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Book offers guide to mixing families

Author shares experience, lessons growing up Black with white parents



Michael Gaither

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The first time Michael Gaither remembers noticing he was different from his peers was at the beginning of nap time.

Resting on a cot at Mary Moppet's Day Care between two other toddlers, he closed his eyes and attempted to fall asleep. Then he felt hands tugging at his hair.

The white children on either side of Gaither likely hadn't seen hair like his before. Maybe they'd never seen a Black person at all.

Gaither wasn't yet old enough to put words to his feelings, but he still vividly remembers being strongly uncomfortable in that moment.

"I remember thinking, I'm never closing my eyes again," he said.

That discomfort never went away as Gaither grew up in Lincoln. Adopted into a white family at 18 months old, Gaither said his childhood was full of love.

But something was very obviously missing: people who looked like him and people who knew what it was like to be Black in a predominantly white community like Lincoln.

"We didn't talk about it much at home," he said. "You knew you were different, but it's like, what do you do with this information? Because you're a kid, you don't have a choice but to go to the school or go to the church."

With no way to escape or process the constant anxiety, Gaither said food became his source of comfort. He would often sneak down the ladder of his bunk bed and into his kitchen to grab food in the middle of the night.

"I'd sit up and eat half of the night just because I knew that now I'm going to have to go back to school tomorrow and then be in that sea of white again where kids aren't always kind," he said.

Gaither hopes his experiences can help educate other parents through his new book, "I Was Your Black Child: What White Parents Raising Black Children Need to Hear Before It's Too Late."

The book published on Oct. 7, a month ahead of National Adoption Month.

It's notably not a memoir, Gaither said. He wrote it with intentions that parents of transracial adoptees will feel more comfortable discussing race with their children.

"Every chapter turns back to the parents," Gaither said. "So I'm also excited about the response in terms of … the format because they have something to take with them."

Gaither retired from a career in education and now lives in Florida running Beyond the Moment Adoption Studio. He offers resources and coaching for parents who plan to adopt or have adopted children of different races. The work has helped him heal and process emotions he suppressed during his own childhood, he said.

Even though his parents showed him unconditional love, Gaither said he didn't know how to broach the topic of race at home.

"It might be your safe place, but I'm still talking to my white parents," he said. "Adoptees often know that if they bring something home, we can feel when certain conversations may be a little uncomfortable or change the air in the room."

His mom used to ask him to tell her three things he learned at school while they sat around the kitchen table each day. It was never the right question.

He didn't fit in with his few Black peers who knew that he lived with a white family, and his white peers often saw the color of his skin and treated him differently because of it.

"I get what my mom was doing, but in my mind I was always thinking, I didn't learn anything," Gaither said. "All I am trying to do is fit in, right?

"That became some of the hardest part."

If his mom had asked him to share what he dealt with at school each day, Gaither said he may have been comfortable being more vulnerable around his family.

"My parents just didn't know what they didn't know," he said.

One of the first people to understand some of his experience was Timothy Carroll, who taught physical education while Gaither attended Lefler Middle School, then Lefler Junior High School.

That was the first time Gaither saw a man who looked like him in a teaching role.

Carroll was the type of man who never seemed to be having a bad day, Gaither said. Even when he had classes on the other side of the building, Gaither would find a way to walk past the gym to see his role model.

"He knew my family situation. He knew I was adopted. He knew I lived with a white family," Gaither said. "But I think he probably just saw the look in my eyes how much I admired him for who he was."

Though Carroll died in 2010, Gaither said that relationship still informs his life and the advice he gives adoptive parents through his coaching business.

"Surround your kids with people that look like them, people that they can look up to and say, 'Hey, you know what? Maybe I could be that,'" Gaither said.

After a long journey of ancestry searches and phone calls, Gaither was able to reconnect with much of his biological family, most of whom live near his birthplace of Syracuse, New York. Looking into his birth mom's eyes for the first time when he was 49 years old was "like looking in a mirror."

He doesn't blame his mom for putting him up for adoption, and he doesn't blame his adoptive family for failing to understand his experience.

But there's a lot of good that can come from understanding someone, Gaither said, and he hopes his story and work can lead to those breakthrough moments for other families.

"Your child is always dealing with more than you know," he said.

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