

DEFINING MOMENTS

Chief justice reflects on his journey to the bench

BY BRIAN KOONZ
PHOTOS AUTUMN DRISCOLL

LONG BEFORE RICHARD ROBINSON was confirmed as the first black chief justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court, he was a little boy riding 13 hours in the back seat of a car.

Summer didn't just mark school recess on the west side of Stamford in the 1960s. It also marked a trip to his grandfather's farm in South Carolina and a taste of a different world, a place where "boy" was a pejorative and a family's strength unlocked a future.

"When you got to the Mason-Dixon line ... things changed," Robinson told nearly 200 people attending a Black History Month dinner in February honoring the Legacies of Black Excellence. It was the first time Quinnipiac has held a dinner in conjunction with its annual celebration.

"We knew we couldn't stop at the gas stations for gas. We knew we couldn't stay at the hotels," Robinson said. "My mother used to pack a shoebox with tangerines and pound cake, and we'd trail each other to South Carolina."

These days, Robinson is blazing a new trail as the chief justice of Connecticut's highest court, the journey of a lifetime he so eloquently—and sometimes bluntly—shared during a one-hour conversation with Don C. Sawyer III, vice president for equity and inclusion.

"If you don't give justice to people, if you don't make people feel they're getting equal justice, the system fails," said Robinson, who was appointed chief justice in May 2018. "I truly believe that everybody who comes through our doors should leave those doors feeling they had their day in court and were treated fairly."

This requirement extends from the local courts in Connecticut all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. But justice also demands a knowledge of the legislative and executive branches of government. The chief justice said he recently spoke with former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor about the critical importance of teaching history and civics to children.

"If you don't know how to be a citizen in this country, if you don't know what your role is, if you don't know how the courts work, if you don't know how our government works, you end up having a lot of the stuff we have now," Robinson said, referring to the polarization and political rancor in America.

Quinnipiac Dining sous chef Eric Jackson created the dinner menu of 11 traditional dishes—appetizers, entrees and desserts—selected from recipes prepared at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

"I went through the recipe book, and the first thing I thought about was Thanksgiving dinner," Jackson said. "I made most of these recipes a few months ago for my own family."



At left, Quinnipiac Dining sous chef Eric Jackson serves okra and tomato soup to a guest during the Black History Month dinner and program in February. Below, Connecticut Supreme Court Chief Justice Richard Robinson engages in a conversation with Don C. Sawyer III, vice president for equity and inclusion.



The Black History Month feast was three days in the making, Jackson said. The menu included okra and tomato soup, hickory-smoked pork shoulder, shrimp and grits, salmon croquettes and sweet potato pie.

"I'm just excited for everybody to taste the food my team put together," Jackson said before the dinner. "I hope everybody enjoys at least one thing on the menu or tries something they've never had before."

After praising the food, President Judy Olian remarked that Robinson represented a role model for all, a person whose courage and commitment to inclusive excellence shines in his judicial leadership.

"It isn't enough to go by the numbers to merely have a presence of people different from oneself to be a stronger community, though that's an important first step," Olian said. "It's when we respect and learn from and empathize with and are humbled by and join hands with others who might be different. That's when we truly become inclusive."

Around the room, 10 African Americans were honored on posters for their contributions to medicine, science, higher education, entrepreneurship, and the culinary and performing arts. Acclaimed soprano Leontyne Price, blood bank developer Charles Drew and college president Shirley Ann Jackson were among those featured.

"We aim to incorporate inclusive excellence in everything we do to create a globally engaged, culturally rich and highly collaborative campus," Sawyer said.