

Cheerios TV commercial sparks heated conversation

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
Friday, 07 June 2013 09:47



Editors note: Due to the complexity of the topic of blended families and interracial dating, Insight News has chosen to run a series of articles on the subject.

Who knew a 30-second television ad about cereal could cause such a commotion?

But that is just what the Cheerios spot, “Just Checking” has done, as it portrays a family of a biracial girl, a Caucasian mother and an African-American father. The ad, which has drawn more than two million hits on YouTube, (which has since disabled commenting due to a throng of racist comments from anonymous posters), has sparked a national debate on interracial dating. For many of biracial descent, the commercial is long overdue in showing their reality. For General Mills, the parent company of Cheerios, which is headquartered in Golden Valley, the commercial was just another way to sale more cereal.

“There are many kinds of families, and Cheerios celebrates them all,” said Camille Gibson, vice president of marketing for Cheerios. “Our actors reflect many families across America, so we are actually a little surprised to see this ad become a story of its own. Multicultural families are everywhere these days, including on television. Consumers are actually responding very positively to the ad.”

Several biracial individuals in the Twin Cities are among those responding positively to the spot, which is a brainchild of the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi – a New York-based firm. And, true, multicultural families are far more prevalent than they were in years past, but 46 years after *Loving v. Virginia*, the U.S. Supreme Court case that outlawed states from barring interracial couples the right to marry, there are very few television acknowledgements of blended families.

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“What’s the problem? What could people be so upset about,” questioned Stephanie Webster. “It (those outraged by the commercial) shows racism is still real and alive.”

Webster, 42, is the product of a family very much like the one depicted in the Cheerios ad. Her mother is white and her father is African-American.

“How limited is your experience if that commercial can create this type of reaction,” asked Webster, who was born in St. Joseph, Mo. and moved to Minneapolis when she was 17-years-old. “This is normal to me.”

Webster said as a child her mother, who was active in her area NAACP, would color Webster’s male dolls brown to reflect her real-life family.

“The first thing I noticed (about the commercial) was the little girl; then it showed her mom and it immediately made me happy,” said Jen White, 32. “That’s been my whole life growing up because (my look) didn’t match my mother. I noticed growing up there was never a family on TV that looked like mine.”

White, who is also biracial, said the commercial gives her reason to applaud General Mills for choosing to air the commercial, which first hit national networks on May 27. And though the ad was produced by a New York-based agency, White feels the fact that General Mills is located in the Twin Cities, an area known to have one of the highest concentration of interracial relationships in the nation, played a role in the spot’s conception.

“I think there’s definitely a connection,” said White. “There are probably some in the company that are in interracial relationships or who know people in interracial relationships.”

Lakisha Mitchell said the commercial provoked an emotional response from her.

“It (the little girl) looked like it could have been me,” said Mitchell, who is biracial and grew up in St. Louis.

Mitchell said though she’s 37, she still deals with certain pains of growing up as a biracial child, but thinks younger biracial children can feel supported by seeing positive images of blended families on television.

“The mixed girls behind me can see this family image and know that it’s OK to have a white mom and be out in public with her and love her; and at the same time be out with your Black dad and love him,” said Mitchell, who said her father was shot and beaten by whites for having a relationship with her white mother.

Adrian Perryman, 28, of St. Paul said he became aware of the Cheerios ad campaign only after the spot had become the talk of the Internet. He said though he supports Cheerios for running the ad, he is not surprised at the racist comments it received on YouTube.

“On the Internet people can speak their minds without people knowing who they are, so it isn’t

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shocking,” said Perryman, who is biracial.

Perryman said 30-second spot showed blended families in a positive light.

“I felt relieved and comforted because the (blended) family was being represented in such a good way. I felt supported.”