



**SCHOOL PARTY SHOCKER!**

# DIVIDED PROMS



**America elected a black President, but in the rural South some school proms are separated by race.**





**WHAT'S A PROM?** In American secondary, or high schools, students celebrate graduation with lavish leaving parties. At Georgia's Montgomery County High School, black and white students hold separate proms – an issue that splits the community.

### Before you read:

- Does your school have leaving parties? How do you celebrate leaving school?

**A**bout now, high school seniors' everywhere slip into a glorious sort of limbo. Waiting out the final weeks of the school year, they begin to celebrate the shared thrill of moving on. It's no different in south-central Georgia's Montgomery County, made up of a few small towns set between fields of tall grass and onions. The future looms large.

But for the 54 students in the class of 2009 at Montgomery County High

School, so the past also looms large. On May 1 last year – a balmy Friday evening – white students held their senior prom. And the following night – a balmy Saturday – the black students had theirs.

Racially segregated, or divided proms have been held in Montgomery County – where about two-thirds of the population is white – almost every year since its schools were integrated in 1971. Such proms are, by many accounts, historic traditions in towns across the rural South; though in recent years a number of communities have successfully pushed for change.

## Black or white?

The senior proms held by Montgomery County High School students – called by many students “the black-folks prom” and “the white-folks prom” – are organized outside school through student committees with the help of parents. All students are welcome at the black prom, though few if any white students show up. The white prom, students say, is governed by a largely unspoken set of rules about who may come.

**The proms are organized outside school through student committees with the help of parents.**

Black members of the student council say they have asked school administrators about holding a single school-sponsored prom, but that has failed. According to Timothy Wiggs, the outgoing student council president ▶▶▶

▶▶▶ and one of 21 black students who graduated last year, “We just never got anywhere with it.” Principal Luke Smith says the school has no plans to sponsor a prom, noting that when it did so in 1995, attendance was poor.

Students of both races say that interracial friendships are common at Montgomery County High School. Black and white students also date one another, though often out of sight of judgmental parents. “It’s awkward,” said JonPaul Edge, a white senior. “I have

**“I don’t think anybody at our school is racist.”**

as many black friends as I do white friends. We hang out. We play sports together. We go to class together. I don’t think anybody at our school is racist.” Trying to explain the segregated proms, Edge falls back on the same reasoning offered by a number of white students and their parents: “It’s how it’s always been,” he said. “It’s just a tradition.”

On the Friday night of the white prom, Kera Nobles, a black senior and six of her black classmates, drove over to the local community center. Standing amid a crowd of about 80

## Divided proms: Right or wrong?

**The U.S. has a long history of institutional racism. Here’s what three American students have to say about segregated proms.**

**Kelly:** “We voted for civil rights a long time ago but still have segregated proms? It makes no sense.”

**Andy:** “Kids hang out with their own friends and stay in their comfort zone. What’s the big deal? It’s a big yawn.”

**Della:** “Black and white kids would rather have a prom together. It’s the white parents who stop it. That’s wrong!”

**What do you think? Should divided proms be allowed? Why or why not?**

**Source:** Teens from Oregon comment on blueoregon.com (edited)



**PROM HISTORY:** Georgia’s Turner County High School held its first-ever integrated prom only in 2007.

parents, siblings and grandparents, they snapped pictures and whooped as their white friends – blow-dried and glittering – did their “senior walk,” parading in elegant pairs into the prom. “We got stared at a little, being there,” said one black student, “but it wasn’t too bad.”

After the last couple were announced, and after they watched the white people’s father-daughter dance, they were ushered by chaperones out the door. Kera and her friends piled into a nearby Kentucky Fried Chicken to eat. Whatever elation they felt for their dressed-up classmates quickly wore off.

**GEORGIA GLORY:** From sleepy river towns to its busy capital Atlanta, Georgia is also known for cotton and tobacco fields, Southern fried chicken, soul music and Georgia peaches.





## Left out

“My best friend is white,” said one black senior girl. “She’s in there. She’s real cool, but I don’t understand. If they can be in there, why can’t everybody else?”

The seven teenagers – a mix of girls and boys – slowly worked their way through two buckets of fried chicken. They cracked jokes about the white people’s prom (“I feel bad for them! Their prom is lame!”). They puzzled merrily over white girls’ devotion both to tanning beds (“You don’t like black people, but you’re working your hardest to get as brown as I am!”) and also to the very boys who were excluded from the dance (“Half

of those girls, when they get home, they’re gonna text a black boy”).

They mused about whether white parents really believed that by keeping black people out of the prom, it would keep them out of their children’s lives (“You think there aren’t going to be black boys at college?”). And finally they questioned their white friends’ professed helplessness in the face of their parents’ prejudice (“You’re 18 years old! You’re old enough to smoke, drive, do whatever else you want to. Why aren’t you able to step up and say, ‘I want to have my senior prom with the people I’m graduating with?’”).

It was getting late now. KFC was closing. Another black teen mopped the floor nearby. Kera had an early hair appointment. The next night, they would dress up and dance for four hours at their own prom. In the meantime, a girl named Angel checked her cell phone to see if any of the white kids had texted from inside their prom. They hadn’t. Angel shrugged. “I really don’t understand,” she said. “Because I’m thinking that these people love me and I love them, but I don’t know. Tonight’s a different story.”

Originally published in *The New York Times Magazine*. Copyright © 2009 Sara Corbett.



**WHO CAN DANCE?** All white students are welcome at black proms, but few come. No blacks attend the white proms.

**“It’s how it’s always been. It’s just a tradition.”**

## Choose It: Comprehension Check

In each sentence below, choose the word or words that match the correct meaning in the article.

- In the rural South, some towns have \_\_\_\_\_ .  
banned all proms    integrated their proms    let students give proms
- In Montgomery County, few black students show up at white-only proms because of \_\_\_\_\_ .  
state laws    traditional customs    prejudice.
- Black students would like proms to be organized by \_\_\_\_\_ .  
community officials    school officials    students themselves
- Some white students say that school racism \_\_\_\_\_ .  
doesn’t exist    is a historical practice    is very strong
- Many black students feel excluded by \_\_\_\_\_ .  
school policies    white-only proms    student councils

Answers → Page 23

### \* WORDWISE

**senior (n):** 17/18 year-olds in the last year of secondary school in the U.S.

**limbo (n):** an uncertain state of being

**to loom (v):** to appear in a large, sometimes threatening, way

**balmy (adj):** very warm, tropical

**to integrate (v):** to mix together, often used about race

**principal (n):** head official of U.S. secondary school

**amid (prep):** surrounded by things or people

**to whoop (v):** to make loud excited cries

**blow-dried (adj):** hair dried by an electric hair dryer

**to usher (v):** to lead or escort someone in or out of a place

**elation (n):** joy, delight, euphoria

**lame (adj, inf):** really poor, lousy, unconvincing

**to puzzle (v):** to try to figure out something

**to text (v):** to send an sms message

**to muse (v):** to wonder or guess about something

**to profess (v):** to admit to believe in something, sometimes falsely



Now go to page 22 for a language activity