

The New York Times

Jackie Robinson's Legacy Stretches Beyond the Baseball Field

As M.L.B. celebrates Jackie Robinson Day, scholars from a foundation created in his honor — like Rep. Lauren Underwood — work to fulfill his vision for society.



“It gave us exposure to even let us know that those circles exist and how to navigate them,” Rep. Lauren Underwood said of the doors opened by the Jackie Robinson Foundation. “It created that opportunity for me as a student nurse.” Credit...Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images



By [David Waldstein](#)

April 14, 2023, 6:25 a.m. ET

The closest Lauren Underwood ever came to being a baseball player was the night in 2007 when she was asked to throw out the ceremonial first pitch on Jackie Robinson Day at Comerica Park in Detroit. She practiced for days, tossing pitches from the mound of the baseball stadium of the University of Michigan, where she studied nursing.

She got pretty good at it, too, able to heave the ball over those 60 feet 6 inches directly into the catcher's mitt. But when she arrived at the park on the appointed day, she was told she had to throw from the grass halfway to home plate. Now a representative for the 14th Congressional district in Illinois, Underwood laughs at the memory.

"I threw it way over the catcher's head," she said.

Underwood was never much of an athlete. She was more focused on academics, and participated in the Girl Scouts. But a significant part of her life has been shaped by the vision and legacy of Robinson, a legendary baseball star who helped transform American society by integrating Major League Baseball and later using his fame as a persistent advocate for social justice and activism.

As it does every year, Major League Baseball on Saturday will honor the anniversary of the day that Robinson first broke Baseball's racial barrier on April 15, 1947. Players will wear Robinson's No. 42 to commemorate his achievement, which helped shift many long-held beliefs about race in the United States.

But Robinson's legacy goes far beyond the baseball field. It also extends to hundreds of Jackie Robinson Foundation scholars and alumni, like Underwood, who help to fulfill Robinson's vision of a more just society through their own accomplishments.

Image



Robinson signed his first Dodgers contract on April 10, 1947, and made his debut with the team on April 15. Every year, M.L.B. honors Robinson on the 15th by having players wear his jersey number. Credit...Associated Press

They are engineers, partners at financial institutions, doctors, attorneys, Hollywood executives and civic leaders like Underwood, who embody Robinson's commitment to uplift and enhance the lives of underserved people of color in a variety of ways, including education and economic independence.

As much as a Black ballplayer today can be seen as the living extension of Robinson's legacy, so too are the Jackie Robinson Foundation scholars and alumni, even if such a characterization makes Underwood feel unworthy.

"That makes me a little uncomfortable, to be candid with you," she said, "because he was so great."

But Della Britton, the president and chief executive of the foundation, said that many of the scholars in the program do reflect Robinson's core principles of civic engagement, especially Underwood.

"We constantly tell the scholars that they are ambassadors of his legacy and she is a quintessential example of that legacy," Britton said.

Image



Underwood thanked Rachel Robinson "for believing in and investing in little ol' me." Credit...Anna Rose Layden for The New York Times

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Jackie Robinson Foundation, which was founded by Robinson's widow, Rachel, in 1973, the year after her husband died. Underwood learned of the program when she attended Neuqua Valley High School in Naperville, Ill. She applied and was accepted in 2004.

The scholarship program provides on average \$32,000 over four years to 242 students. The organization also engages and provides resources for more than 4,000 other students as well.

The program requires the scholars participate in community service that is logged and overseen by the foundation. Underwood, who earned a masters degree in nursing at Johns Hopkins, completed internships in public health policy.

Students are also required to attend a four-day seminar in New York each year, where the scholars are immersed in social skills instruction, networking and public speaking.

Scholars are often assigned mentors, whether alumni or other benefactors, who take the students to lunches and provide guidance and support. As helpful as the scholarship was, Underwood said it was the social skills learned at these events that were particularly helpful to her. She discovered and incorporated many of the practices and niceties — many taken for granted by children of elites, and which she learned from mentors and alumni of opportunities and institutions that had never even occurred to her, like the Congressional Black Caucus.



“We constantly tell the scholars that they are ambassadors of his legacy and she is a quintessential example of that legacy,” Della Britton, the president and chief executive of the Jackie Robinson Foundation, above, said of Underwood. Credit... Julia Nihkinson/Associated Press

“It gave us exposure to even let us know that those circles exist,” she said, “and how to navigate them. It created that opportunity for me as a student nurse to see myself in a place where there has literally never been anybody like me before.”

Before she entered Congress, Underwood, a Democrat, was a senior adviser at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, helping communities respond to disasters

and public health emergencies and assisting with the implementation of the Affordable Care Act. She decided to run for a seat in the House of Representatives in 2018.

“I know Jackie would have been elated about the fact that she is dedicated to improving conditions in the community, particularly the dispensing of health care,” said Britton, the president of the foundation. “He would have been so proud of the fact that she used her brilliance and used it just as he used his celebrity to improve society.”

Underwood spoke at the foundation’s recent dinner in March, and discussed her special connection to Rachel Robinson, who also earned a postgraduate degree in psychiatric nursing. In her speech, Underwood said she would not have known how to attain any of her career goals without the foundation and its network of staff, alumni and donors.

She thanked Rachel Robinson, “for believing in and investing in little ol’ me and putting me on a path that really began here with the Jackie Robinson Foundation.”

On Saturday at Dodgers Stadium, 50 Jackie Robinson Scholars will throw out ceremonial first pitches to recognize not only Robinson’s life, but also the 50th anniversary of the foundation.

Wherever those pitches end up — in the catchers’ mitts or high over their heads — is not as important, to alumni like Underwood, as what led up to them and what happens long after.