



MEDIA RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: February 18, 2021

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Mayor Jacobs Highlights Trailblazing History of Theotis Robinson, Jr.

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. —Dr. Theotis Robinson, Jr., broke racial barriers in higher education by successfully fighting to become the first African American undergraduate student admitted to the University of Tennessee.

Robinson recalled his trailblazing efforts in a conversation with Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs for the ‘Knox Narratives’ docuseries, which was developed to tell important long-form stories about Knoxville, Knox County and East Tennessee history.

In his conversation with Mayor Jacobs, Robinson said he wrote an application letter to the University of Tennessee in July 1960 that avoided revealing his race and the segregated high school he attended.

“I got a response saying the school does not accept negroes as undergraduate students. Clearly, they did some investigation to know I was Black,” said Robinson.

Robinson described “cordial” meetings with University of Tennessee administrators to discuss his desire to attend the school. Robinson made it clear to President Andy Holt he intended to sue if UT trustees refused to integrate. The board subsequently voted in November 1960 to admit Robinson.

“That is why I consider myself the first African American admitted to the undergraduate school. I was on the point of the spear to bring about this change,” said Robinson. “In January 1961, I enrolled and two other [African American] students also came on board.”

Robinson shared tales of conflict and friendship as a student at the University of Tennessee. His fond memories include the story of star football player who interrupted an instructor's “racist rant” by physically intimidating him.

Robinson’s dedication to inclusiveness continued after graduation as a longtime leader in Knoxville. He was elected to Knoxville City Council from 1970 to 1977 and served as vice president of economic development for the 1982 World's Fair. Robinson returned to the University of Tennessee as a political science lecturer in 1989 and rose to the position of vice president of the UT system. He retired in 2014.

You can watch the [Knox Narratives with Robinson on YouTube](#) and [Facebook](#).

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