be happy and have a nice life. . . . I had a wonderful childhood. I lived in the perfect 'Leave It to Beaver' world. . . . I wanted her to have a childhood like mine."

Cicily: "I did have an idyllic side of the world. She gave it to me. . . . I was never aware that someone might think less of a person or [think I was] stupid because I was a black or because I was a girl. Or that someone might think that I was different, until I got out there and I saw when we were together nobody thought we were. Chaney was adopted, they thought. Why? . . . It's possible [Karen] could have had sex with a black man, you know? But she did give me that idealistic dream and it made me believe I could do anything."

Bill: "Colgate's a factory. Young women come out a certain way. . . . People in power are able to see them and go, 'Ah, they know the rules. We can accept them.'"

Karen: "I don't have a clue what [Cicily's] life is like. How could I? I can understand what she's saying, but not what she's going through. The reality of it is, I'm never going to face that. . . . I have the option of walking to the other side."

Bill: "What does it mean to be black in America? It means every moment you're outside your door it's high tension. Very high tension. Like being a mouse among cats."

Bill, commenting on the trip to Colgate University to pick up Cicily: "In America you've got to go into lots of places where there are no blacks. . . . The only way that you could get any success was to deal with the white people. . . . To get in a lot of power you've got to go where the people with power go."

Cicily: "When I visited [Colgate University] it was beautiful. . . . I didn't know that there were only 3% African American students in the whole school. I thought it wouldn't matter anyway."



What kind of community would be most comfortable for you and/or your family? Why?

- Consider how being part of an interracial family influences Cicily's experience at Colgate University. What does she and her family experience that her white classmates don't?
 - ◇ Karen is scared when they go out together in small towns; she avoids certain places and worries about reactions in restaurants and gas stations.



Bill, Karen, Cicily and Chaney

- ◇ Cicily: "My freshman year I was telling a girl about my mom and dad. . . . She saw pictures of them. . . . She said, 'That's not natural. Something's wrong with your dad because he wants to marry a white woman.' She told me this to my face. . . like she wasn't even insulting me. . . . You're abnormal. Your parents are sick and mentally ill. . . . I was really upset about that."
- ◇ Cicily saw herself as just another girl joining a sorority, but others saw it as a big deal because she was black. She also recognizes that she "connected with the women because I didn't connect with the African American students."
- ◇ Cicily describes encountering people who assume they know what she is like and, worse, assume that she is somehow deficient because she is black: "The color of my skin is like a deck of cards. People are like, I know what your cards look like. You're black. That's it. . . . They [think they] got my number. . . but I'm like, no, I got some aces, I got some jacks, I got some kings. They're like no, you got some twos, you got some fives. . . . I'm like no, I got a flush."

SELECTED QUOTES

Bill: "Four hundred years ago somebody brought somebody that's related to me here by force. [Now] somebody who is related to me. . . is going back by choice."

Karen: "Africa to me is just another country."

"A Piece of the Puzzle Is Missing"

EPISODE
2

Bill is excited and Karen is anxious as Cicily leaves for a semester abroad in Nigeria. The next day, Karen is hospitalized; she had been bleeding excessively from fibroid tumors and has lost 70% of her blood. As she recovers, Bill, a professional musician, leaves for a disastrous gig in Ohio.

Major Topics

racial identity
health/dealing with illness
marriage and compromise

Additional Topics

gender roles
economic class



Discussion Sparks

- Any parent who has contemplated letting a child leave home, especially when the destination is half-way around the world, will be familiar with the dynamics in this episode. In addition to gender and personality, consider how race influences the different meanings Cicily's parents assign to her pending trip to Nigeria.
- The episode begins with Karen saying that she and Bill like things their own way, but they know when to give in to each other and they "compromise a lot." Where do you see compromise? How do their compromises strengthen their relationship?
- How do gender, race, and class shape the way Bill and Karen deal with Karen's illness, the way each earns a living, and their division of household responsibilities?

"I've Fallen and I Can't Get Up"

EPISODE 3

Cicily's trip to Nigeria becomes an explosive experience as her fellow students divide into two racially segregated groups. As a child of a multiracial family, she is stuck in the middle of this fight and forced to define her racial identity. To further complicate the situation, Cicily falls in love with a Nigerian man.

Major Topics

racial identity
discrimination

Additional Topics

parenting
love/relationships

Discussion Sparks

- How does being in Nigeria influence Cicily's identity? Ironically, while many Nigerians think Cicily is white because she is light-skinned, being in Nigeria seems to strengthen Cicily's positive feelings about being black. She talks about not wanting to identify as white because, historically, Caucasians have done some very destructive things. Did you find yourself wanting Cicily to choose one identity over the other? Why or why not? How much of your identity is based on how others see you?
- One of Cicily's black classmates says that he "can't imagine that she can do either [black or white identity] justice; she must have a really tough time with that." What assumptions is he making about Cicily's choices? What would "doing justice" look like?

SELECTED QUOTES

Cicily: "I am Cicily. That answer was good enough for me through high school. . . . Now I am still Cicily but I am multiracial as well."

Black classmate: "If there was any time I didn't want to be around white folks, it was in Nigeria. . . . You just wanted to be comfortable, to be around your kind. And especially now, where you were now the majority, where the tables are turned. . . . and everywhere you look there are just black people. . . just looking around and just wondering whether I was related to them somehow. . . . The white students couldn't understand why we wanted to be together. . . . We didn't really want to explain. We just wanted to be."

Black student: "Yes, you have to choose. . . . If you want to be down, you have to choose that you're black. . . . You're either down with us or you're not down with us. You couldn't be both. You have to be one or the other."

Cicily: "When I was growing up I didn't have to choose."

Cicily: "It's hard to think that people are just saying things about you because of the color of your skin because you have no control over it."

Cicily: "For the rest of the bus ride, all I could hear was, 'I didn't come on this trip to hang around no half-breeds.' "



Cicily in Nigeria, 1992





Tony and Cicily in Nigeria, 1992

- Why doesn't Cicily share her black classmates' desire to be separate from the white students? How does her background influence her interpretation of the events in restaurants, where whites are served first, and on the bus? (She questions whether there really was discrimination in restaurants, and says that even if it happened, the white students who benefited from the discrimination are not to blame. She also objects to the black students treating the servers rudely and seems not to acknowledge that experiencing discrimination was especially painful for her classmates, who expected to finally feel at home in Nigeria because they weren't the racial minority. On the bus, she interprets Carlton's actions as being more about gender and personality than race.)

- Edwin, Cicily's classmate, asks, "What would it have been like if there had been no slavery?" What do you think?
- A white classmate of Cicily's notes, "Even though I was different over there, it wasn't in a negative way." What was the difference between being a white minority in an African nation and being a person of color in the United States? What role does colonialism play?
- Cicily observes that she and her mother have very few friends because they feel people will reject them when they reveal their interracial ties. How did you feel when you heard Cicily make this comment? What do you avoid for fear of rejection?
- At one point, Cicily and her boyfriend discuss this quote from a popular musician: "There is no such thing as a black person who is racist." Do you agree?
- One of Cicily's white classmates says, "It seems like a lot of the tensions on the trip came from the black students rather than the white students." Do you agree with her perception of events? In your community, have you heard similar sentiments being expressed? If so, what was the source of the tensions and perceptions? Have you seen examples of whites perceiving people of color who speak up for themselves being labeled "troublemakers"?
- In the incident on the bus, for whom did you feel sympathy (or empathy) and why? Did any of the students make you angry? Issues that arise as a result of the fight include stereotypes about violent black men and loud black women; the accusation that Carlton can't handle having a black woman stand up to him; Carlton questioning Cicily's "credentials" as someone who is black; the perception that white students were all against Carlton and had been looking for an excuse to attack him; assumptions that Carlton is jealous of Tony; resentment that Cicily seems to be receiving special treatment by bringing Tony on the bus.
- Cicily does not believe that the bus incident was about race. Contrast her view with her classmate's observation, "It wasn't just a seat. What white students don't understand is that we've mapped out things in our heads from our lives that went on beforehand. So when something like that happens, all those things come rushing back. That's what that situation was. So to them it was just a seat, but to us it was an invasion of our privacy." What are the historical memories that influence conflicts in your community?

"It's Another Year and I Ain't Gone"

EPISODE 4

Cicily returns from Nigeria and, as the extended family gathers for Christmas and New Year's Eve, she is hospitalized with a life-threatening case of malaria. As Cicily recovers, she realizes that Nigeria has changed her in a way that her parents can't understand. The prospect of losing his daughter brings Bill to the realization that the only thing that really matters is family.

Major Topics

parenting/family dynamics
communication

Additional Topics

alcoholism
racial identity

Discussion Sparks

- Cicily tries to explain to her parents why the African American students cast her as a "sellout." It makes as little sense to Karen as it did to Cicily. Does it make sense to you? What do you think is meant by the term sellout?
- As Cicily leaves Nigeria she says, "I'm scared of going home. Everything's going to be so different. . . . It's going to be hard trying to explain it all." What does she fear? Why is it frightening to think that others can't understand us? How can we understand others when we haven't experienced what they've experienced? How do Karen and Bill try to keep the lines of communication open and listen to their daughter?
- Listen for views of family and responsibility to children, parents, and family traditions. Do you agree with the views expressed? Are they similar to or different from the experience of your own family?
- Bill talks about being an alcoholic. Observe how the family deals with the situation and its consequences. How has the disease influenced all their lives?

SELECTED QUOTES

Bill, on leaving his kids: "I was out there trying to build a road. And I didn't know how."

Bill: "You can't trust anybody but your family."

Cicily: "Dad's afraid of losing me to another guy and [mom] is afraid of losing me to another country."



Bill, Cicily, and Karen in San Francisco, 1978

"Chaney and the Boy"

EPISODE 5

Twelve-year-old Chaney desperately wants to meet her telephone boyfriend. She struggles with her worried parents, pleading with them to let her go out on her first date. Bill and Karen try to figure out the fine line between protecting their child and letting her grow up.

Major Topics

parenting/children's independence
adolescence
family values

Additional Topic

gender roles

SELECTED QUOTE

Karen: "Chaney, you are 12 years old!"



Discussion Sparks

- How do race or gender influence Bill's and Karen's approach to parenting, discipline, and dating? Chaney thinks her parents are very traditional. Are they? Clearly, they have been willing to challenge the status quo, or they would not have become a couple. In what ways are Karen and Bill radical and in what ways are they traditional? How does each try to protect Chaney? How have their parenting decisions been influenced by the ways they were parented? How have your parenting decisions been influenced by the ways you were parented?
- In this episode, we see Bill and Karen negotiate a sensitive parenting issue. How do they keep the incident from escalating into a crisis? Examples might include: keeping a united front, emphasizing the importance of talking things out, setting reasonable boundaries, and suggesting compromises.



Chaney in Flushing, New York, 1980

SELECTED QUOTES

Cicily: "When you get to college you really realize that the world is segregated. I saw people who had taken private jets to school. . . . How can you talk to these people and explain to them where you're coming from and make them understand? They come from worlds that don't include black people. And these are the people who are going to decide about Social Security and decide about your medical. And these are the people that you're going to have to deal with to get ahead in this world."

Cicily: "People define themselves by their race. Black women say they are black first. I'm a woman first."

Cicily: "Everything would be fine if I would just say I was black."

Karen, watching Cicily's struggle to find an identity: "It's not something I can help her with. What am I going to teach her? I can't teach her to be white. I can't give her blue eyes and blonde hair."

Cicily: "A lot of white people don't realize that it's hard to be black."

Cicily: "I just want to be me and they're not letting me."

Cicily: "I would never say I was white."

"The Devil You Know..."

EPISODE
6

In this episode exploring mother/daughter bonds, Karen visits her mother's trailer home in Florida under a veil of tension because her mother's current husband did not approve of Karen's marriage to Bill. Cicily struggles to make sense of her Nigerian experience and her identity during her final semester at Colgate University.

Major Topics

mother/daughter relations
racism
racial identity

Additional Topics

competing allegiances
(race, gender, family)
parenting

Discussion Sparks

- Consider these mother/daughter situations. Which seem universal or common and which are unique to interracial families?
 - ◇ Cicily and Karen reflect on how it feels when they are out in public and people don't treat them as if they are together (let alone a mother and daughter).



- ◇ Cicily sees the fact that Karen had to fight to keep Cicily when she was born as having strengthened their bond. She predicts, "I'm never going to separate from my mother."
- ◇ Both Cicily and Karen have trouble making friends. Cicily says: "You never know when you can trust somebody else."
- ◇ Cicily is afraid to think about having children who won't look like her, which she sees as inevitable.
- ◇ For Cicily, home is a sanctuary where race isn't an issue.
- ◇ Karen is frustrated because her daughter is in pain and she feels like she can't help with this particular struggle.
- ◇ When Karen's father died, her mother was only 46 years old. Though Karen appreciates the support her mother gave her in Ohio when she dated Bill, she now feels a separation because her mother remarried a man who was upset when he found out that Bill was black.
- ◇ Karen wishes her parents had pushed her to stay in college, but remembers their approach as "just do what makes you happy." She resolves not to make the same "mistake" with Cicily.
- Cicily and Tamika disagree about allegiance to race over gender and loyalty to family over loyalty to people. When Tamika asks, "Have you ever done something you disagree with for the sake of unity?" Cicily answers, "No." How would you answer Tamika?
- Cicily says, "I'm not really in the mood to teach anybody any more. I don't really feel like explaining myself." Her sorority sister answers, "It is not your job to educate the world." Whose job is it to educate people about race and racism?
- Cicily never really dated while at Colgate University. Friends weren't sure about who to set her up with. Says one, "It's hard for her to find a guy because there are very few guys at Colgate who would consider an interracial relationship. . . . Black men are attracted to white girls. . . . I wonder why the white men don't go for the black women here?" How would you answer her question?
- Cicily's sorority sisters reflect on how Cicily's friendship changed their experience. "I don't think it should matter what color you are, what nationality you are, anything like that," one explains. "I was naive that way. I just thought people don't care anymore. Then Cicily will point something out to me. . . . I've learned to notice it more." Why didn't she recognize these things before she met Cicily?
- One of Cicily's white sorority sisters asks, "Are we allowed to say 'home girl' without being racially offensive?" How would you answer her?



Cicily and her college roommate



SELECTED QUOTES

Bill: "It takes a lot of time to really fall in love with somebody. It takes a long time to really say 'this is it. I'm going to stay with this person forever.'"

Bill: "The earlier you figure out what makes you happy and how to make life work, the better the rest of your life is going to be. That's the secret. Just working on it, one little thing at a time."

Bill: "I can better guess what it's like to be a bull elephant than I can guess what it is like to be a woman. . . . Twenty-seven years and we're so different! Basically just two different animals. Hard work!"

Bill: "Because we're racially mixed as a couple [people think] our family values won't be as high or as strong as yours because you're the same ethnic background. I can sense that sometimes in people."

Karen: "What we have is not what everybody has. . . and it's a shame for them because it's pretty nice. . . it's true love. I wonder what they think true love is?"



Karen, Cicily, and Bill, Hamilton, New York, 1993

"True Love"

EPISODE
7

The family confronts some significant transitions: Karen finally deals with her medical problems by having a hysterectomy, and Cicily graduates from Colgate University.

Major Topics

gender roles
family values
health
sustaining a marriage

Additional Topics

racism
true love

Discussion Sparks

- Considering the various ways that his family members deal with Karen's illness, Bill concludes, "Everybody has their own medicine." What "medicine" is each family member using? How do gender, race, age, personality, and economic class influence their choices? Consider the following reactions and situations:
 - ◇ Bill has to choose between staying to care for Karen and going out on the road. (He chooses to stay.)
 - ◇ Karen notes that Bill, like the rest of his family, doesn't express emotion or show affection. She observes that she has never seen his parents kiss.
 - ◇ Karen begins to worry about how she looks.
 - ◇ Karen begins to worry that Bill will leave her.
 - ◇ Karen's surgery and the fact that Karen can no longer conceive forces them to deal with their desire for more children.
- Cicily sees her family as a refuge from the confusion and tension that surrounds her at college: "Every time my parents came to Colgate it felt like reality was back. It gave me a part of myself back." How does this reliance on her family influence her college experience?
- Cicily is the first person on her father's side to graduate college. As Bill remembers, "My grandmother and my mother picked cotton. My mother wanted to go to school but couldn't." What is the history of college attendance in your family and what factors have influenced the educational choices of family members?
- Karen says that her family members don't show much emotion or affection. Yet, it is clear that they love one another. How do they show their love?
- Bill says, "You have to decide: I'm going to make this relationship work, no matter what it takes." How does this attitude influence the way the family adjusts to the changes life brings them (e.g., Karen's illness, Cicily's graduation)?



"Marion Truth"

EPISODE 8

Bill returns to Marion, Ohio, to help Alton, the son he fathered as a teen-ager, who has been arrested for drug trafficking. Being home evokes Bill's memories of his own childhood and the fate he narrowly avoided. He feels unable to save his son from a similar fate.

Major Topics

race and small town life
race, generation, attitudes toward them
race, religion, discipline/parenting
stereotypes about black men

Additional Topics

desegregation and black culture
prison

Discussion Sparks

- At several points Bill talks about how important it is to "have a plan." What do you think he means? Do you think he followed his own plan? How did growing up as a black man in Marion, Ohio, shape his plan? Consider the role of race, class, gender, and geography in the following observations on life as a black man in a small town:
 - ◇ Bill: "Hardly any way to get ahead in Marion if you're a black person." (The highest you could go in Marion was middle class.)
 - ◇ Bill: "In Marion, it's how many ladies you have. That's what you're judged on. That's why Chris [Bill's brother] is so popular." (Bill's father conveys pride in Chris as a chip off the old block.)
 - ◇ Bill: "You're stuck where you are because you can't see anything else."
 - ◇ Bill talks about having to quit jobs because the only work available to black men required tolerating hazardous conditions and chemicals.
 - ◇ Bill's father drives through a nice suburban neighborhood and says he doesn't belong here and if he stopped, the highway patrol would come question him.
- At one point Bill comments that in Marion, "[Dating a white woman] is almost like a status symbol." How does this attitude reflect or reinforce the racial status quo in the United States?
- In Bill's family, attitudes toward prison and law enforcement are complex and even contradictory:
 - ◇ Bill remembers that as a youth, he viewed the courthouse as a good rather than as a threatening place: It was one of the few buildings downtown in which it was safe to use the bathroom.
 - ◇ Bill considers himself lucky not to be in jail. He has watched the incarceration of many peers.
 - ◇ Bill's father reports that prison jobs are sought after "'cause you never get laid off."
 - ◇ Bill's father observes, "A lot of the guys in prison, they livin' better than we are."
 - ◇ Bill's father suggests that Alton is going to go to prison "'cause he ain't got the money for a good lawyer."
 - ◇ The family seems to treat Alton's arrest as inevitable.

SELECTED QUOTES

Bill's son Alton: "Marion's not going to give a black man a fair chance. . . . You can pick the garbage up or be in that factory over there, but you can't be on the city council."

Bill: "A lot of my friends are in prison. . . . To get to this point in my life and be alive and be able to tell my story is no small wonder."

Bill, on having children as a teen-ager: "White kids would get abortions; the black kids, nobody had any money. . . . [Children are a] poor man's wealth."

Bill: "Church used to be filled every Sunday. . . . There was this nation of black people who lived together, worked together and helped each other. . . . There is no black tribe anymore. No more black businesses. No more black culture. Black culture is dead in America. We've assimilated."



Alton, Bill's son





The Sims family, Marion, Ohio, 1960s

How are these attitudes shaped by race and racism? Class? Geography? Gender? Have you seen similar attitudes in your own community?

- Bill responds to his father's invocation of "spare the rod, spoil the child" by saying that parents who whip their kids are acting out what the slaves learned from the slave owners. He also notes that his mother, who was whipped as a child, whipped him "daily," but his father, who was not whipped as a child, did not hit him. What do you think of Bill's discipline philosophy?
- In an argument with his father, Bill says that the Bible comes from slaveholders who used it to pacify blacks by telling them that better times awaited them in heaven and that they should behave themselves on earth so they would get to heaven. Do you agree?
- Bill comments on the irony of parenting in a situation where your child is involved in illegal activity: "You try to teach your kids to be the best they can be. So if they are drug dealers, do you teach them how to be good drug dealers and how to stay out of jail? Of course you do." What do you think?
- Bill talks about Alton's situation as being his own failure. Alton is 25 years old with no marketable skills. In addition to Bill, is anyone else responsible?
- Bill believes that the strong black community he knew as a child has disappeared: "We're the first generation that really integrated. It's like it took us apart as a people." Do you agree with his assessment? Do you agree that integration is to blame? Why might some black people see integration as a problem?



William and Georgia Mae Sims, Bill's parents

"It's My Job"

EPISODE

9

The family goes through a difficult summer. Cicily can't find a job and slips into a depression. Bill and Karen work to bolster her self-esteem. Meanwhile, Bill struggles with his music career and faces his drinking problem. In the end, Cicily finds a job and Bill gives up alcohol.

Major Topics

parenting/children's independence
depression/self-esteem
alcoholism
sustaining a family/keeping a family intact

Additional Topic

race and work

Discussion Sparks

- Cicily's difficulty finding a job and physically separating from her parents highlights the complex web connecting her to her parents. What do you notice about family ties that is expressed in the person Cicily is becoming?
 - ◇ Though Cicily is closer to her mother, Bill thinks she is more like him in terms of personality.
 - ◇ Cicily: "When you tell [Bill] about stuff that you're scared about, he just brushes you off. Why let your fear be in the way of you living? And I think that's his biggest criticism of himself." She thinks that her father can't do it himself so he wants her to do it.
- Bill and Karen experience a common parenting disagreement: Bill thinks Karen is too easy on Cicily, which is why she hasn't found a job. What do you think?
- Bill's initial attitude towards his alcoholism is fatalistic: "My fate will be the same as yours [I'll die]. . . . Yes, I drink too much. So what?" What happens to change Bill's attitude enough so that he enters a treatment facility?
- The prospect of losing Bill frightens Karen, but her response is: "I would never try to change him." Essentially, Karen does not see Bill as an alcoholic. What supports her attitude? Does Bill show a different side of himself to his family than he shows in other places? Have you known people who act differently depending on the situation? Have you acted differently with your family than, for example, with people at work?
- Bill's blues song recounts a period of history in Georgia when many black men ended up on chain gangs — literally with targets on their back ("you better not run"). What stories do people in your community remember?
- As the episode closes, Bill and Karen conclude, "We were a family in crisis, but we made it through and we're still standing." What allowed them to survive these crises?

SELECTED QUOTES

Bill: "They sign black acts for 35-50% less than white acts."

Bill: "I like my life. . . and it's killing me — literally. . . . But you know what? I expected as much."

Bill: "No such thing as in between. I don't believe in in between."

Cicily: "I don't think I've found it yet. I don't think I've found my really big bonfire. . . . I have to find that aggression that's inside of me. I don't really show that. And I'm afraid to because I'm afraid that maybe I'll be too. . . I don't know how to show just a little bit to get what I want. That's hard."



Cicily and Karen, Montauk, Long Island, 1993



SELECTED QUOTES

(Episode 10)

Karen's childhood friend: "We didn't see black people in our town. To have someone routinely going up to Karen's apartment was pretty different."

Karen: "They always notice, all the time that I go there. . . . I still feel danger there."

Karen's childhood friend: "This is the stuff that war is made of."

RESOURCES

Books

Beverly Daniel Tatum. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (Basic Books, 1997)

A must read on the development of racial identity. Particularly helpful as background for Episode 3 and Cicily's journey.

Claudine C. O'Hearn, ed. *Half & Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial and Bicultural* (Pantheon Books, 1998)

A collection of non-fiction essays.

Lise Funderburg. *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk About Race and Identity* (Morrow, 1994)

A collection of interviews with people who have wide-ranging experiences.

Isabell Monk. Janice Lee Porter, illustrator. *Hope* (Carolrhoda Books, 1999)

For children 4 to 8, a story about a 6th-grade girl's experience understanding her mixed-race identity.

"We Were Never Ozzie and Harriet"

EPISODE
10

The final episode takes the viewer back to the beginning as Bill and Karen return home for Karen's high school reunion. They see the people who ostracized them 25 years ago and confront the joyful and painful events that led to Cicily's birth and cemented their relationship for life.

Major Topics

racism and interracial dating

family as source of support

Additional Topics

parenting

having children out of wedlock

Discussion Sparks

- Martha, Karen's mother, says: "His color has nothing to do with it. He's a nice man. I always believed all men are created equal. Bill's no different than any other man." Do you share the opinion that Bill's "color has nothing to do with it?" What do you think are the sources of Martha's belief? Do you think her opinion would serve as a basis for good race relations in your community?
- Make a list of the specific incidents of harassment mentioned in this episode. How does hearing these stories make you feel? Does hearing them make you more or less likely to act against racism? Imagine how you might have reacted if you were Bill, Karen, or their parents. If you saw something similar happening to a neighbor today, what would you do?



Bill Sims, Marion, Ohio, 1967



- ◇ Karen's childhood friend: "This one young man was just outraged by the whole thing and had talked about maybe trying to pick Bill off with a gun."
 - ◇ Karen: "I was sure they were going to kill us. They were just mean, downright mean. . . . The sheriff would follow Bill and I everywhere we went."
 - ◇ Bill's car was routinely stopped, searched, and all the contents dumped and left on the street with the sheriff explaining they had "probable cause."
 - ◇ Karen's family was harassed by the sheriff and her father was shunned.
 - ◇ "Girls that ran with her didn't run with her anymore. It hurt her real bad. They didn't want to be associated with her because they didn't know how to handle it. . . . Their fear of them being talked about."
 - ◇ Karen was pressured to give up her baby, Cicily, for adoption.
- What gave Karen and Bill the strength to go against community standards?
 - ◇ Lee remembers Karen as having a lot of freedom.
 - ◇ Lee describes Karen as responding to the hatred: "This is not what I've been taught. This is not what I know."
 - ◇ Karen was a leader, not a follower. When things got rough, she protected friends by keeping them out of it.
 - ◇ Family support: Karen's father spoke to the city council about the harassment. Are you surprised by the things that are and are not on your list?
 - Karen's father wanted Karen and Bill to get married because she was pregnant. That was more important to him than her not marrying a black man. Which values do you hold most dear and why?



Karen Wilson, Prospect, Ohio, 1967

RESOURCES

Web Sites

www.pbs.org/lovestories This Web site, inspired by *An American Love Story*, provides an innovative on-line discussion format that encourages "dialogues across differences" between Americans from a range of backgrounds, experiences, perspectives. It also includes a quilt of American love stories from couples successfully "negotiating differences" of race, ethnicity, religion, age, culture, or economic background.

www.mavin.net MAVIN is a quarterly print journal dedicated to the celebration of the mixed-race experience in America. Its mission is to create a pan-collegiate voice and to provide financial and logistical support to encourage mixed-race student organizations across the country.

www.multiracial.com The *Multiracial Activist* site is dedicated to the struggle for governmental and social recognition of multiracial individuals.

www.ameasite.org The Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA) is a nationwide nonprofit confederation of local multiethnic/interracial groups. This site's primary goal is to promote a positive awareness of interracial and multiethnic identity.

www.whitehouse.gov/Initiatives/OneAmerica The *President's Initiative on Race* Web site provides background on the Initiative, its goals and findings, plus extensive resources and publications, such as *Promising Practices for Racial Reconciliation*.





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An American Love Story had its national broadcast premiere on PBS in September 1999. The series is co-presented by American Playhouse and the Independent Television Service (ITVS). It is a featured program of the **Television Race Initiative** (TRI), a multiyear effort in which diverse, character-driven, high-profile television broadcasts create a spine for sustained community dialogue and problem solving around the issue of race relations. In partnership with national and community-based organizations, TRI uses storytelling — initially in the form of several public television broadcasts — to “break the ice” and encourage essential conversations that lead to constructive action. Previous selections included Emiko Omori’s *Rabbit in the Moon* (P.O.V. 1999), Macky Alston’s *Family Name* (P.O.V. 1998), Orlando Bagwell’s *Africans in America* (WGBH 1998), The Fred Friendly Seminars’ *Beyond Black and White: Affirmative Action in America*, and *Facing the Truth with Bill Moyers*.

For more information and additional copies of this guide, please contact:

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Or visit our Web site to download additional copies of this guide and explore additional resources: www.pbs.org/pov/tvraceinitiative

To obtain a VHS copy of the series, contact:

For home video:

Docurama at 1-800-314-8822

or

National Video Resources “Viewing Race” Catalogue

212-274-1782; E-mail: ViewingRace@nvr.org

For educational use:

First Run/Icarus Films at 1-800-876-1710



PBS

Cover: Bill Sims and Karen Wilson. Photograph by Antoine Verglas
Other photographs courtesy of the Wilson-Sims family