



DON P. ROBERTS

RAGS TO RICHES: THE PURSUIT OF PASSION

For my children.

May you always remember that being rich and happy is an internal
state of mind.

PROLOGUE

My name is Don P. Roberts and I was born on August 3, 1962 in Atlanta, Georgia. I'm a "Grady Baby" which is defined as "a person or child who was delivered at Grady Memorial Hospital in downtown Atlanta." Believe it or not, many Grady babies have gone on to change the world, so I see it as a badge of honor.

With that "Grady Baby" knowledge in mind, you'll see that my story is one of perseverance and overcoming the odds. So as you read, I hope you resonate with it and feel encouraged to push past struggles within your own life.

MY UPBRINGING

To start off, I'll tell you a little bit about my family. I was raised in the Grady Homes Housing Projects by a single mother, Ms. Willie Belle Roberts, whom I loved and adored. If you're wondering why she was named after a boy, you're not alone. I asked her the same question one day and she said during that time, it was common for females from the country (Dawson, Georgia) to be named after men. Looking back, I see that she worked harder than any man around.

She had my oldest brother at just 16 years old and my second oldest brother shortly afterward. Because of this, she was thrown out on the streets, along with my siblings and they went missing for an unknown amount of time. Fortunately, my aunt (her sister) and uncle drove around for hours one day looking for them. They found her and my siblings asleep under a cardboard blanket.

By the time I came along, my mom was working as a housekeeper/maid in the mornings and would always return home a few hours after school was over. She would ask about school and our day and shortly thereafter, cook dinner, take a nap until around 9:00 pm, and then jump up and go to work at the warehouse until 6:00 am the next morning.

Our signal that she was home was the smell of bacon, sausage, eggs, and grits waiting for us.

Even holidays were special. My siblings and I always got the best toys in the neighborhood for Christmas. It wasn't until years later that I found out most of the toys were usually a year old, and hand-me-downs from the white family my mom worked for during the day.

When it was time for my family to move from the projects and into a home that my mom was able to rent (mostly free from my aunt and uncle), I cried for days because I didn't want to leave. I was happy, had great friends, and my mother had taught me that "being rich and happy is an internal state of mind." She made me feel as rich and happy as any kid in the world, so I didn't see why we had to leave.

Once we were out of the projects, I began to resent the fact that my mother was a maid and I stopped telling people that I used to live in the projects. They used that as an opportunity to call me poor and I hated it because I never felt that way.

It's actually crazy that I didn't become ashamed of being poor and living in the projects until I actually moved out of the projects.

I see now that through it all, my mother was only trying to give us a better life.

When I look back and think about the sacrifices she made, just so my siblings and I could be happy kids, I can't help but cry. The difficulty she went through and her simultaneous selflessness is simply difficult to grasp.

On the other hand, I wish I could say more about my father, John Grisham, but I unfortunately don't know much. He wasn't around like he should have been.

Lastly, I have three siblings - two of which (one brother and one sister) I'm very close with. And oh, my immediate family wasn't complete without Jazz. He was a beautiful Afghan hound that I couldn't forget if I tried.

THE START OF MY DREAMS

I joined the band in 7th grade as a not-so-good trumpet player. Like most young boys, my true love at the time was sports. I just knew that I was going to play professional football. It's hilarious to think about now because my height is a pretty obvious hindrance to that dream. In fact, that's ultimately why I ended up joining the band. Everyone in sports seemed to be growing except me.

Once I reached high school, I met a young and exceptional band director by the name of Alfred Watkins. He was a recent graduate of Florida A&M University and with his help, I really began to excel on my trumpet. This was a life-changing moment because Mr. Watkins became the catalyst that ignited a love for music that would exceed any and all of my previous interests.

Sure, I maintained a love for sports and even ran track, played soccer, and was also the editor of my high school newspaper. But music had my heart.

I defied stereotypes by attending college at Florida A&M University where I played in the band.

Initially, I was studying to become a journalist because people told me I would never make any money as a musician. But again, I just couldn't shake my love for music. I remembered the lessons my mother taught me: "Being rich and happy is simply a state of mind." So I changed my major to study Music Education.

This decision forever changed my life because it put me on a path of unfathomable success. I was a drum major in the world-famous FAMU Marching 100, I became a member of Kappa Kappa Psi Honorary Band Fraternity, and I also became the first person from my immediate family of siblings, cousins, uncles, and aunts to graduate from college... and I did it with honors.

LIGHTS, CAMERAS, ACTION

Most would say that graduating from college was a significant accomplishment for a kid from the projects, but it was just the beginning. I became a music educator, and although I disliked the paperwork, I loved working with the students and teachers.

My high school band, Southwest DeKalb, became the first African American band, along with Miami Central, to ever perform at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City. We also received superior ratings each and every year at the annual Band Festival. From there, we became the only high school band in the world to perform on global television at the Opening Ceremonies of the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia.

These accomplishments would be pinnacle achievements for most band directors and musicians, but I knew I was capable of more. I *wanted* to do more.

One hot summer day at band practice, I received a phone call from the team of Dallas Austin, a Grammy Award-winning producer. They said Dallas wanted to come by to observe rehearsal.

I had absolutely no idea why a man of his notoriety would want to meet with a high school band director. Well, Dallas and his entourage showed up at band rehearsal in several incredibly beautiful luxury cars. All the kids were oohing and aahing.

After the gawking was over and rehearsal was finished, I got a chance to get away from the band to talk. Dallas told me he had been a fan of Southwest DeKalb's band for a long time. He saw us perform at the Battle of the Bands and wanted us to be a part of a movie he was working on.

That movie was "Drumline" and Dallas asked me, a little kid from the projects, to be the Executive Band Consultant for the (now) greatest band movie of all-time.

I was responsible for training the actors, writing the precision drills, rehearsing the band, etc. and ultimately, the movie received national and international acclaim.

In 2003, it was nominated by the NAACP as "Most Outstanding Motion Picture" and was also nominated for an "American Choreography Award" for outstanding achievement in a feature film.

After "Drumline", I was totally happy with what I thought would be my only movie project, but for some reason the phone has been ringing ever since.

Since “Drumline” debuted in 2002, I've had the opportunity to work on Marvel's "Captain America and the Winter Soldier", Beyonce's iconic Coachella Performance, the Emmy Award-winning “Dear Evan Hansen” musical and soon-to-be movie, as well as numerous other movies, TV commercials, and music videos.

I've had the honor of working with some of the most dynamic movie directors and producers in the world, such as Will Packer, Rob Hardy, and of course Charles Stone, from "Drumline".

Most recently, I had the honor of working with Tyler Perry. I'm so inspired by his struggles to become successful because it looks a lot like my journey. People only see the mega millionaire and successful artist, producer, and director, but I see a man who struggled to make his dream a reality and now he is changing the world. That's my next step also.

Today, I have a company called DRUMLine Live and we have performed and toured in almost every state in America, as well as several tours in Japan and Korea. It has become one of the longest tenured African American theatrical companies in the world.



RELATIONSHIPS & CHILDREN

While my career as an Educator has absolutely been a significant part of my life thus far, I've grown and evolved from previous relationships I've been in as well.

One that I'll highlight is Yona. She was my first love. I met her in college at a fraternity picnic and was immediately attracted to her at first sight. I fell in love with her in a very short span of time and ultimately proposed to her. It was a memorable experience, but the wedding is what really stands out because it was filled with music, family, and friends.

My wife was wonderful and our marriage was great before I messed it up. I wasn't the best husband which led to our divorce, but with a lot of prayer and family, I healed. That experience taught me that it's really hard to find the right person. Since then, I have never found anyone as loving and caring as my ex-wife.

Despite the divorce, I'm grateful for Yona because I had two wonderful children from one of the best women in the world.

My beautiful daughter was born with a deformity in one of her toes on both feet. She had to have surgery and wear casts on both feet for the majority of her first two years of life. It's something about watching your daughter learn to walk with two casts on her feet that will make you realize that any problems you have aren't so big after all. She grew up to become a two-time state champion gymnast, and graduated with both a bachelor's and master's degree from Louisiana State University. Now, she is a Lead Public Relations Manager at AT&T in Dallas, Texas.

My oldest son is on track to become a doctor. He attends Florida A&M University where he is also a saxophonist and drum major in the very same Marching 100 band that I played in. I see him as somewhat of an anomaly. He was actually born a genius. I'm joking, but he truly is brilliant. He took the SAT once, got the highest score in his class during his senior year of high school, and graduated with honors. I'm sure he is going to eventually struggle with a few things in life as we all do, but right now, he sure makes everything look easy.

And then there's my youngest son. He attends Emory University, one of the best schools in the world, and is also on track to become a doctor.

It's impressive because he was diagnosed with dyslexia, and his teachers kept recommending to hold him back a grade level due to his lack of academic progression.

To see him overcome his obstacles, become an honor student, while now pursuing his goal to become a doctor lets me know I don't have any excuses.

With all of that being said, my kids are the greatest joy of my life, and nothing makes me happier than seeing them succeed. Through my kids and my mother, I learned that perseverance can overcome absolutely any obstacle.

ANGELS

Through this point in my life, I've lost my grandparents, biological parents, and some of my aunts, uncles, and cousins - all of whom meant the world to me. Some died due to natural causes, some by accident, and others due to illness, so the days and months following were of course difficult.

I've grown and learned to deal with the pain of their passing and found that pain eventually turns into loving memories. If I had the chance to say anything to them, I'd say "I love you more."

EPILOGUE

All-in-all my life has been filled with significant moments like when I began playing the trumpet, when I moved out of the projects, when I went to college, when I got my first job, when I got married, and when I had kids. I've had fun memories with friends and family, and I largely attribute my success to my mother, who had the biggest impact on my life.

If I never work another day in music, movies, television, or whatever, I can proudly say that it's been a damn good ride, and I couldn't be prouder of where I came from and how I was raised. As my mother taught me, "being rich and happy, truly is a state of mind."

The lessons she taught me will guide my life forever, and I hope I can pass those same lessons down to my kids.

Not bad for a Grady baby from the projects!!

A LITTLE MORE ABOUT ME

Race:

- Black

Ethnicity:

- African American

Native Language:

- English

Religion and Beliefs:

- Christian
- I respect other people's religious choice

Sex/Gender

- Male/Man

Sexual Orientation

- Heterosexual

Medical Background

- I have been healthy for the majority of my life. I don't exercise as much as I used to, but I attempt to exercise as much as I can.

Where I've Lived:

- I was raised in Atlanta and I went to college in Tallahassee.

Historical events I remember

- President Barack Obama Elected (2008), Osama Bin Laden Killed (2011), COVID-19 Pandemic (2020), Insurrection at the Capitol (2021)
- All events were very dynamic and/or traumatic.

Parting Advice:

- Love your family.



A LIFE TO SHARE