



Justice James E. Robinson, Sr.

Justice James Edwin Robinson, born on August 17, 1922, was the second son born to Bertha (Gordon) and Smiley Robinson, in Bainbridge, Georgia. Around the age of five, he and his mother and brother, took part in the great migration of African Americans from the south to the north, where they eventually settled in Harlem. Like most Blacks in Harlem, Dad and his family were poor. When they did not have money to pay the rent, they moved. You could save money with the movers if you waited until the marshal put your belongings out on the street. He got his early education from the New York City Public Schools and graduated from Haaren High School. He married young and had twin boys, Philip and James Jr., with his first wife Irma.

Dad took a number of jobs early in his life that made him think he needed to find a better way to earn a living and provide for his family. One of his first jobs was delivering huge blocks of ice for families to place in their ice boxes. These families tended to live on the top floor of walk-up apartment buildings. Dad then joined the Merchant Marines where he worked on the United Fruit Line steamship that went from New York to Honduras and Guatemala picking up bananas and bringing them back to the city. When German U-boats began sinking American ships in the Atlantic during World War II, Dad decided to look for another line of work. His brother William got him a job with the Pennsylvania Railroad where he drove carts through the rat-infested train tunnels to deliver mail to the mail trains. Dad had learned typing and shorthand in high school and looked for a typing job in downtown New York, but was turned away by a sign saying "Whites Only." However, he was able to get a clerical job in Washington, D.C. He was drafted into the Navy, which had been segregated and only allowed Blacks to work in the mess hall or in the kitchen. Dad resolved that he would go to jail before he allowed himself to be subject to that treatment. As it happened, however, President Roosevelt had just issued an order allowing Blacks to serve in the general service and not be limited to the messman branch of the Navy. So instead of having to go to the brig, Dad was able to use his typing and shorthand skills in the Navy to work as the company clerk and advance to the rank of Yeoman 3rd Class. After a short period, he was medically discharged due to a preexisting skin condition.

Dad used his veteran status under the GI bill to take the civil service exam and go back to school. After getting some additional high school credits, Dad attended City College at night and worked in the Post Office, where he would stay for twenty years. While still at the Post Office, Dad went to Brooklyn Law School at night, graduated in 1955, and passed the bar exam in 1956. A few years later, Dad joined the Queens District Attorney's office, where he rose to the position of Executive Assistant District Attorney. Dad was admitted as an attorney before the United States Supreme Court in 1967.

Dad had attended Mt. Olivet Baptist Church in Harlem since he was a pre-teen. He joined the church in the 1940s before he was drafted. Dad met Jane (Ella James Washington) in the 1950s, who lived in Harlem in the building next to him. They wed at Mt. Olivet on June 10, 1956 and moved to the Dorie Miller housing cooperative in Corona, New York, where sons Philip and James Jr. joined them and daughter Karen followed a few years later. Dad served as a member of the trustee board at Mt. Olivet and Vice-Chairman of the Deacon Board, where he was its longest serving deacon.

Dad joined the Corona-East Elmhurst branch of the NAACP, where he later became branch president. The branch sponsored the Malcolm X Day Care Center and later helped organize the Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center, where Dad has served as board chairman of both organizations. Dad also served as legal counsel to the Frederick Douglas Democratic Club.

In December 1988, Dad was inducted into the New York City Civil Court following his election, where he served as judge for two years. He was then elected to the New York State Supreme Court, where he served for approximately eight years, until mandatory retirement.

Dad was known for his dry wit and sense of humor. He believed in eating healthy and staying active, using his treadmill into his 90s. During his retirement, he enjoyed traveling the world with Jane. After Jane died in 2018, he learned to love the air fryer she bought, googled all sorts of recipes, and became a pretty good cook. He didn't brag about how old he was, while still driving and living independently. He just lived, like anyone at any age.

Dad died on September 16, 2021, at age 99. Among the family he leaves behind are his children: Philip and his wife Charmel, James Jr., and Karen; his grandchildren Brian, Brett and his wife Fabiola, Philip Jr. and his wife Ana, and Khalia; his great-grandchildren Arianna, Frances, Miles, Ava, Carmen, and Vivienne James; niece and nephew: Roberta and Alvin; great nieces and nephews: Darryl and his wife Thelma, Yvette, Cynthia, Yvonne, Will and his wife Angel, Nicole, Jeanae, Adanna, Starsha, Nneka, Okechukwu, and Chike; and in-laws Dianna and Dennis, Monica, Dorothy Cunningham, Ernest Alexander, Adrienne Cunningham, Steven Cunningham, and Barbara Washington.

AUGUST 17, 1922 – SEPTEMBER 16, 2021