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EDUCATION

Family values, experiences with racism drive new Akron superintendent's career in education

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A young Clarence Michael Robinson Jr. was sitting outside his third grade teacher's classroom when he heard his father rise out of his chair inside the room and slam a fist on a desk.

Robinson's parents were speaking with his teacher, a nun at his private Catholic elementary school. The teacher kept saying their son was "different" and that he shouldn't be in the school.

His father asked her what she meant.

"She said, 'Well, I'm just saying he doesn't play with the other children,'" Robinson said. "He said, 'And what you're saying is basically because my kid is Black you don't want him here?' She said, 'That's not what I'm saying.' He said, 'But that is what you're saying.'"

Some 40 years later, Robinson, who goes by his middle name, still remembers the exchange as a moment in his life that drove him to want all children to feel a sense of belonging and to not be judged by their race or any other external quality. Years of experiencing racism in the deep south, he said, formed him into the leader he is today.

Robinson is now the superintendent of Akron Public Schools. He started in August, moving to Akron from Louisiana.

Akron is his first home north of the Mason-Dixon line, but he said in a recent interview that he felt at home almost instantly.

"I love the family-oriented feel of Akron," he said.

Family has been an big theme in Robinson's life, from growing up with several generations nearby to his heavy involvement in the lives of his nieces and nephew today.

Robinson's parents set high expectations

Robinson, 54, was born and raised in Thibodaux, Louisiana, about an hour west of New Orleans just inland from the Gulf of Mexico. His mother, Maxine Young Robinson, who still lives in the house where he grew up, is a retired teacher who has her master's degree in education. His father, Clarence Michael Robinson Sr., who died in 2013, was a school bus driver but worked other jobs, including as a police officer and an entrepreneur.

Robinson said he never realized how little his parents made, even though some meals were only grits and liver. But as he got older, he said, he began to recognize the sacrifices his parents made.

"What I didn't realize was that we were not rich," he said. "We were very much at a poverty level. ...Just about every Christmas I had, it was like being in a toy store. We didn't want for anything. We really did not. But that did not mean my parents had money either. They worked hard. They took out loans."

His grandmother taught him his first lesson in equity. Robinson noticed she was buying presents for his cousins, but not for him and his sister. He asked her why. She explained that his cousins didn't have both their parents and weren't as fortunate, and she wanted to make sure they wanted for nothing, either.

"At first I was upset about it, but after she explained it to me, I loved her more," he said. "It wasn't that she was being unfair. She just wanted to make sure they didn't want for anything just like we didn't."

Robinson described his parents as setting a high standard of expectations, including going to school during the week, helping clean the house on Saturdays, and going to church and Sunday school on Sundays.

"If you gave any type of attitude, they would remind you all the stuff you'd gotten that other kids couldn't afford to have," he said. "So don't gripe about being asked to do anything. Whatever you're asked, just get it done."

'I don't want any child to ever have those memories'

At school, he said, he struggled to fit in but made friends with two other students who used to sit with him in the outfield looking for four-leaf clovers while the rest of the kids played baseball. If a ball came their way, they were happy to sit tight while the kids who failed to pick him and his friends for either team ran to field the ball.

He loved kindergarten at his private school, he said, but from first grade on, it was a struggle. He was regularly bullied, he said.

"I endured a lot," he said. "A lot that I didn't tell my parents."

His parents moved him to public school in Thibodaux for middle school, and he thrived.

"I just loved school," Robinson said. "It was like this magical bullet I had that just happened for me, like this magical moment when I got into public school. That's not to say anything's wrong with private or Catholic schools. It just wasn't good for me."

It was in junior high where he also developed his love for the arts. A teacher — one of his first Black teachers — gave the class an assignment to write a story and act it out. He loved every part of the process.

"I really wanted to be an actor," he said. "My mom said, 'You need to go to college and get a real job. And maybe you can do that after, on the side. But you need to get a real job because I'm not going to take care of you forever.'"

Robinson also rarely saw any Black people in his town involved in the arts.

"It was just not typical for most Black kids in the deep south to talk about being an actor or a writer or the arts," he said. "That was unheard of."

Robinson said through high school, he continued to feel like not all opportunities that were available to white students were accessible to kids who looked like him.

That drove him to a career in education.

"I don't want any child to ever have those memories," he said.

Robinson progresses from teacher to administrator

Robinson graduated from Southern University with his bachelor's degree in elementary education. He later earned his master's in educational leadership from Troy State University in Georgia, and his education specialist degree and doctorate of educational leadership from Argosy University in Florida.

He was a middle school English teacher and served as a principal at the elementary, middle and high school levels. He bounced around from Louisiana, Florida, Atlanta, Houston and then Prince George's County in Maryland, where he was in charge of improving the district's lowest-performing schools.

He received his first chance to run a school district in 2016 in Pine Bluff School District in Arkansas, a district of about 3,800 students, but a difference in opinion with the school board about how to steer the district away from state takeover led him to resign before the end of his three-year contract. He took a pause, he said, and did some consulting work before becoming the chief academic officer for East Baton Rouge Parish School System in Louisiana in February 2021.

Robinson said he applied twice to be the superintendent in his hometown, a district that had only had one previous Black superintendent. He said he and other Black candidates were aware of "comments" made about them when they applied.

"I was very disenchanted by just some of the mindset of people, even in this day and time," he said. "We are all people — it doesn't matter what you look like on the outside, we're all people, and it think we should concentrate more on humanity and less on race and political affiliations and all that, because those are things that divide us, and in the world today, we need more unity."

Robinson and London-Shane find a home in Akron

He found a home in the Midwest instead, something he never thought would happen.

"I absolutely love it," he said, although he admitted he's not ready for winter. "I love Akron. It reminds me so much of home. I think that's why I have adjusted so well and so easily to it."

In his time here, he has already explored some of the festivals on Main Street, as well as several local restaurants and the arts scene.