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THE Arts

A Look at Looking Different

By FELICIA R. LEE

Alexander David grew up with a Chinese mother and a white Jewish father in the liberal Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn. He attended the predominantly Asian elite Stuyvesant High School. He was comfortable in his skin in both places, but in a world of tribes, the Asian kids considered him white,

In Brooklyn, a study of mixed heritage from multiple angles.

and the white ones considered him Asian.

"We're not like a racially blind kind of society," Mr. David said in an interview recently.

Mr. David's experience is now part of an unusual project by the Brooklyn Historical Society called "Crossing Borders, Bridging Gener-

ations," which has as its centerpiece a collection of more than 100 oral histories of people who identify themselves as being of mixed heritage, whether through race, ethnicity, religion or nationality.

Three years in the making, "Crossing Bridges" will be completed in mid-January and is uncommon in subject and scope for a historical society, said Annie Valk, vice president of the Oral History Association. It comes with public programs, a school curriculum and an interactive website.

"I think it's unique in its breadth," said Deborah Schwartz, president of the historical society. "Oral histories are usually very specific, and this is very wide-ranging, with mixed heritage meaning different things to different people. It is also infused with the reflections of scholars: historians, anthropologists, sociologists."

Since 2011, the historical society programs have included a discussion of the 1991 Crown Heights riot (which pitted blacks against Jews); a multi-racial art project created by the art-

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A Look at Those Who Look Different From the Rest

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ist Kip Fulbeck; screening of films about interracial couples, like "Jungle Fever" and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner"; an annual discussion on mixed race called "What Are You?"; and a genealogy workshop, among many other gatherings. The programs continue this year and next.

About 30 of the oral histories are now gathered on the website, which includes photographs, audio clips, transcripts and scholarly articles. The full oral history collection will be available next year at the historical society's Othmer Library, the repository of more than 1,200 oral history narratives on a variety of topics. In February, educators will also be offered a curriculum for grades six through 12.

All the oral history subjects were volunteers who live or work in Brooklyn, or did so in the past. They were a diverse flock, including biracial lesbian couples and Jewish couples from different European countries. Their stories reflect changes from the time when mixed marriage often meant spouses of different religions to a time when it means gay or interracial marriage, or both, said Sady Sullivan, the former director of oral history at the historical society. Ms. Sullivan, who conceived the project, has been named the curator of oral history at Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

"The idea I get really excited about is that this is for the future," Ms. Sullivan said. "What will it be like to listen to stories about the social construction of race in 150 years?"

Championing multiracial families — including the struggle for the right to check more than one census box for race — has also had detractors. Some argue that multiracial identity only increases racial stratification. Others have argued that discussions

Do not forget the Neediest!



ANDREA MOJIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Elizabeth Velazquez, who is of Puerto Rican and Peruvian heritage, is part of "Crossing Borders, Bridging Generations."



EMON HASSAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Alexander David has an Asian parent and a white Jewish parent. He says being of mixed race isn't always uncomfortable.

about multiracial identity too often fail to examine how race is related to wealth and power.

Nitasha Tamar Sharma, an associate professor of African-American studies and Asian-American studies at Northwestern, wondered how the oral histories would be framed. "Is it going to be used only as a celebration?" asked Professor Sharma, who writes about and researches

issues of racial identity.

The historical society's frame is loose, Ms. Schwartz said. "For some people, there's great strength" to be found in their experience. "For others, there's great hardship," she said. "We're not looking for one version."

While the interviews might touch on big issues — race, religion, immigration, marriage laws — they mostly capture the

small, telling moments of a society obsessed with categories and hierarchies of people. Mr. David, an engineering major at City College of New York, said he was always aware that people could not find the right words to ask him outright about his family. "I don't think it's the most comfortable thing to talk about," he said of his reasons for telling his story.

Another participant, Elizabeth Velazquez, 37, who grew up in upstate New York with a Puerto Rican father and a Peruvian mother, recalled feeling that she did not fit in anywhere. She received a lot of blunt "What are you?" questions. In a recent interview, Ms. Velazquez, a public school art teacher in the East New York-Cypress Hills area of Brooklyn, said that even as a child, she realized that the questions and tensions were related to class, race and sentiments about immigrants.

"I feel like stories have a way of making connections with people," she said of her reason for sharing her experience. "Our society now is not really nurturing that connection. It's really cold and fast-paced. And policy makers are disconnected, I feel."

Mixed-race studies, books on the subject and student clubs have gained currency in the past few several years, reflecting that one in seven new marriages is between spouses of different races or ethnicities, according to data analyzed by the Pew Research Center. Figures from the 2010 census showed that this country's multiracial population among children had increased almost 50 percent, to 4.2 million people, since 2000, and was the fastest-growing category among youths. The number of people of all ages who identified themselves as both white and black jumped 134 percent since 2000, to 1.8 million people, the 2010 census data showed.

"It's trying to catch up with America today," Renee Romano, a history professor at Oberlin College, said of "Crossing Borders," for which she was an adviser. "This is saying that people's intimate lives are of historical importance."