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Black doll collection goes on display in South Florida

In 2005, Kiri Davis, then a student in New York City, filmed a documentary replicating the original 1940s black doll tests performed by Drs. Kenneth Bancroft Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark.

During the 20-minute film, *A Girl Like Me*, Davis presented 21 African-American preschoolers with both a white and black doll, asking them to choose which doll was good and nice, and which was bad and ugly.

Fifteen of the 21 children selected the white doll as the nice and good one.

In an effort to encourage self-esteem among young African-American girls and remind them of their natural beauty, The Black Doll Affair, along with selected South Florida doll collectors, will showcase their private collection of black dolls at the African-American Research Library and Cultural Center near Fort Lauderdale.

"The dolls will include both vintage and newer dolls from all over the world," said Karen Grey, director of the Black Doll Affair's South Florida chapter.

The unveiling of the collection will take place in conjunction with the affair's invitation-only party at the library on Sunday, Dec. 7. The dolls will be on display there through Dec. 31.

The idea for the Black Doll Affair was born in 2007 after its founder, Dana Hill—who has done work as a model, journalist and event producer—watched Davis discuss her documentary on Oprah.

"I received emails and calls from friends saying, 'I can't believe this is still happening 50 years later,'" Hill said. "I knew then that something needed to be done about it."

The Black Doll Affair, whose mission is to remind black girls of their beauty and increase their self-esteem, will celebrate its one-year anniversary on Dec. 17.

The South Florida chapter is also hosting its first event, an invitation-only affair, on Dec. 6 at the Overtown Youth Center in Miami. The girls invited to both events will receive special attention from the members, who are called Black Dolls.

"When the Black Dolls host a meet-up, everyone attending must bring a doll," Hill explained.

Grey said the dolls are then collected for distribution to young girls attending The Black Doll Affair at Christmas.

"We cater mostly to preschoolers, as they are the ones that play with them [dolls]," Grey said. "Only about 10 percent of the girls are up to ages 10 and 11. It's hard for a preschooler to understand what it means when you try and explain internalized racism, that beauty comes in all packages, so we use models to distribute them because dolls are modeled after models."

Grey continued, "What a girl that age sees is a doll, and when they see women who are dolled up, that gets their attention."

Hill added that "you can't talk to them in grown-up language when they are that little. All you can see is the little black girls that get the little black doll, and her face drops. It's sad, but they often cry when they get the black ones."

The Clarks were an African-American husband-and-wife team of psychologists best known for their 1940s experiments using dolls to study children's attitudes about race. The tests, which grew out of Mamie Clark's master's degree thesis, served as a tool in the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that outlawed segregation within the school systems.

The 1940s doll tests revealed that black children often preferred to play with white dolls over black, and that they viewed the white dolls as good and pretty, but black dolls as bad and ugly.

The results were viewed as evidence of internalized racism caused by stigmatization.

"Our goal as Black Dolls is to have the girls receive the dolls, talk to them about self-esteem and beauty and let them see that there are role models like them," Grey said, adding that "there simply aren't enough black dolls on the market, and that's probably our fault because we don't demand them."

Hill agreed.

"Silent messages are very strong," she said. "If you continually show up every Christmas and birthday with a white doll, knowing that dolls are role models, then you are constantly sending the message that a black doll is not good enough. After all, a mother is always going to buy her baby what she feels is best."

SOURCE: Cynthia Roby, *South Florida Times*, November 26, 2008.



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