

Honoring Rachel Robinson, Baseball Pioneer and Civil Rights Activist

Posted: 07/20/2014 5:47 pm

Like 1,225 people like this. Be the first of your friends.

On Sunday, Rachel Robinson was inducted into the Baseball Reliquary's Shrine of the Eternals, along with Dizzy Dean and Don Zimmer. Jim Bouton, former major league pitcher and author of the iconoclastic book Ball Four, has called the Reliquary a "people's Hall of Fame." It celebrates baseball's rebels and renegades. I had the privilege to introduce the induction of Mrs. Robinson at Sunday's ceremony at the Pasadena Public Library. Below is my introduction.

It is my pleasure to introduce the induction of Rachel Robinson into the Shrine of the Eternals. It will be accepted by Delano Robinson, Rachel's sister-in-law and a long-time Pasadena resident.

Rachel Robinson was voted into the Shrine the first time she was on the ballot - a rare feat. Her entry completes the cycle about baseball's battle against segregation. Jackie Robinson, Josh Gibson, and Lester Rodney (the sports editor of the *Daily Worker* who was an early champion of baseball's integration) have already been elected to the Shrine.



Rachel Robinson

Rachel Robinson may be the most important woman in the history of the major leagues. She didn't own a team, or cover the game as a reporter, or play the game herself.

But as Jackie's partner, and as the person who has kept alive Jackie's legacy, Rachel has had a significance influence in her own right.

Like Jackie, she has used her celebrity as a platform to fight for a more equal society.

She has continued Jackie's commitment to pushing Major League Baseball to hire more people of color as managers and as executives.

Thanks to Rachel's efforts, most of today's Major League players, managers, and executives know that they stand on the shoulders of those, like Jackie, who came before them and opened doors for them.

Yesterday was Rachel Robinson's 92nd birthday. She's still going strong. Still a fighter. Still speaking out - not only about baseball, but about society.

If all you know about Rachel Robinson is what you've seen in the two major Hollywood films about Jackie, you'd have an incomplete picture of the kind of woman she was and is.

She was portrayed by Ruby Dee in the 1950 film, *The Jackie Robinson Story* and by Nicole Beharie in last year's hit movie, *42*.

Both films depict Rachel as Jackie's supporter, cheerleader, and helpmate, the person who comforted him when he faced abuse, and encouraged him when he was feeling discouraged.



Rachel and Jackie Robinson

This is all true, but it is incomplete. So let me briefly tell you about this remarkable woman.

Rachel Isum was born in 1922. She grew up in a house on 36th Place on LA's west side.

In the early 1920s, Los Angeles was racially segregated. It still had restrictive covenants, prohibiting the sale of houses to African Americans in certain neighborhoods. To get around that obstacle, Rachel's parents - Charles and Zellee - arranged for a light-skinned black man to buy the house and then re-sell it to them. This was a risky and courageous thing to do at a time when the Ku Klux Klan had a presence in LA.

In 1940, African Americans comprised only four percent of Los Angeles' population of 1.5 million. Growing up in LA's predominantly white west side, Rachel faced bigotry on a regular basis. For example, when Rachel and her friends went to the movies, they were regularly directed to the balcony in the movie theater.

Rachel's father had served in World War One. On his last day of active service, he was gassed, leaving him permanently disabled and with a chronic heart condition. By the time Rachel was in high school, her father had to quit his job as a bookbinder for the *Los Angeles Times*, where he'd worked for 25 years.

As a result, Rachel's mother had to support the family. She took classes in baking and cake decorating and had her own business catering luncheons and dinner parties for wealthy families in Beverly Hills, Bel Air, and Hollywood.

Rachel worked, too. She helped her mother with her catering business, worked on Saturdays at the concession stand in the public library, and sewed baby clothes for the National Youth Administration, part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal program.

Rachel graduated from Manual Arts High School in June 1940. That fall, she entered UCLA's highly selective and competitive five-year nursing program.

Rachel was a real pioneer. In 1940, only five percent of all women - and less than two percent of black women - earned a college degree. But Rachel wasn't about to let those odds get in her way.

She met Jackie in 1941 when they were both students at UCLA. They were introduced by Ray Bartlett, one of Jackie's friends from Pasadena who also went to UCLA, where he, too, was an outstanding athlete.

Jackie was already a multi-sport campus hero by the time he met Rachel. For their first date, Jackie took Rachel to a Bruin football dinner at the Biltmore Hotel in downtown LA. But much of their courtship took place at Kerckhoff Hall, the student union, where the small number of UCLA's African American students gathered in-between classes. Rachel and Jackie got engaged later that year.

While at UCLA, Rachel lived at home and commuted to the campus each day.

She also worked at night. This was during World War Two, and local industries were hiring women to do what had previously been considered "men's" jobs.

Rachel was hired as a riveter at the Lockheed Aircraft factory in LA, where they made airplanes for the war effort. She worked the night shift, drove to UCLA at dawn, changed clothes in the parking lot, and then went to class.

To encourage women to take factory jobs during the war, the federal government created an iconic figure - "Rosie the Riveter" - whose image adorned this famous poster.

But if America hadn't been such a racist and segregated society back then, perhaps the government would have selected another woman to represent the nation's female workers - "Rachel the Riveter".

Rachel and Jackie promised their parents that they wouldn't get married until Rachel had completed her degree. She earned her nursing degree in June 1945.

They were married the following February.

By then, Jackie had already served in the military, played in the Negro Leagues, and signed a contract to play with the Dodgers' minor league team in Montreal.

Two weeks after their marriage, Rachel and Jackie left for spring training in Daytona, Florida with the Montreal Royals.

The film *42* portrays the ordeal they faced dealing with the Southern Jim Crow system, including the segregated trains, buses, restaurants, and stadiums, and the hostility of many white Southerners.

To get to Daytona, they flew from LA to New Orleans. At the New Orleans airport, they were told they were being "bumped" from the plane to Florida. Jackie protested this obvious racist act to the airline attendant behind the counter.

Meanwhile, Rachel escaped to the Ladies Room. But there were two Ladies Rooms in the airport, right next to each other. One said "Colored Women." The other said "White Women." Rachel went into the one that said "White Women." People stared at her, but nobody stopped her.

Nine years before Rosa Parks triggered the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rachel Robinson had performed her first act of civil disobedience!

For the next 11 years - until Jackie retired from Major League Baseball in 1957 - Rachel and Jackie together endured the humiliations and bigotry, and celebrated the triumphs and accolades, of being civil rights pioneers.

Roger Wilkins, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, wrote this about Rachel:

She was not simply the dutiful little wife. She was Jack's co-pioneer. She had to live through the death threats, endure the vile screams of the fans and watch her husband get knocked down by pitch after pitch. And because he was under the strictest discipline not to fight, spike, curse or spit back, she was the one who had to absorb everything he brought home. She was beautiful and wise and replenished his strength and courage.

In addition, she was primarily responsible for raising their three children - Jackie Junior, Sharon, and David.

While Jackie played for the Dodgers, they first lived in Brooklyn, and then in Long Island. Then they tried to buy a home in Purchase, New York. After Rachel offered the asking price, the house was taken off the market, and she knew why.

In 1955, they found a plot of land they liked in Stamford, Connecticut and built a new home in that suburban community. When the news had spread that the Robinsons had bought the property, several families on the block sold their homes.

The Robinsons settled in, made friends, became active in the community. But they couldn't escape the racism.

When a white friend attempted to sponsor Jackie at the local country club, he was rejected by a majority vote. Jackie was already a bona fide national celebrity who had won the MVP award, but the white country clubbers didn't think he was good enough to play golf with them.

After Jackie retired from baseball in 1957, he began a new career in business, and expanded his involvement with the NAACP and other civil rights groups.

At that time, Rachel decided to resume her professional career. This was five years before Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, ignited the women's movement. Rachel was an early feminist.

As Rachel describes in her book, *Jackie Robinson: An Intimate Portrait*, Jackie was somewhat upset by Rachel's decision to go back to school and back to work, but Rachel insisted that it was something she needed to do. Eventually, Jackie came around.

In 1959 - at age 37 - Rachel was admitted to the graduate program in psychiatric nursing at New York University.

After earning her master's degree, Rachel worked as a nurse-therapist and researcher at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

In 1965, she was hired as a professor at Yale's School of Nursing and as the nursing director at the Connecticut Mental Health Center.

When Rachel was teaching at Yale, the university asked her to join its board of trustees. Rachel said no. She told Yale: "Not unless you put another black or another woman on the board. You won't get a two-fer from me."

While working full-time, Rachel remained deeply involved in her children's education and in community activities. Beginning in 1963, Jackie and Rachel hosted their legendary jazz concerts at their home as fundraisers for jailed civil rights activists.

Rachel taught at Yale and ran the state mental health center for seven years, until 1972, the year that Jackie died at age 53 of diabetes and heart disease.

After Jackie's death, she took charge of running the Jackie Robinson Development Corporation. During her 10 years as its president, it built more than 1,300 units of affordable housing.

In 1973, she created the Jackie Robinson Foundation. The foundation is Jackie's living legacy and Rachel has been its hands-on chair and inspiring leader.

In its 41 year existence, the foundation has provided scholarships to 1,400 college students. Each one gets \$6,000 a year for four years, plus mentoring, summer jobs and internships. The foundation's goal is to help them become leaders in changing society.

Most of these students are the first in their families to attend college. Most are students of color. They have a remarkable graduation rate of 97 percent. They've gone to Harvard, Yale, Georgetown, UCLA, and many other colleges. I'm proud to say that a Jackie Robinson Scholar graduated from Occidental two years ago.

Rachel has received numerous awards for her activism as well as honorary degrees from eight universities. She has been invited to the White House by five presidents.

Like Jackie, she has enormous physical courage and moral integrity.

In 1997, for her 75th birthday, Rachel and a dozen family members climbed to 10,000 feet on Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa.

In 1997, when the entire country was celebrating the 50th anniversary of Jackie's triumph in breaking baseball's color line, Rachel made sure that the celebration did not divert attention from ongoing problems.

When a *Los Angeles Times* reporter asked her if Jackie would be pleased with the status of race relations today, Rachel didn't pull her punches. She said:

"No, I think he'd be very disturbed about it. We're seeing a great deal of divisiveness, a lot of hatred, a lot of tension between ethnic groups, and I think he'd be disappointed."

I think it is fair to say that both Rachel and Jackie were ambivalent about Pasadena. They returned here to visit family, but otherwise they kept their distance.

During Jackie's youth growing up here, Pasadena's black residents were treated like second-class citizens.

African Americans faced constant harassment from the Pasadena police. The local schools, landlords, and employers discriminated against Pasadena's African American residents.

In 1936, when Jackie's older Mack returned to Pasadena after winning a silver medal in the Olympics in Berlin, he couldn't get a job commensurate with his college education at PCC and the University of Oregon. The only job he could find was as a street cleaner.

In the 1940s, Mack joined an effort to push the city to desegregate the public swimming pool at Brookside Park. The pool was open to blacks only once a week, the day before the water was changed.

Finally, in 1944, after a judge ordered local officials to desegregate the pool, the city retaliated by firing its black employees, including Mack.

While Jackie was alive, the Rose Bowl parade never invited Jackie to be its Grand Marshal, even though he was the city's most famous native.

In recent years, however, Pasadena has finally come around and honored the Robinsons in several ways.

There are the now-famous nine-foot busts of both Mack and Jackie in front of City Hall.

The stadium at PCC is dedicated to Mack and Jackie. The U.S. Post Office named one of its buildings in Pasadena for Jack and another building for Mack.

Pasadena has a Jackie Robinson Stadium, a Jackie Robinson Park, and a Jackie Robinson Center.

And this weekend is, officially, "Robinson Family Weekend" in Pasadena. Friday was the 100th anniversary of Mack Robinson's birthday. On Friday there were two ceremonies to honor Mack.

The various places named after Mack and Jackie Robinson help keep their memories alive in their hometown.

But this is not sufficient.

If you visit Baltimore, you can go to the Babe Ruth Museum. If you visit Royston, Georgia, you can go to the Ty Cobb Museum. Even Shoeless Joe Jackson has a museum and research library dedicated to him in his hometown of Greenville, S.C.

What about Pasadena? This city needs a Jackie Robinson Museum.

There is no place in Pasadena where current and future generations, as well as the many tourists who visit Pasadena each year, can learn about the Robinsons' upbringing and athletic exploits, or Jackie's odyssey as a sports pioneer and civil rights activist. There is no local site that documents the Robinson brothers' athletic triumphs at Muir High School and PCC.

Where in Pasadena can residents or tourists really learn about Jackie's struggle against segregation as an Army officer in World War II, his brief career in the Negro Leagues, or the protests that broke baseball's color barrier? Where can they find out about the hardships Mack endured as a black member of the US team at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, which Adolf Hitler and the Nazis sought to use as a celebration of white supremacy and which Mack and Jesse Owens used to destroy that myth?

There is no place in Pasadena where people can learn about the city's long history of racism and segregation that was a part of Jackie and Mack's experience growing up in this city.

I also believe that the Pasadena public schools should develop a curriculum, as part of its American history courses, that draws on the Robinson family story to teach students about the history of this city and its race relations.

Without a museum like that, the best way we have to learn about this history, these trials and triumphs, is through the oral tradition, by hearing about it from our community's elders and recording their stories.

One of those people is Delano Robinson. She has lived in Pasadena since 1955, when she and Mack were married. Like Rachel, she was a nurse. She studied nursing at PCC and worked at St Luke and Huntington Hospitals before retiring in 1988. But she didn't retire as a community activist. Like Rachel, she has been a keeper of the flame, a link between the past and the present.

So I'd like to ask Mrs. Robinson to come up to the stage and accept this plaque on behalf of her sister-in-law.

Peter Dreier teaches Politics and chairs the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His most recent book is *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books, 2012). Jackie Robinson is one of the people profiled in the book.

Follow Peter Dreier on Twitter: www.twitter.com/peterdreier