



Masks sold in Ossining draw racial complaints

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THE JOURNAL NEWS
(Original Publication: November 1, 2005)

OSSINING — Josh Barkan came across something that made his blood run cold when he was shopping for Halloween costumes with his kids over the weekend.

Among the various fright masks, he came across something he called "very disturbing" — a mask depicting a black man with grotesquely bulging lips — and a short distance away on the Ossining store's shelves, another mask featuring an Asian man with absurdly large glasses and buck teeth.

"I was disheartened," said Barkan, a Croton-on-Hudson resident who is black and works as a dean and basketball coach at a Queens middle school. "It's so negative, especially for children."

Barkan was incensed enough by Halloween masks, depicting what he termed crude racial stereotypes, to complain. He asked the store's management to stop selling the masks, and after receiving what he called an unsatisfying response, plans to follow up with a series of letters.

"The main thing is awareness. Too often people look past this kind of thing," he said, "But this is wrong. These images, these ideas have caused people to suffer a lot of pain. Why perpetuate it?"

A manager at the Parties Plus Warehouse on Rockledge Avenue, who did not identify herself, said she had no comment yesterday. There were none of the exaggerated racial or ethnic masks on the shelves yesterday.

The local distributor of the masks in question, Bronx businessman Frank Bee, said he would discontinue them. He said the masks are manufactured in Asia and sold all over the country.

"Everyone sells them. I'll take it off the rack. It doesn't mean anything to me. I'll pull them. I don't want to offend anyone," said Bee. He said the black mask appeared to sell to African-Americans, as a kind of racial inside joke.

There is a long history behind the images on display at the party store this weekend, notes an authority on African-American stereotypes, John Thorp.

"The racist imagery of the past is being brought into the future," said Thorp, director of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia in Big Rapids, Mich. "At Halloween, some people say it's fun and games, it's nothing important. But there's some very long history in our society of the blackface tradition, egregious, dehumanizing images. We have a long way to go to escape the racist past."