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hen Don R. Harrison Jr. was growing up in Philadelphia, other kids would tease him and call him “white boy,” because his skin was lighter than theirs. But Harrison, a “proud black man,” was still unprepared for the results of a DNA test, taken as part of a class at Pennsylvania State University, to determine his genetic ancestry.

Harrison, a 20-year-old sociology major, was shocked by results showing his ancestry to be 52 percent African and 48 percent European. “I had no clue about [it], considering both my parents are black,” says Harrison. “So I’m half white.”

DON HARRISON was shocked to learn that he is 48 percent European.

Scientists say such unexpected results can be explained by family history. Harrison, for instance, recalls

a great-grandfather who “would cross for white, he was so fair. . . . He looked white in a black-and-white photo.”

Samuel M. Richards, who teaches Sociology 119, Race and Ethnic Relations, to 500 students each semester, says the DNA tests, which were conducted last year for the first time, were very popular with the class.

Mark D. Shriver, associate professor of anthropology and genetics at Penn State, developed the test with DNAPrint Genomics Inc. To gather DNA samples, Shriver took cheek swabs from about 100 student volunteers in Richards’s class. The test compares an individual’s DNA with that of four parent populations: Western European, West African, East Asian, and Native American.

COMPLEX IDENTITIES

“Everyone wants to take the test, even students who think they are 100 percent one race or another, and almost every one of them wants to discover something, that they’re 1 percent Asian or something,” says Richards. “People want to identify with this pop multiracial culture. . . . They want to be part of it. It’s cool.”

Richards says the tests also help to deepen conversations about race. “When I teach, I try to demonstrate to students how complex race and ethnicity are,” he says. “My secondary goal is to improve race relations, and when people discover that what they thought about themselves

Are You Who You Think You Are?

When a group of Penn State sociology students took DNA tests, they were quite surprised at some of the results

By Emma Daly
in State College, Pa.

KHALIL A. BHATTI/THE NEW YORK TIMES (2)

is not true—"I thought I was black, but I'm also Asian and white"—it leads them to have a different kind of conversation about race. It leads them to be less bigoted, to ask the deeper questions, to be more open to differences."

Natasha Best, a 21-year-old public-relations major, has always thought of herself as half black and half white, because her mother is Irish-Lithuanian and her father West Indian. But the test showed that she is 58 percent European and 42 percent African.

FAMILY LINEAGE

"I was surprised at how much European I was, because though my father's family knows there is a great-great-grandfather who was Scottish, no one remembered him," says Best, who grew up in Yonkers, N.Y. "I knew it was true, because I have dark relatives with blue eyes, but to bring it up a whole 8 percent, that was shocking to me."

But Shriver explains that although a great-great-grandparent would contribute on average 6.25 percent of a person's genes, any one ancestor might be represented at a higher or lower level in today's generation.

Best and Harrison are part of the fastest-growing ethnic grouping in the United States, one that was acknowledged in the 2000 census for the first time: mixed race. Yet the two students identify themselves in very different ways.

GENETICS VS. CULTURE

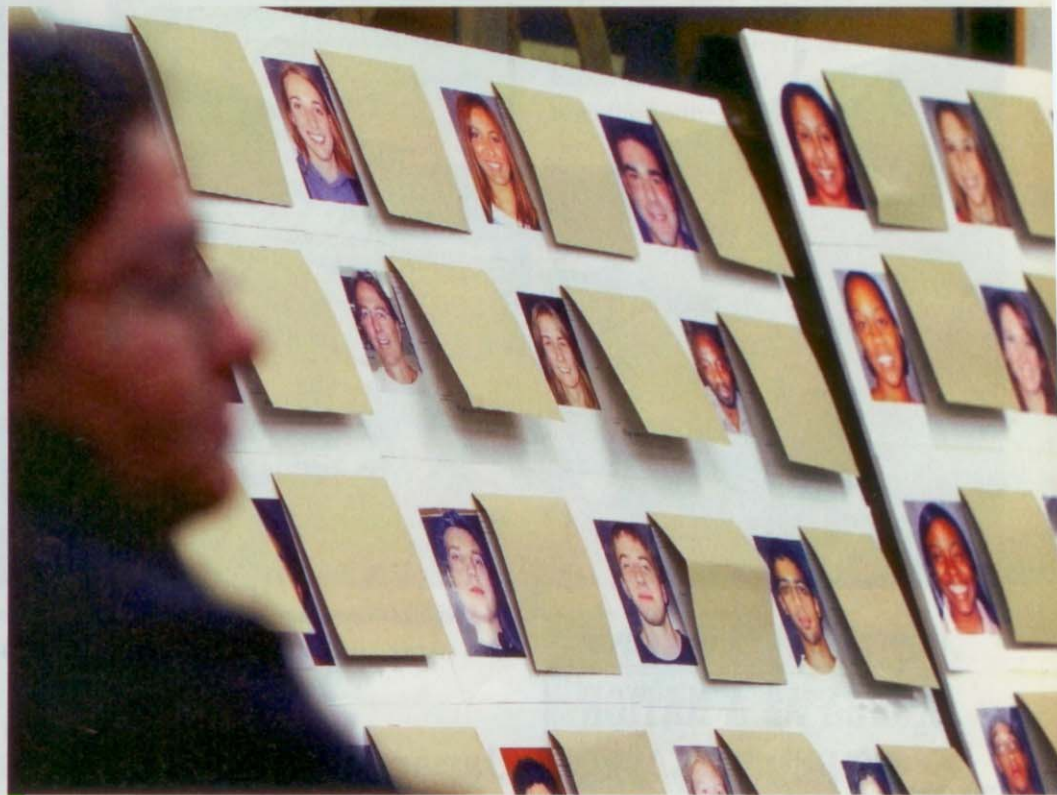
"I am 48 percent white—genetically I am, at least, but not culturally," says Harrison. "And the fact that I'm black is more important, because it's something I know. It's who I'm comfortable with."

Best says, "Some people think it's funny that I consider

myself Irish and celebrate St. Patrick's Day—because no matter how you cut it, when you look at me you don't think, there goes a white girl."

Harrison, who says that as a child he molded himself to be more black, does not want this new information to change his identity.

"Just because I found out I'm white, I'm not going to act



PHOTOS of Penn State students, along with the sometimes surprising results of their DNA tests

white," he says. "I'm very proud of my black side."

But whatever Best's or Harrison's genes say, they will most likely be seen as black—at least by white Americans—for the rest of their lives.

"I think the test is really interesting; I had to know," says Best. "But it makes me question: Why are we doing this? Why do people, especially in this country, want to know? Why are we, as a people, so caught up in race? Maybe we haven't progressed as much as we thought we had." ❊

Emma Daly writes about education for The New York Times.

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