

Oral History with Randall Robinson

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Interview with Randall Robinson
Session 1 (10/10/2020)

ROBINSON (00:00:02)

My name is Randall Robinson. Arthur Ashe was an extraordinary human being. We met as children growing up in segregated, Richmond, Virginia. My father was a history teacher and athletic coach at Armstrong High School. He also ran a baseball camp at Brookfield gardens in Richmond. Brookfield gardens was run by Arthur's father. That was how Arthur and I met six to seven year olds trying to play baseball at my father's camp. Arthur was one of the earliest supporters of TransAfrica. He was present at the very first fundraiser we held in the DC home of my brother, Max, beyond that Arthur was always Arthur principled, dependable, courageous, and never, ever a self promoter. The first trip Arthur took to South Africa was controversial, but it was important to his self education and Arthur became a leading opponent of apartheid and constructive engagement. Constructive engagement was the Reagan administration's policy of opposing sanctions. They wished instead to embrace South Africa's apartheid regime. Artists and Athletes against apartheid was a TransAfrica initiative. We wanted artists and athletes to call for sanctions. There was no better way to reach out to athletes than Arthur Ashe and no better way to reach out to artists than Harry Belafonte. We approached them both. They agreed to chair the committee and the rest is history.

ROBINSON (00:02:14)

TransAfrica launched the free South Africa movement in November, 1984. For more than one year, every single day without exception, senators, union leaders, artists, teachers, athletes, and people from all walks of life marched with us at the South African Embassy to demand an end to apartheid. Arthur was one of those who stepped forward to march with us at the south African embassy.

ROBINSON (00:02:57)

We were understandably pleased to have him with us at that critical time. Anti-Apartheid sanctions became US law in 1987. Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were released in 1990, but democracy had not yet come to South Africa. To maximize pressure on south Africa's apartheid government, TransAfrica led a "Democracy Now" tour to South Africa in 1991. We met with a vast range of individuals, including Nelson Mandela, to strategize on ways to hasten the end of apartheid and Arthur Ashe was of course, a member of that delegation. After two centuries of foreign interference, Haitians were finally able to elect the president of their choice in 1990. Less than a year later, this president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was brutally overthrown by US allied interests. Thousands of Haitians were murdered by the coop leaders and a reign of terror began. In 1992, TransAfrica organized a massive March to expose America's role in the tumult in Haiti, although very ill and in no position to do so, star athlete, Ashe, humanitarian, decided to make gargantuan sacrifice. He came to the white house, using his prestige and celebrity, to protect millions of Haitians he would never personally know. When Arthur first received his heartbreaking diagnosis.

ROBINSON (00:05:20)

He called to let me know. I was stunned and deeply saddened. When vacationing on the Chesapeake bay, I received a phone call letting me know that Arthur had died. He was only 49 years old. He had been a unique and important voice in the quest for social justice. When TransAfrica acquired its headquarters on R street in Washington, DC, in appreciation for all Arthur had done for the black world, the TransAfrica library was named the Arthur R Ashe Foreign Policy Library. TransAfrica was established in

1977 to advance, enlightened US policies towards Africa and the Caribbean. Arthur Ashe stepped forward to stand with TransAfrica. When we were little more than an idea. He continued supporting our work from that day forward, traveling with us on foreign policy delegations, attending annual dinners with his wife, Jeanne, marching with us to change US policies towards Africa and the Caribbean. Arthur had been a unique and important voice in the quest for social justice. And to him, this world will forever be indebted.