



50th anniversary of March on Washington has special resonance for Sharon Robinson

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If the country itself was awakened from its civil rights slumber by Jackie Robinson's breaking baseball's color-line in 1947, then the Robinson family itself had an epiphany 16 years later by the greatest peaceful demonstration in U.S. history.

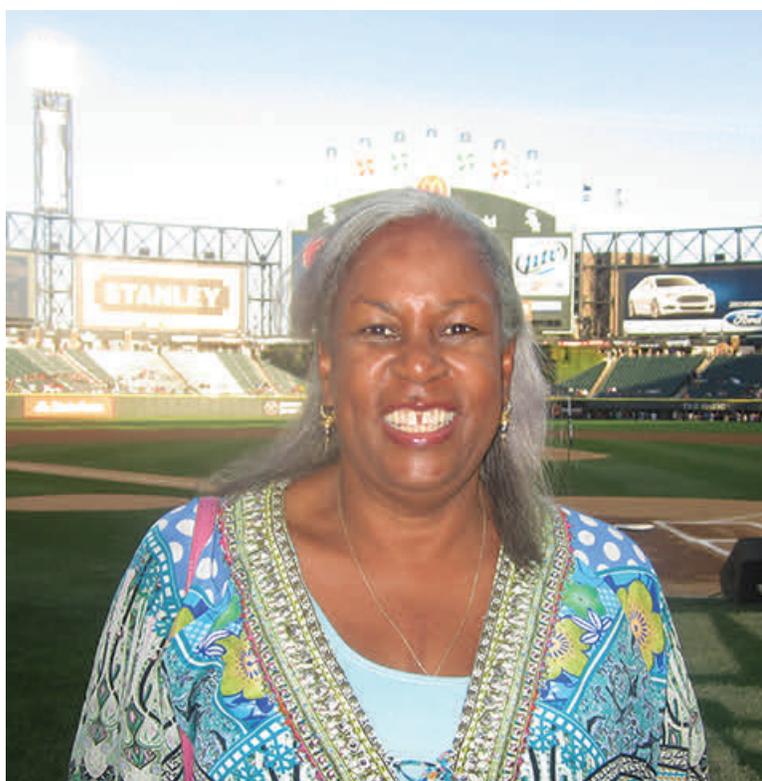
The last week of August thus will never be dog days for Sharon Robinson, only daughter of Jackie Robinson – especially as the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington was commemorated.

“He had been traveling (in the) South. We were watching on TV what was going on down South and looking for our father,” Sharon Robinson said.

The personable Robinson time-tripped amid the star-studded celebration of the annual Civil Rights Game at U.S. Cellular Field Aug. 24 along with its attendant roundtable discussion at Chicago Cultural Center and the Beacon Awards luncheon at the downtown Marriott.

“We were integrating our schools in Stamford, Ct. and our neighborhood,” she recalled. “The night he came home, he said I’ve been going down South, and want you to find work that you love, and keep family important. But we as a family have to have a legacy. Our legacy is social change.

“Our mission as a family was the March on Washington. That was the introduction, my brothers



Sharon Robinson during pre-game ceremonies at the Civil Rights Game Aug. 24 at U.S. Cellular Field.

and I, our introduction to the movement, not just watching it on television unfold. So this 50th anniversary means a great deal to me. It not only changed America, but it also changed my family.”

The year 2013 may have been the most eventual year for the Robinson family since its patriarch’s passing in 1972. Not only has it marked the 50th anniversary of the march that Jackie Robinson and son David attended, but also baseball’s most impactful player ever has come to life via the popular, critically-acclaimed biopic “42.” And thus Sharon Robinson, an educational consultant to Major League Baseball since 1997, doesn’t mind at all telling her father’s story all over again.

Robinsons like accuracy of ‘42’

“We were thrilled with ‘42,” both its authenticity and its power,” she said. “The greatest joy was watching my mother (Rachel) this year. This was a project she worked on for 30 years. To have it come through when she’s 90, and for her to have this amazing year that seems to be ongoing has been wonderful.

Rachel Robinson did not attend the Civil Rights Game festivities, but Sharon was an able stand-in and center of attention about the family legacy.



Sharon Robinson (left) with Commissioner Bud Selig and two youthful athletes.

“She’s absolutely wonderful,” she said of her mother. “She would have been here today, but she needed a little break. We spent a lot of time together the last couple of months.”

Sharon Robinson was a nurse, like her mother, before becoming vice chairman of the Jackie Robinson Foundation Rachel Robinson founded in 1973. In addition to providing frequent oral history of her father’s career, she has put down that timeline as an author. Robinson penned “Jackie Robinson: American Hero,” a 48-page biography for children available in elementary schools nationwide. She previously authored “Stealing Home,” a memoir of her life in what has become baseball’s royal family.

Her remembrance of her father revealed a post-baseball life that was almost as meaningful as his groundbreaking, decade-long journey as the heart and soul of the Brooklyn Dodgers.

“My dad took a job with Chock Full ‘o Nuts as vice president of personnel,” Sharon Robinson said of his first post-baseball job with the New York-based restaurant and coffee-distributing chain in 1957. “But he had an agreement with Mr. (William)

Black that he be allowed to participate in the civil rights movement. So he was free to travel as he was needed.

“His first assignment was with the NAACP. He was their national fund-raiser. They raised \$1 million that year. And because of their success, other organizations came after him wanting his support. The way he worked that through is we started doing a series of jazz concerts at our home to raise money for the various civil rights organizations as well as the families of those who were killed in the various crises.”

Scouting top job for mid-1950s African Americans

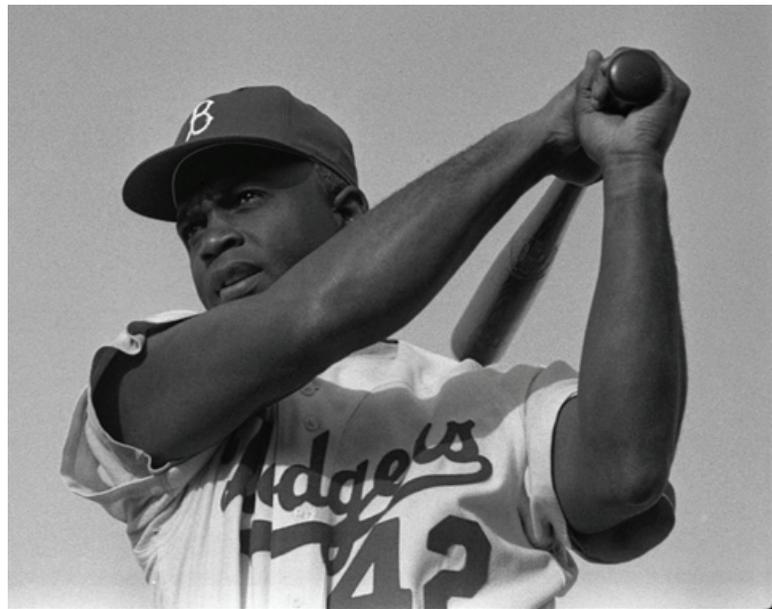
Robinson had to shift to private business with social activism as his 1-A assignment. Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley was no Branch Rickey as far as taking the next step in baseball integration – coaching, managing and the front office. The best an African-American could do off the field in the mid-1950s was scout African-American players. That was Negro League legend Buck O'Neil's job for the Cubs starting in 1956. O'Neil was named the first African-American coach in 1962, but was barred from rotating into the head-coaching job in the wacky Cubs' College of Coaches scheme.

“When he left, he left,” Sharon Robinson said. “He moved from corporate America into politics. He had a rich post-baseball career.

“While he was in baseball, he hoped he could move into management. But they didn't want him. They made it clear they didn't want him. They didn't want blacks in management at that point. They were not ready to integrate to that extent.

“That's why his last statement to baseball (at the 1972 World Series) was like, OK, great, I'm glad we're celebrating this 25th anniversary of my having broken the color barrier, but still I'm looking out there and there are no black managers. He was still egging them on at the last moment -- you still have to continue to change, baseball has to continue to change, America has to continue to change.”

Robinson had one baseball affiliation after his last playing day, an under-reported one when it comes to breaking color lines. He was the first African-American network baseball analyst on ABC-TV's low-rated Saturday “Game of the Week” for one season, in 1965. NBC assumed the Saturday TV rights in 1966, and Robinson did not continue. Interestingly, Pee Wee Reese, his old Dodgers double-play partner, took over the NBC analyst's job alongside Curt Gowdy.



The Robinson family enjoys an everlasting legacy due to the achievements of patriarch Jackie Robinson.

Vintage 1965 tape will go to Rachel Robinson

The Chicago Baseball Museum informed Sharon Robinson it possesses a rare two-minute audio tape of her father's broadcast work in the Dodger Stadium TV booth along with Leo Durocher and Chris Schenkel on Labor Day 1965. The same clip has yet another confluence of big names on the pre-game show – Howard Cosell interviewing Sandy Koufax and Willie Mays together. Delighted to hear of the tape's existence, Sharon Robinson asked the museum to send a copy to Rachel Robinson at the family foundation offices in New York.

The refusal of the Dodgers or any other so-called “progressive” team to tap into Robinson's wellspring of baseball knowledge and old-school fiery nature can never be reconciled. He had obvious leadership and instructional talents along with the cache of his celebrity-hood.

Robinson was noted for staying behind on the bench after batting practice to observe opponents taking their cuts in the cage. He also made it a point to counsel African-Americans, who made their debuts in the years after his own arrival, on adjusting to the majors in an era still rife with discrimination and informal quotas on the number of players of color on each team. Ernie “Mr. Cub” Banks, for one, remembered Robinson approaching him soon after he was called up to Wrigley Field in Sept. 1953.

Fellow Hall of Famer Frank Robinson, now an MLB executive vice president, did not get similar counsel in his Reds rookie year in 1956, coinciding with Robinson's final season. But there would be time soon enough for the two to meet.

“I was very shy and didn't approach Jackie,” Frank Robinson recalled. “I took a photograph with him because my manager, Birdie Tebbetts, took me over and we posed for a picture. After that, it was business as usual. I believe in not fraternizing with the opposition when I'm in uniform.

“But after he retired, I went by his office at Chock Full 'o Nuts, and sat down and talked with him for a couple of hours. Just baseball, about life, the game away from the field and what the responsibility of me coming in and people of my color being in the game at that time, what the responsibility we had on and off the field. It was a real good chat and the only lengthy time that I really talked to him.”

Red Smith thought Jackie would be manager

Legendary sportswriter Red Smith thought so much of Robinson's leadership skills he referred to him as the “veteran Brooklyn Dodgers manager” in an Oct. 27, 1951 special issue of Collier's



Jackie Robinson and son David, then 11, at the March on Washington on Aug. 28, 1963.

magazine that projected a rebuilding world of 1960 after a fictional U.S.-Soviet third world war of 1952-55. Unfortunately, Smith was off by more than 15 years in predicting the first African-American manager.

Despite this unfulfilled promise and the inherent logic of Robinson the baseball leader, the family does not see a hole in his life story.

“It would have been great (to stay in baseball),” said Sharon Robinson. “But he found a very satisfying life post-baseball. And he didn’t look back.”

Instead, the Robinsons prefer to try to make the present batter and prepare for a better future that might require the same kind of effort the civil-rights pioneers showed a half century ago.

“We’re very proud of our youth programs where we have 200,000 kids playing baseball ages 5 to 18,” Sharon Robinson said. “We have these urban academies expand. We hope to have them in every MLB city. There’s movement from urban academies and RBI programs into the draft (and onto major-league rosters). We need to see the movement upward and then we hope to see the movement into management. Our commissioner is committed to it.”

Meanwhile, civil-rights progress is perceptible, but far from finished, with bumps in the road being encountered regularly.

“We’re in a different phase,” Sharon Robinson said. “We need to have another civil-rights movement...Having us all reflect on the past is hopefully helping us to think about where we need to think about where we need to go in the future. We just had, two weeks ago, my father’s statue with Pee Wee Reese in Brooklyn where they wrote racist and anti-Semitic marks on the statue. The amount of hate in this country is scary. So we have a long way to go.”

“We have to understand the history of our past and know how to deal with the present time.”



Sharon Robinson follows in her mother's active life honoring her father. Here, Rachel Robinson accepts the Congressional Gold Medal from then-President Bush in 2005