

TEENS

Hi, I'm Susan Muhammad. I'm 15 and so is my best friend, David Fitzpatrick. We live about five blocks from each other. We've been friends since we were 3, when our mothers took us to the same nursery school.

We've also known that we were different from each other. I'm African-American and Baptist. David is white, and Catholic. Our differences didn't seem to matter to anyone, until David and I became teenagers. Or maybe I should say they didn't matter until David and I became teenagers and considered dating.

All of a sudden, *everything* mattered. Color. Religion. *My* friends told me I was turning my back on my heritage. David's so-called friends called him some terrible names I won't even repeat. And our parents... well, who can explain them? They were so proud of us for not being prejudiced, but they sure didn't want us to get too close. My mother kept saying, "Why can't you just be friends?"

Our parents are not monsters. I'm sure they were worried by the pressures interracial couples get, the meanness some people show. The church is very important to his mom, and they are really into their Irish heritage. My dad and mom talk a lot about black pride and solidarity and sticking together.

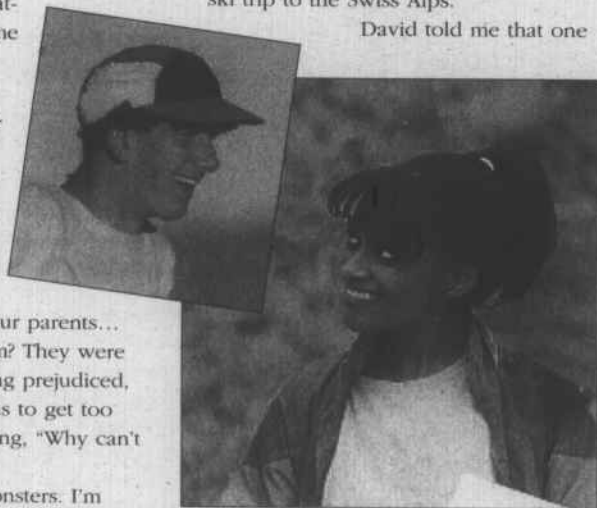
And I'm sure all of them were thinking about their friends watching us march down the aisle, even though we had no thoughts about getting married—to anyone!

David and I had some pretty serious talks about it. And once we opened up this can of worms, suddenly every difference seemed to matter. Everything seemed to either make you better than someone, or envious of what someone else had. Like, did you go to public or

private school? Did you go to expensive summer camps when school was out or did you have to work at the car wash? We were so *aware* of everything that was different about everybody.

Surprisingly, the difference that bugged us both turned out to be money—how much your family had or didn't have. Was I going to get a car when I turned 16? Toshina Pemberton said she was. Where did we go on vacations? Ben Myers said he was going on a ski trip to the Swiss Alps.

David told me that one



Meet Susan. She and David are friends.

of the worst moments of his life was when he realized his parents didn't have enough money to send him to an Ivy League school, that he would have to go to a state school if he wanted to go to college. And David's so smart—much smarter than some kids we know who go to expensive private schools.

David and I decided not to date. It just got too intense. We didn't want to risk losing the friendship we had, or feel like we were putting our parents against each other.

Maybe we wimped. David and I still celebrate our diversity, but we aren't so naive about our differences. Or what other people think of them.

ASK SUSAN

Why does everything seem to come down to money in this country? In our school, people make a lot out of what kind of jacket, or sneakers, or jewelry you wear. I'm not poor, but this makes me uncomfortable.

You're not alone. Money bugs a lot of people. That's because there's a big gap between the richest and poorest people in this country.

TV, movies and magazines make it hard to get a clear picture of how money—or lack of money—affects people. On TV most people are well-off, dressed in the latest fashions, glamorous. They drive great cars, they go to fancy restaurants. Real life is not like that picture.

Your family's wealth can be just as much of a diversity issue as your race. Fancy clothes are like skin color. They're both just on the surface. The important thing is to find out what's inside before you decide if you like someone.

DIVERSITY TDBITS

Each year, to celebrate the cultural diversity of their school community, students at Bret Harte Middle School in San Jose, California, create a calendar depicting world holidays. Students in grades 6 through 8 submit drawings of a holiday they celebrate or a tradition they observe during a particular month. After the winners are selected, students, teachers and parents work together to produce the multicultural calendar.

Holidays depicted in their calendar included "Oktoberfest" (German); "Children's Day" (Japanese); "Family Day" (South African); "Rosh Hashanah" (Jewish); "Janmashtmi" (Hindu); and "Cheyenne Frontier Days" (American Indian).

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