

# LEARNING

# AND

# LIVING

THREE BIRACIAL FAMILIES BLEND BACKGROUNDS  
TO SET THEIR OWN COURSES IN THE MADISON AREA

By Lynn Armitage

PHOTOS BY PATRICK STUTZ

**A MODERN FAMILY:**  
Rainey and Julie  
Briggs and their  
daughters Rylee,  
Rayna and Reagan.



# E

## very kid, every day, whatever it takes.

That's Rainey Briggs's motto. Thirty-seven-year-old Briggs is the principal at Horizon Elementary School in Sun Prairie—an “educator,” as he puts it—and the only African American male elementary school principal in the Sun Prairie Area School District. It's a distinction he carries proudly. “I want to be a role model for other African American males, white males, females. Anything I do in life, I want it to have a widespread impact.”

His motto could also be applied to his home life as father of three biracial daughters and husband of Julie Briggs, also an educator.

Rainey Briggs credits his family for his career success. “Those three girls, my experiences in life and my wife have really formed and molded who I have become as a person and how I would like to lead a school,” he says.

His wife is the district literacy coordinator for the Monona Grove School District. “She is, hands down, the most amazing educator I have ever met in my life,” boasts Rainey. And she is white. They met at a friend's birthday party when they were just sixteen. “He kept staring at me

and I finally said, ‘What?’ and then he came over and announced to everyone, ‘This is the girl I am going to marry,’” recalls Julie, who understandably avoided Rainey the rest of that night.

They were an unlikely pair. Two kids from different parts of town: Julie grew up in Verona in a white, Catholic family; Rainey, a Black teen, hailed from Somerset Circle and Simpson Street, a section of Madison that he describes as pretty rough, and he was raised Pentecostal. But they fell in love at a time when racial tensions were high and interracial dating was uncommon.

Times have changed, and the Briggses believe Madison is now far more accepting of interracial couples—a demographic trend that reflects what is happening in the nation overall. According to a recent report from the Pew Research Center, 6.3 percent of all marriages in 2013 were between spouses of different races, up from less than one percent in 1970.

“Madison is a very friendly place. It's what brought us back here,” Julie says, reflecting on the time when they moved to Milwaukee to start their careers after attending college together in Minnesota and



getting married after graduation. At the time, she says, Milwaukee was the second-most segregated city in the country.

“When we were out together, a lot of Black people would look at Rainey and roll their eyes or shake their heads” as if in disapproval, says Julie. Eventually, when their first daughter, Rayna, was born, they knew it was time to move back home. “I remember googling ‘best places to raise interracial children,’ and Madison was on the list,” she says.

Even so, racial judgments still exist in this capital city, where 7.3 percent of the population is African American, according to the most recent census data. “We've gotten many stares when



we are out in public,” but Rainey says blonde-haired, hazel-eyed Julie gets the lion’s share of questioning looks when she’s alone with their daughters, who are darker-skinned like Rainey. “People think she’s either a nanny or that the kids are adopted,” he says.

As a biracial couple, parents of interracial children and educators, the Briggses have a nuanced perspective on education. They agree that there could be much more diversity among the teaching population in Madison. “We don’t have enough Black educators,” says Julie, who believes it is not a race issue, but rather the simple fact that too few people of color are pursuing careers in education. “We’re

not blind to see that we have a very white workforce. But we are taking measures to bring diversity to our schools, learning about culturally responsive practices and social justice. The schools in our area have made it a big priority to close the achievement gap. It’s on everybody’s radar.”

Rainey is quite concerned about the outlook for minority students in the Madison area. “About fifty percent of African American kids aren’t graduating from high school on time in the Madison school district,” he says, referring to the 2013 Race to Equity report by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families that highlights racial disparities between the white and Black populations in Dane

County. The study also revealed that Black third-graders in Dane County were less likely to be reading at proficiency levels than other Black third-graders throughout all of Wisconsin.

“As a principal, I look at what we can do to ensure that our kids are reading at that third-grade level,” says Rainey. “We really look at every kid and find out how we can make him or her the best that they can be.”

Rainey acknowledges that the teachers are predominantly white at Horizon Elementary. “I don’t think the teacher population reflects the population of students no matter where you go. That’s just a challenge here in Madison,” he says.

The Briggses have done their part in trying to recruit teachers of color to Madison, attending job fairs outside the state to sing the city’s praises. However, nary a nibble. “Honestly, I think it’s because no one wants to live in the cold,” Rainey says.

But recruiting more teachers of color is not necessarily the answer, according to Rainey. “I don’t believe it drives the outcome of success,” he explains. “I think kids are, and can be, successful no matter what teachers you put in front of them.”

He is an example of that. Rainey was one of very few Black kids in the mid-1990s who attended Edgewood High School, a private, Catholic college preparatory school in Madison. He recalls that most of his teachers were white. “The experience was amazing. The things I learned and what it taught me prepared me well for the work that I do every day.” The future educator later earned a 4.0 grade point average in graduate school, made the dean’s list and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in educational leadership. He aspires to be a school superintendent and motivational speaker one day.

He and Julie are raising their three daughters—Reagan, Rylee and Rayna—to aim high, too, despite any racial obstacles they may face in life. As Rainey puts it, “We tell them not to let people group them in a certain way. They are both Black and white, not one more than the other. They need to establish who they want to be, and then make that very clear to everyone.”

**LYNN ARMITAGE is a freelance writer based in Madison and an enrolled member of the Oneida Tribe of Indians of Wisconsin.**

## WORDS AND PICTURES

**EMIDA AND STEVE ROLLER** of Verona complement each other nicely. Steve, a marketing copywriter, crafts words, and Emida, a professional muralist, paints pictures. The two met after college at a summer job in Nashville. Four years later they reconnected, and now they've been married for seventeen years.

While the couple has obviously found common ground, the two had vastly different upbringings. Emida was born in New York City to Nigerian parents and was later raised in Nigeria, where her father was a celebrated artist. Steve is a homegrown Wisconsin boy, born



THE GROV FAMILY

## A TOAST TO FAMILY

**TWO LAWYERS WALK IN TO A BARBECUE.** The punch line? They fell in love and got married. Ten years later, this romance that began near Lake Michigan between Gail and Jeff Grov has a blended family history that stretches across the Pond and the Caribbean.

Gail, a personal injury attorney with Rizzo & Diersen, S.C., in Madison, was born in Wimbledon, England, to parents from Trinidad and Tobago, and she grew up in the Caribbean. "I am first-generation British and third-generation West Indian," she says. Jeff, an environmental lawyer with CBS, has German roots. He was born in St. Louis and moved to Wisconsin when he was seven years old. They have five children between them.

"We teach our kids all the time about the cultures we came from," says Jeff. "We want them to understand the differences and appreciate both of them."

The family moved to Verona from Kenosha two and a half years ago. "Madison is a wonderful place to live, with a great university. The schools are much more multicultural here," says Gail, although she has observed a lack of diversity among the teaching staff. "Other professional groups are crying out for diversity, too—they would love to have these people, they just can't find them. It's the only thing that is missing."

Gail has tried to help change the tide. When she moved to Wisconsin in 2005, she was not allowed to practice law because she had attended law school in England, rather than at an American Bar Association-approved institution. So Gail petitioned to the Wisconsin Supreme Court for permission to take the state bar exam. She was granted special dispensation and is now a licensed Wisconsin attorney and a member of the state and county bar associations.

"That was really encouraging for diversity in the Madison area, and I think it helped open doors for other professionals from other countries," she says.

When they aren't practicing law, the Groys grow grapes and hope to open a winery soon. They own Verona Hills Vineyard and live on thirty-six acres of land outside of Verona with three of their children. "It's like the mini Tuscany of Madison," jokes Gail, who believes that grape growing makes for good bonding time. "When we're out in the vineyard, all the family is here. We even rope our kids in to help us pull weeds."

— Lynn Armitage



THE ROLLER FAMILY

**“I think part of it has to do with Madison being a very diverse place. People are accepting of all kinds of relationships, beliefs and races.”**

in Waukesha. The three children they have together are a blend of both parents. Their oldest son, Alex, is from Steve's previous marriage.

The Roller children are being educated in the Verona Area School District. “We purposely moved here from Madison when our kids were young because we thought a smaller school district would be better,” says Steve. “People asked us, ‘Aren't you concerned that it's not going to be diverse enough?’ First of all, it's a non-issue for me. As it turns out, Verona is quite diverse. But it's probably different now than it was twenty-five or thirty years ago.”

The Rollers said that Madison has been very welcoming to them as a biracial family. “I think part of it has to do with Madison being a very diverse place. People are accepting of all kinds of relationships, beliefs and races,” says Steve.

Emida, a commissioned commercial and residential artist who has painted murals for the Parade of Homes, says she has never experienced any discrimination in Madison.

The family loves to travel together. They have been to Ecuador, South America and Emida's parents' homeland in Nigeria. Steve appreciates the irony. “I've been in the same situation as Emida because we went to Nigeria about six years ago and I was probably the only white person there,” he says.

Their advice for other biracial couples in Madison? “Try to connect with other people from other races through health clubs, church or wherever. Get together with couples who are living with different cultures within the same home,” advises Emida.

– Lynn Armitage

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