# This Jackie Robinson Day, let’s celebrate Rachel Robinson, too

## **The pathbreaking life that most Americans don’t know about**

From the Washington Post

By Seth S. Tannenbaum, April 15, 2022

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Friday marks the 75th anniversary of Hall of Famer Jackie Robinson integrating modern Major League Baseball. This year, MLB is going all out for its first full-capacity Jackie Robinson Day since 2019 and prominently featured Robinson’s 99-year-old widow, Rachel, in its news releases about the event. Rachel Robinson, however, has always been more than just Jackie Robinson’s wife.

During his playing career, Rachel was his sounding board and partner, even as she fulfilled the stereotypical mid-century American woman’s roles that the public — and her husband — expected her to play. Later, Rachel excelled in multiple pathbreaking careers. She fought for civil rights, was a pioneering psychiatric nurse and professor of nursing at Yale University and, since her husband’s death, has protected, shaped and defended Jackie’s role in American history. For all those reasons, Rachel Robinson — a woman referred to as the “Queen Mother” by Hall of Fame second baseman Joe Morgan — deserves to be honored, recognized and celebrated in her own right.

Rachel Isum and Jackie Robinson married on Feb. 10, 1946, eight months after she graduated from UCLA with a Bachelor of Nursing degree — a rarity for a Black woman in the 1940s — and just a few weeks before they traveled to Florida for Jackie’s first spring training as a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers organization.

Rachel accompanied Jack — as she called him, because Jackie “didn't have the intimacy that calling him by his given name had” — to spring training and faced the same racist treatment that he did on their trip from Los Angeles to Florida. Rachel attended many of Jack’s games that spring and throughout his career, hearing the torrents of abuse hurled upon him by White fans. She helped her husband to process his experiences after games; they often found some comfort by laughing together at the absurdities of racism.

These discussions exemplified how throughout his baseball career, Rachel was Jack’s primary support system, later saying that she “didn’t walk behind him, I walked beside him. We were in it together.” Her husband concurred, writing in his autobiography that while he knew successful men were supposed to say that their wives were essential to what they achieved, in his case, it was “gospel.” And he meant it. Both Robinsons frequently used the plural pronoun “we” to describe events in his playing career, indicating just how much of a joint effort they felt it to be.

Despite her nursing degree, Rachel Robinson stayed home with the family’s three children — Jackie Jr., Sharon and David — born in 1946, 1950 and 1952, respectively.

As their family grew, the Robinsons began searching for a larger house. Rachel envisioned moving to “a racially integrated neighborhood where we would have space, clean air, good schools, friends for our children and a strong sense of community.” She spent a year, “searching in vain from Long Island to northern Connecticut for such a place.” Instead of finding the perfect house or neighborhood, however, Rachel “encountered the whole array of discriminatory practices used to exclude blacks on one pretext or other.” When the Robinsons found a property they liked in Purchase, N.Y., and offered the asking price, for example, the seller took it off the market.

And it was Rachel, not Jackie, who let the world know about this bigoted treatment. She did an interview about the experience with a journalist from the Bridgeport (Conn.) Herald who was writing a series on housing discrimination. That interview led concerned White residents of Stamford, Conn., to invite Rachel to meet with real estate brokers, and in 1954, the family purchased a six-acre plot in Stamford, where they built a home.

During Jackie’s MLB career, and his first two years out of baseball, Rachel found herself “creatively absorbed and most contented in the role of wife, mother and homemaker.” Yet, by the late 1950s, she worried that if she “stayed home any longer,” her “mind would have deteriorated.”

That concern sent her back to graduate school in 1959, despite Jackie’s initial reluctance. Rachel earned a master’s degree in psychiatric nursing at New York University in 1961 and then began working full time. She first served as part of a research team examining whether “acutely ill psychiatric patients” could thrive while living at home with their families and receiving daily inpatient treatment. It was the first American study of its kind and indicated that 80 percent of patients could be treated successfully in that fashion.

Following that work, Rachel became director of nursing at the Connecticut Mental Health Center and an assistant professor of nursing at Yale University. By the mid-1960s, Jackie had spent seven years as an executive with Chock Full o’ Nuts coffee and started a new job in New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller’s administration. He also served as chairman of the board of directors of Freedom National Bank and later started a construction company with the goal of building affordable housing.

Jackie’s political alignment shifted in the 1960s. When Barry Goldwater defeated Rockefeller for the 1964 GOP presidential nomination, Jackie, a lifelong Republican, turned away from the party as it turned away from civil rights.

Both Robinsons had made their commitment to civil rights clear, and in the previous year, they learned that they could support Martin Luther King Jr.’s work by raising bail money for imprisoned civil rights workers. They hosted a jazz benefit concert on their Connecticut property that raised $15,000. The family continued to host the event annually, supporting a variety of social justice institutions, through family triumph and tragedy for nearly 40 years.

Rachel spearheaded this effort for most of those years because of Jackie’s untimely death. When he collapsed into Rachel’s arms in October 1972, his last words were “I love you.”

Amid her grief, Rachel left nursing and devoted her time to protecting, preserving and solidifying her husband’s legacy — and building upon it. She took over the Jackie Robinson Construction Company, refashioning it into a development firm and fulfilling her husband’s goal of creating thousands of units of affordable housing.

With the assistance of several friends and family members, in 1973, Rachel created the Jackie Robinson Foundation, aiming to help students of color afford college and succeed there. To date, the foundation has helped more than 1,800 students and has a graduation rate of 98 percent. The foundation is also set to open the Jackie Robinson Museum in New York City this spring. While it’s named after Jackie, it is Rachel who has driven the foundation’s success, philanthropy and vision.

Rachel Robinson has also spent much of the past nearly 50 years trying to ensure that the public’s image of her husband matches her image of him. The closing lines of the preface to Jackie’s posthumously published autobiography — “I cannot stand and sing the anthem. I cannot salute the flag.” — outraged some and became a fundamental part of his public image.

Rachel feared, correctly, that people would misunderstand these lines, and that their lasting memory of her husband would be, “that he hated the country.” She understood that he “loved the country” even as it “wasn’t functioning the way he hoped it would,” because of racism and injustice.

She wanted this more nuanced understanding to be part of his legacy. To ensure that it was, Rachel provided writer Arnold Rampersad with unprecedented access to the family’s papers to facilitate his biography of Jackie. She pushed documentarian Ken Burns to focus an entire film on her late husband, and in 2016, his four-hour “Jackie Robinson” aired on PBS.

Throughout her life, Rachel has blazed pathways in medicine, civil rights and access to higher education, yet often found herself in Jackie’s shadow, even after his death. Her history is a reminder that when we lionize great men, we frequently ignore their wives, who all too often are partners — and leaders — in these accomplishments, even as they accumulate impressive achievements of their own. Rather than just understanding Rachel as the woman who stood alongside Jackie quietly supporting him, at times, it’s worth remembering Jackie, too, as the man beside the pathbreaking Rachel Robinson.

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