

A Tribute to Reggie Robinson

Reggie Robinson, 63, died on Sept. 19, 2020, in Lawrence, Kansas, at home with his family, including his wife, Jane, and daughters, Clare and Page. Reggie was an exceptional public servant, a dedicated NAPA leader, an extraordinary person, and a treasured friend and colleague.

A Lifetime of Public Leadership and Impact

Former Kansas Governor and HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius summed up Reggie Robinson's career in public service with these words: "I knew Reggie to be both a passionate and a compassionate leader, a man of great accomplishment who helped those around him succeed as well. Reggie cared about educational excellence, about social justice and about the legal profession and system — and he served in leadership positions in all of these areas, both advancing the causes he cared about and making Kansas a better place for us to live."

Reggie indeed had an extensive record of public service in his native state of Kansas and beyond. He most recently served as CEO of the Kansas Health Foundation. Prior to that, he was vice chancellor for public affairs at the University of Kansas, director of KU's highly respected School of Public Affairs and Administration, president and CEO of the Kansas Board of Regents, a faculty member at both the Washburn and KU schools of law, a White House fellow, special assistant to Attorney General Janet Reno, and deputy associate attorney general for the United States.

Reggie's career in public service goes back at least to his undergraduate days at the University of Kansas, where he was student body vice president. Between college and law school, he served four years as a field artillery officer in the United States Army and was honorably discharged at the rank of captain. He earned his law degree at KU, serving as editor-in-chief of the Kansas Law Review.

Over the years, Reggie served in leadership roles for numerous nonprofit boards, state and local commissions and national organizations addressing criminal justice reform, juvenile justice, children and youth services, victim advocacy, civic leadership, mental health, public administration, as well as arts and humanities.

A Commitment to the Academy

Reggie was highly committed to the mission of the National Academy of Public Administration, serving on the board of directors from 2015-2020, including a term as chair in 2017-18. Reggie very capably led the recruitment process that resulted in the appointment of Terry Gerton as NAPA president and CEO.

An Extraordinary Person

Excerpts from published tributes:

"It's hard to calculate the scope of the loss when a man like Reggie Robinson leaves us — especially coming on the heels of the death of another heroic crusader for justice and fairness, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. These are people who, wherever they went, left things better than they found them. People whose legacy includes nurturing generations of leaders who followed them. I'm pleased to join the chorus of accolades coming from Reggie's friends, colleagues and students. The chorus reminds us of what we've lost — but should encourage our ambition to emulate Reggie's enterprise, unselfishness and grace."

— Kathleen Sebelius
Former Kansas Governor and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services

“Reggie was a brilliant and devoted public servant whose passion was to help others and make the world a better place...Beyond his remarkable intellect and record of service, Reggie will be remembered for his uncommon kindness, warmth, generosity and decency. To put it plainly, Reggie was the nicest and most compassionate person one could ever hope to meet. He was humble, thoughtful and gracious. He had a disarming wit and an easy smile that lit up the room. He cared deeply about people and made those around him feel special — because to Reggie, everyone *was* special.”

— Dr. Doug Girod
Chancellor, University of Kansas

“Whenever I met with him, no matter what the issue, I always came away feeling that I had learned something. His relentless optimism encouraged [and] inspired all who knew him.”

— Laura Kelly
Governor of Kansas

“Reggie was a tireless advocate for Kansas, KU and a good friend.”

— Jerry Moran
U.S. Senator, Kansas

“He was an incredibly gifted leader and a dedicated and caring public servant whose work made a tremendous impact on the Board of Regents, the University of Kansas and the entire public higher education system. He was also a caring and thoughtful friend and mentor to everyone whose path he crossed. Those of us who were fortunate enough to call ourselves his colleagues will forever be grateful for the chance to work alongside him.”

— Blake Flanders
President and CEO, Kansas Board of Regents

“Every time I saw Reggie was a memorable moment. Every time I got to say hello and see his smile and ask him how he was doing was always a special moment with Reggie...I learned from him that success and leadership is nothing without integrity and caring for others like the way he did...[he] found all the ways to make sure that you felt that there was something that you had to give to your community. And now we can only strive to be like that a little more each day.”

— Jessie Pringle
Former KU student leader mentored by Reggie Robinson

Our Friend and Colleague

We are deeply thankful for the opportunity to call Reggie Robinson our friend and colleague. We were inspired by his intellect and integrity; we are grateful for his professional leadership and impact; and we are comforted by the enduring legacy of his warmth and humanity.

Jewel Scott speaks for all of us in this remembrance: “Reggie was a consummate professional who modeled the concept of service above self. He truly listened to others, valued what he heard, and acted with respect and compassion. His wisdom, wit, and pursuit of excellence made him a great colleague and the best kind of friend, teacher, and mentor.”

— NAPA Fellows: Erik Bergrud, Charles Epp, Marilu Goodyear, Steven Maynard-Moody,
John Nalbandian, Rosemary O’Leary, Barbara Romzek, Jewel Scott and David Warm