

Loving Decision: 40 Years of Legal Interracial Unions

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This week marks the 40th anniversary of a seminal moment in the civil rights movement: the legalization of interracial marriage. But the couple at the heart of the landmark Supreme Court case of *Loving v. Virginia* never intended to be in the spotlight.

On June 12, 1967, the nation's highest court voted unanimously to overturn the conviction of Richard and Mildred Loving, a young interracial couple from rural Caroline County, Va.

That decision struck down the anti-miscegenation laws — written to prevent the mixing of the races — that were on the books at the time in more than a dozen states, including Virginia.

'They Just Were in Love'

Richard Loving was white; his wife, Mildred, was black. In 1958, they went to Washington, D.C. — where interracial marriage was legal — to get married. But when they returned home, they were arrested, jailed and banished from the state for 25 years for violating the state's Racial Integrity Act.

To avoid jail, the Lovings agreed to leave Virginia and relocate to Washington.

For five years, the Lovings lived in Washington, where Richard worked as a bricklayer. The couple had three children. Yet they longed to return home to their family and friends in Caroline County.

That's when the couple contacted Bernard Cohen, a young attorney who was volunteering at the ACLU. They requested that Cohen ask the Caroline County judge to reconsider his decision.

"They were very simple people, who were not interested in winning any civil rights principle," Cohen, now retired, tells Michele Norris.

"They just were in love with one another and wanted the right to live together as husband and wife in Virginia, without any interference from officialdom. When I told Richard that this case was, in all likelihood, going to go to the Supreme Court of the United States, he became wide-eyed and his jaw dropped," Cohen recalls.

Road to the High Court

Cohen and another lawyer challenged the Lovings' conviction, but the original judge in the case upheld his decision. Judge Leon Bazile wrote: "Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, Malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. ... The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix."

As Cohen predicted, the case moved all the way up to the Supreme Court, where the young ACLU attorney made a vivid and personal argument:

"The Lovings have the right to go to sleep at night knowing that if should they not wake in the morning, their children would have the right to inherit from them. They have the right to be secure in knowing that, if they go to sleep and do not wake in the morning, that one of them, a survivor of them, has the right to Social Security benefits. All of these are denied to them, and they will not be denied to them if the whole anti-miscegenistic scheme of Virginia... [is] found unconstitutional."

After the ruling — now known as the "Loving Decision" — the family, which had already quietly moved back to Virginia, finally returned home to Caroline County.

But their time together was cut short: Richard Loving died in a car crash in 1975. Mildred Loving, who never remarried, still lives in Caroline County in the house that Richard built. She politely refuses to give interviews.

Interracial Couples Today

Since that ruling 40 years ago, interracial marriage has become more common, but remains relatively rare. Sociologists estimate

that 7 percent of the nation's 59 million marriages are mixed-race couplings.

And even now, interracial marriage remains a source of quiet debate over questions of identity, assimilation and acceptance.

Take Anna Blazer and Bryan Walker, for instance. The white woman and her black husband, with their two young children, live just miles from the Caroline County courthouse. Donald Loving, a grandson of Richard and Mildred Loving, introduced the couple when they were teenagers.

Blazer, now 23, says her family was initially wary of her then-boyfriend because of his race.

"My mom was a little weird with it, because he used to wear this really long — they call it bling-bling — he used to wear a bling-bling cross around his neck and baggy pants. And I don't know, she just kind of looked at him kind of funny when she first met him," Blazer remembers.

But over the years her mother has warmed to Walker, 21.

Blazer says that although many things have changed since the days of anti-miscegenation laws, life is still difficult for them in Caroline County. The couple endures sneers, sideways glances and more from strangers.

"Just a couple of months ago... Bryan got beat up in the Wal-Mart parking lot because he was with me and my sister, and these white men came up to him and they were yelling. The guy ripped off his shirt. He had racial slurs all over him...and they just started going at it," Blazer says.

"I think my life would be a whole lot easier if I was with a white man. And Bryan feels the same way, but he loves me. He really does. And we are meant to be together," Blazer says.