

Art As Human Rights
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Most people remember Paul Robeson as a world-renowned actor, singer, motion picture star and staunch political activist for human rights. This year, exhibits and other events marked the 100th anniversary of his birth on April 9, 1898. They honor a man who had the “whole world in his hands” but chose to risk his popularity and success to make the struggle for equality his life’s work.

From a young age, Paul Robeson distinguished himself as an unparalleled talent. After winning a scholarship in high school through a national oratory competition, he became only the third African American to attend Rutgers University. He became a two-time All-American football player and graduated first in his class in 1919. His professional career spanned the 1920s through the 1950s.

What would Paul Robeson’s life have been like if he had not become an outspoken advocate who fought against injustice? He had the option of a lavish life where he would have been widely accepted by people despite his color. However, his family was instrumental in developing the qualities of goodness and fairness, which manifested in his love for humanity. Emphasizing freedom and democracy in his talks throughout the country, he was known to say: “Through my singing, acting and speaking, I want to make freedom ring. Maybe I can touch people’s hearts better than I can their minds.”

Paul was born in Princeton, N.J., the fifth and last child of Rev. William Drew Robeson and Maria Louisa. His father was born a slave and escaped to join the Union army. He earned his theology degree at Lincoln University in Lincoln, Penn., in 1876. His mother, born to one of the oldest recorded African-American families — the Bustills — assisted her husband in his work by visiting the sick and bedridden, collecting food and clothing for the poor and finding work for refugees fleeing the horrific conditions of the South. She died tragically from burns suffered from a fire when Paul was 6 years old.

“I feel compelled to tell the story [of Paul Robeson’s life]...which has such strong family values,” says Frances Aulston, executive director of The Paul Robeson House in Philadelphia. Within the confines of Robeson’s last residence at 4951 Walnut Street is the organization she founded to preserve his legacy through its museum retrospective, traveling exhibits and educational programs. Currently, the Robeson House is hosting an art and video exhibit on Robeson at Moore College of Art in Philadelphia from May 27 to July 31.

“His life exemplifies integrity, discipline and self-reliance.... He strove for the highest potential of his life, and his father gave him the personal and social survival tools.... His father insisted that he strive for ‘maximum human fulfillment,’” Aulston says. Robeson credited his father with his accomplishments throughout his life.

Despite his unprecedented success in the arts, Robeson remained focused on championing causes such as anti-discrimination laws, labor union rights and the liberation of Africa and the Caribbean. He was determined to let people know that he succeeded in his career in spite of the inequities inherent in the world. From his college days until his retirement in 1961, he established the underlying conviction toward the role his talents played in the greater good. He summed up this conviction by saying: “Every artist, every scientist must decide now where he stands. The artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice; I have no alternative.”

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