



Dr. L. Oliver Robinson

Shaping a
Brighter Future

COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo

Photos by SuperSourceMedia.com and from the collection of Dr. Robinson

Dr. L. Oliver Robinson is a natural born leader. As the superintendent of Shenendehowa Schools for the last 13 years, he has proven that time and again. Becoming an education leader wasn't originally part of his plan, though. It happened more by what he calls divine intervention.

Born in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica in the West Indies, Dr. Robinson was a natural outdoors kid, loving to explore nature as much as possible and living an idyllic life. "Life in Jamaica was wonderful. There was a true sense of community and deep family connection. People genuinely cared for each other and issues of racism were not existent. It was a simple way of life," he explains. "It was simply about working to fulfill your dreams and take care of your family. To this day, going back to Jamaica is an instant source of stress relief and an appreciation of the beauties of life (people) and nature (land and water)."

In 1977, his family decided to move to the U.S. to provide a better foundation for their future. His father took a job in Belle Glade, FL in Palm Beach County and the Robinsons were on their way to new dreams. "The United States of America is a country of immigrants, built on the backs of immigrants (many involuntarily so) and supported by immigrants many generations removed. The U.S. represented an opportunity to get a quality education... the power of our public schools... and to fuel your dreams, prepare yourself for prosperity," Dr. Robinson states.

Dr. Robinson left Florida to attend college at Brown University where he met his wife, Dr. Tammy Ellis-Robinson. His studies through the years were largely in economics and organizational behavior and management, school finance and administration leadership. After graduation, he went home to Florida while waiting to start a job in a major corporation. A high school friend's father was a school principal nearby and asked Dr. Robinson to



be a substitute teacher for a few weeks while he was home. “Those few weeks changed my life and my outlook on what a job is supposed to be about,” says Dr. Robinson. “I learned that I could make a profound difference in the lives of young people and impact generations to come. Being an educator became a calling and is even stronger now that I have the opportunity to make an even greater impact as superintendent of schools.”

His passion for his job and the students in his care is evident in everything he does. He is very goal-oriented and tries to keep his eye on the big picture, helping those that work with him to do the same. “My leadership is about articulating a vision and inspiring others to follow. It is so critical that we have a similar focus, regardless if we take different paths to achieve it. Educating students necessitates constancy in purpose and an unwavering commitment to excellence. Kids on the educational journey don’t get a do-over,” he points out.

His experiences in a leadership position led to his book, *Naked in the Public Eye – Leading and Learning in an Era of Accountability*. The book provides a practical road map to success and illuminates the mental and emotional fortitude needed in educational leadership positions in the

sincere pursuit of excellence. A book meant to be read and absorbed instead of just sitting on a shelf, it has been called profound, inspirational, spiritual and intellectual.

Educators have always had an important and challenging job, but the climate has changed over the past couple of years. The digital world has placed a new layer both within the classroom and the world the students face without. Bullying is on the rise and the media portrays one tragic story after another about school shootings, racism and the supposed decline of our schools. However, Dr. Robinson has a brighter outlook on the use of the digital world. “The 24/7 news cycle has dramatically changed the social landscape,” he explains. “The throwing of mud and daggers from behind the online curtain has caused more issues of bullying and harassment, and seemingly an overall erosion of respect and simple kindness... the ugly side of things have been revealed. Thankfully, the same instant access to information (videos) has also allowed people to aggressively confront negativity, bias, bigotry and intolerance. In so many ways social media, as a close colleague described, is like ‘sunshine and disinfectant.’ Matters are brought to the light and forced to be reckoned with. The challenge now for schools is to cultivate good digital citizens who value and respect different people, ideas and experiences and use technology to define and solve problems, and address issues from a larger context.”

He urges us all to remember that school shootings are not as constant as the sensationalism of the media would have us to believe. He says that schools are just as safe as any large organization, venue or even many homes. “The death of a young person is particularly devastating, leaving a lasting sting on families and communities,” he says. “To that very end, the safety of our children, of our schools, is everyone’s responsibility. There is a lot to the mantra of ‘See (know) something, say something.’ Everyone needs to see it as their responsibility.”

Dr. Robinson is the 2013 New York State Superintendent of the Year, but his service does not end just with the school



district. His drive to make a difference and contribute to leading our youth has led to multiple roles that are helping to shape the futures of the next generation. When his kids were younger, he coached youth football, not only directing them in the art of playing on the field, but in life survival skills as well, such as learning to be team players, having confidence in yourself, determination and to not fear failure. For over a decade now, he has served as the guest speaker at the GED graduation for inmates at two of our regional correctional facilities. "It is my honor to be a source of inspiration to them," says Dr. Robinson. "It is also extremely disheartening when you see and hear the stories, knowing that with better guidance, better role modeling, better educational opportunities, many inmates would have traveled the path of prosperity and not imprisonment. This all shows that as a society we have work to do. Every life needs to be valued more, respected more, supported more, matter more."



He is a guest speaker at many events besides and also serves on the Macedonia Scholarship Committee, the NYS Teachers Retirement System Board of Directors, is Co-Chair of the NYS Council of School Superintendents and serves on the boards of the Ronald McDonald House and the Double H Ranch. These two organizations have afforded him the opportunity to contribute to two important missions that support children and their families during the trials of childhood disease. Speaking of what he has witnessed through his recent work with the Double H, Dr. Robinson states that it is "clear and evident that this organization is the epitome of being socially responsible. It is amazing to see and hear the stories of wonderful young people with debilitating, even life-threatening illnesses, being able to go to camp and have the times of their lives.

The volunteers and donors are remarkable."

The Robinson talent also extends throughout his family. Tammy is now a professor in the School of Education Special Ed department. She is also a writer and has published multiple articles about teaching and learning. Their sons, Oliver (21), a senior at Howard University, is a philosopher and a rapper, and Erik (19), is a talented artist specializing in cartoon and animation, while their daughter, Geneive (16), is a fantastic ballet dancer. Their household also contains their 13-year-old dog, Teddy, as well as two guinea pigs and a gecko lizard. Working out to remain physically sound is important to Dr. Robinson and their family regularly attends church to remain centered. They also enjoy camping and boating on Sacandaga Lake. "I like the quiet things in life," says Dr. Robinson. "Opportunities to be in tune with my mind, body and soul."

That centeredness has been important in helping him with his pivotal role in the community – one he is honored to have. "It is a tremendous honor and privilege to have been the superintendent of Shenendehowa for the past 13 years. I'm beyond fortunate to have a tremendous team of professionals who are committed to excellence."

He is excited for this new school year as they will be able to build upon the successes of previous years and incorporate challenging new practices to enhance the educational atmosphere and address emerging challenges. This new focus on innovative practices and the effective use of emerging technology and informational sources has redefined teaching and learning. He says the goal is to make the learning experience and the whole educational journey more engaging

and dynamic in the months to come.

Dr. Robinson's job is a true passion for which he is immensely grateful. "I love the fact that every day, with every decision, I can make a positive difference for a child, an employee, a family, for the community," he says. "I love the ability to interface, interact and engage with people from varied and diverse backgrounds. I love the ability to help contribute to shaping a brighter future for thousands of children. It is a privilege to help bring out the genius in every child!" ■

Do you know a neighbor who has a story to share? Nominate your neighbor to be featured in one of our upcoming issues! Contact us at jcaputo@bestversionmedia.com.