

## Younger Blacks Absorb A Wariness Of Marriage

By Vanessa E. Jones, Globe Staff | August 9, 2006

As African-American teenagers in a Mission Hill conference room talk about their opinions of marriage, their comments reveal a dreary view of the institution.

"I'm not looking forward to marriage," says Nakeeda Burns, a 17-year-old resident of Revere and daughter of a single mother, "and I don't think we [people in general] should be married, because I see how other marriages ended up in my family and on television. It's always a disaster."

Even the married couples these teens know don't seem particularly happy.

"All of my friends who are married, they tell me not to get married," says Anderson Felix, 17, of Dorchester. "Wifey is going to keep you on lock." "Everywhere you go, she'll call you every five minutes." I won't be able to deal with that."

Anita Marshall blurts out, "I want a big wedding if I get married," but she doesn't think she'll make it to the altar. Her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were married; now they're all divorced.

"I don't know anyone who's married, or anybody who is married and stayed married," says Marshall, a 15-year-old from Dorchester. She and the other 10 teens in the room are participants in the organization YPACT (Youth for Prevention, Action and Change Through Thought), which aims to develop community leaders by teaching teens about social, racial, and health disparities in their neighborhoods.

"When I think of 'married,'" Marshall adds, "[I think] 'divorce' -- first word."

Their disillusionment mirrors a growing resistance to marriage among African-Americans. In the post-Civil War era, when African-Americans had the option to marry legally for the first time, many did. The 1890 Census showed that 80 percent of African-American families were headed by two parents, according to Andrew Billingsley's 1992 book, "Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Enduring Legacies of African-American Families."

But in 1970, census figures showed that only 57 percent of black men and 54 percent of black women were married. By last year those numbers had slipped to 42 percent for men and 35 percent for women. In comparison, 68 percent of white men and 63 percent of white women were married in 1970, vs. 59 percent of men and 57 percent of women in 2005.

As the local teens' comments indicate, views about marriage are formed by what people see in their lives -- and in pop culture. Shows such as "Divorce Court" and the media's focus on the latest celebrity break-up do not paint glowing pictures of relationships. These factors may help explain why the US divorce rate approaches 40 percent.

"Today . . . not just in the African-American community but in the larger community, divorce is rampant, there's a proliferation of single-mother households, and there's a generation of kids coming up who are very skeptical of marriage," says Dr. William July, a psychologist who has written several books about relationships, including "Understanding the Tin Man: Why So Many Men Avoid Intimacy."

But while whites tend to remarry, blacks are less likely to do so. A 2002 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the probability of remarriage was

highest among divorced white women and lowest among divorced black women.

Orlando Patterson, a professor of sociology at Harvard University, believes that African-Americans' views of marriage reflect the lingering effects of slavery. The system emasculated black men, who had no real power over themselves, the women they loved, or their children, who could be sold, raped, or violently beaten. It upended the traditional male and female roles in a family unit. The idea that this history could result in a stable, two-parent lifestyle for African-Americans today "is utterly absurd," says Patterson, who explored the subject in his 1998 book, "Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries."

Patterson says this history lingers in the way black men and women interact. Once slavery ended, a tussle for power developed between the sexes, creating a tension that exists to this day, he says. And as some women became economically independent in the 1960s, they happily chucked those harried marital relationships.

In the decades that followed, single people retained interest in marriage until they reached middle age, according to Patterson. Now, he says that fear of -- or lack of interest in -- commitment is trickling down to a younger generation.

"Women in the black community would take a shine to marriage, and if they didn't find someone appropriate by the time they were in their early 30s, they're down on marriage," Patterson says. "What's happening is the skepticism is starting earlier."

### **Grappling with roles**

That skepticism can be heard in the voices of the YPACT teens. As they talk, they reveal some of the stereotypical ideas about male and female roles they hear from the adults who surround them: Women take care of the home, cook and clean; men go out with friends and provide monetary support.

Marshall blames a male desire to dominate women after marriage on the vows exchanged during the wedding ceremony. "It's the language," she says. "It's like, 'OK, I'm yours, and you're mine. So you have to do this. You have to do that.' It's like ownership. They feel like they own you."

William Glass, 16, who lives in Mattapan, thinks a re-evaluation of power takes place after the wedding ceremony. "When you get married there's a part where it says, 'honor and obey' -- that's the part where everybody gets big-headed at. 'Honor and obey, huh? Obey me! Fix my plate.'"

The problems often develop as men and women grapple over their roles in the marriage -- an issue that is exacerbated in the African-American community because of slavery's legacy, says Patterson.

"There's some profound differences in what the appropriate sex roles should be . . . African-American women have a modern independent view about women's roles. African-American men -- it's a mix. In some respects, they have a modern view of what women should be: that women should work. But there's still some male-dominance views that they have that irk black women tremendously and create real friction in the relationships."

These teens seem to have responded to those tensions by developing an early fear of commitment.

Burns says, "I get tired of people very quickly, so I don't think I'll end up getting married."

Kemar Henry sounds as if he has already written marriage off, and he's only 14. He fears that getting married would cause him to lose his independence.

``When you have made a commitment," says Henry, who lives in Mattapan, ``and then there's money [involved] and you want to [leave], they have something to hold you." And what kind of hold do they have?

``The ring," says Kemar, holding up his ring finger, then beginning to whine as if in an argument: ``` You made this promise.' A lot of drama. But when you're not married, you can say, `I'm sick of this' and walk out."

Henry and Burns admit they've come to some of their conclusions about marriage from watching television. Both spent the previous Saturday afternoon watching ``Divorce Court." ``They're fighting for the littlest reasons," Burns says of the people on the show.

### **Media's messages**

The way TV shows, hip-hop songs, and movies depict relationships influences how young viewers develop their first opinions about marriage .

``The way we figure out what we're going to do is by observational learning," July says. `` ` If I pick up a hot pot, I'm going to burn.' They look at marriage as a hot pot, too."

The unending media coverage of the divorces of Nick Lachey and Jessica Simpson , Halle Berry and Eric Benet , or Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston doesn't help .

``You see the celebrities," says Burns. `` Three years and then they've broke up. You might as well not go that route."

July, who is 40 and has been married for eight years, remembers what happened when he announced his engagement to his friends. One was indifferent; another said, ``What the hell are you doing that for? You're making a mistake."

July, who is African-American, thinks that if he didn't have the example of his parents, who have been married for 50 years, he might have been influenced by those comments. Many African- Americans lack the successful model his parents provided, he says.

Not all messages teens receive about relationships are bleak. Glass has an uncle who's lived with his partner for 25 years; the only married people Glass says he knows are a gay couple who live across the street . But Glass has gotten good advice from his aunt on how to make a relationship work.

``She said you and your partner . . . pretty much have to have life straightened out first," he says . ``Don't plan it out after you get married. Plan out your life first and then you can go and get married."

While Patterson suspects a social or moral shift will have to occur to change current marriage trends, July wonders whether the declining marriage rates will lead to a new form of relationships. July doesn't know what those relationships will look like, but he wants to do research on how economically independent middle class women choose mates.

The answers may help show the form of future relationships.