

# All in the Family: The Robinson Legacy

By Justin Thompson

*“My brothers and I grew up with parents who were very active [politically]. It was normal and natural. It was like eating. It was what you did and what was expected of you.”*

— Josie Robinson Johnson

Many African American activists, politicians, and businesspeople have risen out of the formerly segregated South, but few have sustained their influence across ten decades through multiple generations like the family of Judson W. Robinson Sr. in Houston, Texas. Robinson knew he was capable of much more than Jim Crow customs allowed, and he refused to surrender to laws that oppressed African Americans. He took action to improve the lives of those in the Black community and earned the respect of Houstonians overall. Robinson Sr. taught all his family members about the importance of civic engagement, and, today, that legacy continues to be visible in Houston through the organizations, programs, and policies established by him and his descendants, including his son Judson Robinson Jr. and his grandson Judson Robinson III.

## JUDSON W. ROBINSON SR.

Judson Wilbur Robinson was born in Crockett, Texas, on February 7, 1904. His parents believed in the importance of an education, which led him to attend nearby Prairie View State Normal School (now Prairie View A&M University) and graduated in 1926. His first choice was to study law, but

no Texas law school admitted Black students, so Robinson obtained a business degree

*Judson Robinson Sr.’s work demanded respect. In a period when whites often showed little deference to Blacks, Robinson Sr. was not addressed informally by anyone who did not know him personally.*

Photo courtesy of the African American Library at the Gregory School, MSS0043.072.



*Christmas 1985 brought the Robison family together from across the country for what was Judson Robinson Sr.’s last Christmas.*  
Photo courtesy of the Robinson family.

and returned to Houston. He met Josie Bell McCullough while they were students at Prairie View, and the couple married in 1929, the year she graduated. They had three children: Josie Robinson, now Josie R. Johnson; Judson W. Robinson Jr.; and James S. Robinson.<sup>2</sup> All three went on to emulate their father’s life-long commitment to activism.

Even with a college degree, African Americans discovered that employment opportunities were often limited. Thus, one of the first lines of employment available to Robinson Sr. was as a waiter for Southern Pacific Railroad. Given the inherently racist nature of rail car employment for African American men, Robinson sought to resolve or at least alleviate the injustices and mistreatment they encountered. In 1934 he worked under A. Philip Randolph to help organize a Houston chapter of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), a union that Randolph cofounded in Harlem in 1925.<sup>3</sup> Robinson’s efforts reflected the brotherhood’s focus on fair wages and ethical labor practices. In addition, he worked to overcome the limitations the poll tax placed on voter participation, particularly in low-income and minority communities. Josie Johnson recalled working the neighborhoods with her father “to make sure that people paid their poll tax so they could register and vote, and [then working] the precincts thoroughly before elections.” They also went



Judson Robinson Sr. (center) and two other men check on construction at the YMCA in Southeast Houston.

Photo courtesy of the African American Library at the Gregory School, MSS0316.010.

door to door gathering signatures on petitions to abolish the poll tax.<sup>4</sup>

Robinson Sr.'s experience with the BSCP evolved into a broader range of activist activities to advance people of color. He became involved with the Houston chapter of the National Negro Congress, serving as the acting chairman by 1938.<sup>5</sup> The National Negro Congress worked with the local branches of BSCP, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare.<sup>6</sup>

In 1943, the Houston Housing Authority (HHA) selected Robinson Sr., with his extensive real estate and housing experience, as the first African American to manage Kelly Village, its subsidized housing project in Fifth Ward. Three years later, HHA promoted him to manager of Cuney Homes in Third Ward. As manager of both housing projects and, later, as an HHA board member, Robinson Sr. assisted in improving housing conditions for local Blacks, which were considered some of the nation's worst at the time.<sup>7</sup>

Building upon his experience, Robinson Sr. became actively involved in the local business community. He became the first African American realtor in Houston and the first to own an insurance agency there.<sup>8</sup> In 1950 he established the predominately Black National Real Estate Association.<sup>9</sup> This directly translated into his leadership roles with the Houston Citizens Chamber of Commerce (previously the Houston Negro Chamber of Commerce, and now the Greater Houston Black Chamber of Commerce). He began as director of the 1953 membership drive and was later elected president of the chamber. As president, Robinson maintained the chamber's goals to promote the welfare of Houstonians, increase the patronage of Black businesses, and improve race relations. This was to be achieved by advo-

cating for trades and art education, encouraging the payment of poll taxes to vote, and promoting fair housing and employment practices.<sup>10</sup>

Robinson Sr. advanced fair housing practices with the founding of Judson W. Robinson & Sons Real Estate and Mortgage Company in 1962. Robinson's company was one of three Black real estate and mortgage companies approved by the Federal Housing Administration in Houston and the first Black company to join the Multiple Listing Service of the Houston Association of Realtors.<sup>11</sup>

Years after the death of his wife Josie, Robinson Sr. married Martha Frances Sneed Davis in 1973. She was the widow of dentist and Texas Southern University (TSU) regent

Dr. John Whittaker Davis Jr., and had two children who expanded the Robinson family. Influenced by Robinson Sr.'s example, Davis's son, John W. Davis III, became an attorney and joined James Robinson to create the real estate law practice of Robinson and Davis, Attorneys-at-Law, which became certified Housing and Urban Development closing attorneys and worked to develop local housing projects.<sup>12</sup>

Judson Robinson Sr. exercised his influence in the Pleasantville community where the family lived and successfully ran for and served as chairman of the 259th Precinct. Author Attica Locke described Pleasantville, which was founded by two developers in 1949, as a planned community for "thousands of engaged, educated and monied black folk."<sup>13</sup> Segregation incubated this community of enabled African Americans, and their precinct consistently ranked among those with the highest voter turnout in Texas. During Robinson Sr.'s tenure as chairman, the increase in voter participation made the 259th one of the city's most powerful historically Black districts.

Judson Sr. worked on other civic projects as well. He earned a seat on the board of directors at Riverside General Hospital (formerly Houston Negro Hospital) serving from 1965 to 1975. In 1968, he founded the Houston branch of the National Urban League—Houston Area Urban League (HAUL)—an organization dedicated to uplifting African Americans and other minorities socially and economically. As a non-profit, through affiliation with United Way, HAUL continues to implement programs that benefit Greater Houston under the leadership of Judson Robinson III.<sup>14</sup>

Ten years after establishing HAUL and an even longer storied career of entrepreneurship and activism, Robinson Sr. retired from his real estate and mortgage company, handing the reigns of the presidency over to his son Judson Robinson Jr. in 1978. Respected both in and outside of the

Black community during his career, Robinson Sr. began a family heritage of political engagement and activism that has continued well beyond his passing in 1986.

## JUDSON W. ROBINSON JR.

Born in Houston on November 21, 1932, Judson Robinson Jr. was the second child in the next generation of Robinsons. After graduating from Jack Yates High School in Third Ward in 1950, Judson Jr. followed his sister Josie in attending Fisk University, where he was a part of the football team that competed against other historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) such as Morehouse, Alabama State, and Xavier Universities. He graduated in 1954 with a degree in business administration, seemingly destined to continue the legacy set forth by his father. After graduation, Robinson Jr. returned to Houston and married Margarette Thompson in 1958. The couple went on to have three children, Judson Robinson III, Gerald Robinson, who died in infancy, and Pamela Robinson.

Robinson Jr. began his career with a handful of endeavors, one of which was R.M.P. Development Corporation, which owned and managed multiple Burger King franchises. He also invested in KCOH 1430 AM, the state's oldest, Black-owned and Black-formatted radio station, which went on air in 1953.<sup>15</sup> Both of these pursuits underscore how Judson Jr.'s business expertise was used in the African American community for the African American community. In the fast food industry, his stores provided jobs to minority youth and young professionals. His investment in KCOH, which was created around "public service for the community," was also in keeping with the family legacy.<sup>16</sup>

Judson Robinson Jr. entered politics in 1968, following his father as the second judge of the 259th Precinct in Pleasantville. Building on his father's rapport with the district, Robinson Jr. continued to foster a strong relationship with the residents. It was almost unimaginable that Judson Robinson Jr. would fail to carry that momentum with him in future political contests. Nevertheless, Robinson Jr. ran for city council in 1969 against A. L. Miller and lost in an upset after a campaign that cost about \$29,000.<sup>17</sup> Two years later, Robinson Jr. defeated the same opponent for At-large Position 5, making him the first African American elected to city council, where he served five terms.

As unprecedented as his election was, he faced the lingering Jim Crow sentiments that opposed minorities in leadership positions. Robinson Jr. faced underlying racism in tackling issues related to education, law enforcement, housing, land use, and fair employment. In

1974 he noted, "The city has to [address] this thing of equal opportunities as far as employment, and all the people that do business with the city have to agree to the concept that they'll hire based on qualifications and not race."<sup>18</sup>

Solving such deep-seated problems proved challenging. With regard to housing and land use, for example, a near riot broke out in the Trinity Gardens neighborhood over the placement of a landfill, underlining the neglectful land use policies that Robinson Jr. wanted to counteract.<sup>19</sup> He also encountered a great deal of difficulty securing safe places for people to meet and enjoy recreational facilities in minority communities. Ironically he found an unlikely ally in conservative councilmember Frank Mann who gathered the necessary support to construct parks in communities such as Pleasantville and Denver Harbor.<sup>20</sup> When it came to law enforcement, on the one hand, Judson Jr. dealt with a biased police force; and on the other hand, he dealt with a Black community that felt HPD was untrustworthy, despite efforts to diversify its ranks. These feelings dated back to Robinson Jr.'s time on the Board of Regents at TSU when police responded to an alleged "riot" on campus in 1967. Working with political ally and supporter Mayor Fred Hofheinz, Robinson Jr. tried to foster a more accountable and transparent police force to reduce citizens' claims of police brutality.<sup>21</sup>

Along the same line Robinson Jr. created a social bridge between the Black and white communities through formal and informal means. When asked if his candidacy garnered a deeper understanding of the Black community, Robinson Jr. explained, "The people can see [the candidates] on a very informal basis and talk issues. I had them all out to my house on occasion, and I've been to theirs, so, yes, I think in that area I would like to think we've had some better understanding of each other." The late congressman Mickey Leland commended Robinson for his efforts, saying,



*Judson Robinson Jr. waves at the crowd during a St. Patrick's Day parade.*

Photo courtesy of the African American Library at the Gregory School, MSS 0043.001.



*Local political leaders gather to show support for Judson Robinson Jr. and Anthony Hall's reelection campaigns. Left to right, Congressman Mickey Leland, Justice of the Peace Betty Brock Bell, Council Member Ernest McGowan Sr., Council Member (City Attorney and METRO Chair) Anthony Hall, Council Member Judson Robinson Jr., Harris County Constable A. B. Chambers, State Representative Ron Wilson, Precinct Judge Zollie Scales Sr.*

Photo courtesy of the African American Library at the Gregory School, MSS0043.008.

"Almost every black organization owed something to Judson Robinson Jr. because he [had] helped them very quietly."<sup>22</sup>

During his twenty-plus-year political career, Robinson Jr. also served as a member of the Democratic State Executive Committee (1968-1971), and as mayor pro tem under former Houston mayors Louie Welch and Kathy Whitmire. Towards the beginning of Judson Jr.'s time on city council, his wife Margarette retired from a storied career in nursing to serve as vice president of Judson W. Robinson & Sons Realty and Mortgage in 1972, and Robinson Jr. took charge in 1978. That same year, he ran as a Democrat against Anthony Hall and Mickey Leland for the seat held by Barbara Jordan in the 18th U.S. Congressional District.<sup>23</sup> Despite Robinson Jr.'s support from his sister-in-law, attorney Algenita Davis, and his sister, educator Dr. Josie Johnson, Leland won the election.<sup>24</sup> Robinson Jr. continued working as president of the family real estate business while also serving on city council until he lost a long battle with cancer in 1990, cutting short a legacy of opening doors and bridging differences while remaining committed to uplifting the underserved and underprivileged.

### **JUDSON W. ROBINSON III**

The third generation in the Robinson lineage marks the strength of the family in the post-1960s civil rights era. Judson W. Robinson III was raised in the Pleasantville neighborhood where his forefathers served as political leaders and role models. He learned the importance of punctuality and political involvement as early as age twelve, working in his father's restaurants and at the polls during his father's city council campaign.<sup>25</sup> Robinson III attended Pleasantville Elementary School, but he did not comprehend the true difference between segregated and integrated

schools until he was in junior high school and came into contact with students of different ethnicities. He became the first in his family to experience school busing and to attend a young men's Catholic college preparatory school, St. Thomas High School in Houston. During this time, he came to realize the "power of legacy" and that he had to be the one to continue Robinson and Sons if it were going to survive.<sup>26</sup> Despite attending an integrated secondary school, Judson III followed in his father's footsteps, electing to attend Fisk University where he earned a bachelor's degree in business management in 1981.

After graduation Robinson III worked in sales with IBM until his father's unfortunate health problems forced him to take greater responsibilities in the family business and to enroll in real estate classes. To make matters worse, Robinson Jr.'s diagnosis coincided with the oil bust of the 1980s, which hit Houston hard. After the passing of Judson Robinson Jr., Judson Robinson III and his uncle James Robinson took over the real estate firm, but many of their clients were devastated by the oil bust, and the company survived only a few years. Robinson III describes this period as a "trial of fire" or "rite of passage" that helped him get to where he is today.<sup>27</sup>

After this difficult time, Robinson III's mother, Margarette Robinson, was appointed to fill his father's vacant At-large Position 5 city council seat. After roughly a year, in 1991, Robinson III was encouraged to run for the seat and continue his father's legacy advocating for civil rights. His victory made him one of the youngest African



*A young Robinson III stands next to his father, Judson Robinson Jr.*

Photo courtesy of the African American Library at the Gregory School, MSS0043.016.

Americans elected to city office.<sup>28</sup> That same year, a referendum set a limit of three two-year terms for city office, shrinking the time Robinson III had to make an impact to a maximum of six years in comparison to his father's nineteen.<sup>29</sup> Like his father, he served as vice mayor pro tem, appointed by then mayor Bob Lanier.

Regardless, Robinson III's time on the Houston City Council was arguably one of the most productive in the city's history, with members also including Sheila Jackson Lee, Gracie Saenz, and Eleanor Tinsley. The council undertook initiatives to improve Houston's downtown.<sup>30</sup> By doing this, they hoped to stimulate the economy by creating jobs and adding much needed vivacity to the environment, resulting in the creation of the Business and Tourism Committee, which Robinson chaired. One of the most notable projects from these initiatives was the development of Houston's Midtown, which began as an effort for more affordable residential development in downtown by making the area a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone (TIRZ).<sup>31</sup> While also chairing the Redevelopment and Revitalization Committee, Robinson III was involved in awarding the convention center hotel to Hilton Americas-Houston and approving the downtown baseball stadium, now Minute Maid Park.

After his time as a council member, Robinson III maintained leadership positions, serving as an area vice president for the engineering firm Professional Service Industries and as the co-chief-of-staff in Harris County Commissioner Sylvia Garcia's office, where he gained experience in operations and supervision. But like his father and grandfather, Robinson III gravitated towards aiding Houston's disadvantaged population, transferring the skills he gained while in office to communities akin to his own. After the Houston Urban League's president retired, Robinson III was encouraged to submit his resume; and, in 2007, he became CEO of the same chapter his grandfather had founded in 1968. Today HAUL pursues some of the same goals—yet in a more modern context—through the departments of Education, Workforce and Economic Development, Workforce Training, Housing, and Health and Wellness.

Judson W. Robinson III and his wife Cora have three children, one of whom is Judson Robinson IV. Although his father is not pressuring him to follow in his footsteps, Robinson IV is working in the non-profit sector, indicating the desire for service is still part of the family legacy.

## THE ROBINSON LEGACY

Although historically the Robinson family lacked the visibility of political families like the Hofheinzs, for example, the Robinsons' impact remains evident citywide. Robinson Sr. got his "foot in the door," acting as the catalyst and initiating much of the work that has continued: Cuney Homes and Kelly Village still offer housing, HAUL is headed by his grandson, and the Greater Houston Black Chamber of Commerce continues to serve the business community.

Robinson Jr. built on the progress his father made and further advanced the fight for equality. Aside from being



*Judson Robinson III speaks at the LINCS Supply Chain Management Certification Program sponsored by HAUL and San Jacinto College.*

Photo courtesy of Houston Area Urban League.

Houston's first African American city councilmember, he fought to overcome educational, political, social, and financial inequalities that remained even after the 1960s civil rights movement. He also tried to narrow the racial divide and worked through the political system to address the needs of underserved communities.

To show appreciation and acknowledge the Robinsons' civic work, the City of Houston named a community center and a park in honor of Judson Robinson Sr., and a library, community center, and elementary school for Judson Robinson Jr. However, the biggest legacy left by these two gentlemen was the example they set for their communities and their children and grandchildren. They proved that with education and determination, one can make a difference. Robinson III continues to impart these same values through programs at HAUL, such as the Urban League Young Professionals Program, which targets people age twenty to forty, offering them networking opportunities while building community awareness and accountability to prepare them as future leaders. The HAUL Guild focuses on enlightening older professionals on topics such as volunteerism, investment, and passing on generational wealth. These are only a sample of several HAUL programs that focus on youth, education, and health to better service the city and carry the Robinson legacy forward, making Houston a better place for generations to come.<sup>32</sup>

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