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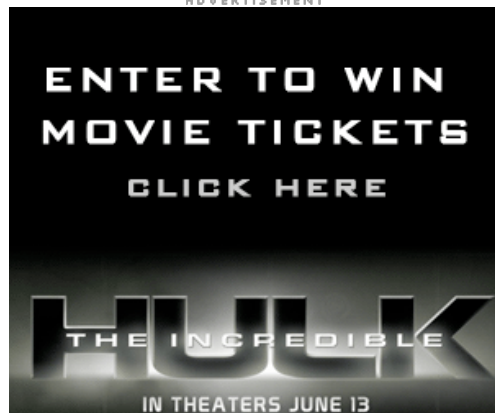
## Flashback: A degree of honor in Will Robinson

BY CHARLIE VINCENT • FREE PRESS COLUMNIST • APRIL 28, 2008

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They're going to honor ol' Will Robinson again today.

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Out at Calihan Hall on the campus of the University of Detroit Mercy, they're going to ask him to stand on his 85-year-old legs and accept an honorary degree and the applause and acclaim earned by a lifetime of doing good works.

You've probably read his name in the newspapers.

Usually it will say something like: Will Robinson, assistant to Pistons vice president of basketball operations Rick Sund, said . . .

Or sometimes there might be a reference that Robinson coached Doug Collins at Illinois State University.

Occasionally, there will be no modifiers at all beside his name.

Occasionally, we will just say Will Robinson said this or Will Robinson did that and leave it at that. We'll assume everybody knows who Will Robinson is. Assume everybody knows what Will Robinson has done.

But we probably are wrong.

Will Robinson is one of those men who has outlived his history. One of those men who



MARY SCHROEDER/DFP file photo

Will Robinson died Monday at the age of 96.

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disproves the adage about the good dying young. He doesn't like to give his age, but if pressed, he'll tell you he was born in 1911. He is a black man who grew up during the worst possible times, when he could play golf in the Ohio high school tournament, but only if he played at a different time of day than the white kids, so no one had to see him.

He could have been bitter, he could have said nobody needs that kind of aggravation, nobody needs that kind of disrespect, nobody needs that kind of humiliation. He could have turned his back on athletics for treating him differently because he was black and gone to some street corner somewhere to hang and while away his time and his life.

Instead, Will Robinson made it a lifetime work to see that others used sports before sports could use them, dedicated every working day to finding a way to make life richer, mostly for young black kids. But not just for young black kids.

Beginning in 1937 -- 10 years before Jackie Robinson became the first Afro-American to play in the major leagues, 13 years before the first blacks played in the NBA, 21 years before Ozzie Virgil became the first Tiger of color -- Will Robinson coached kids.

He was athletic director of the Center Avenue YMCA in Pittsburgh, then he took over the Wabash YMCA in Chicago and in 1943 began coaching at Chicago DuSable High School.

A year later, he came to Detroit -- in the wake of race riots in which 58 were killed -- and became head football and basketball coach at old Miller High. And after that he coached at Cass Tech and Pershing and won city and state championships.

And he was proud of that. But his bigger job, his more important job, was teaching kids to live productive lives, helping about 300 get college scholarships, watching them grow into bankers and policemen and businessmen and politicians.

He has been a coach, a teacher, a guide and a trailblazer who, when he was hired to coach Illinois State's basketball team in 1970, became the first black to coach an NCAA Division I sport of any kind.

In the lifetime that began when William Taft was president and when Arizona was only a territory, Will Robinson has scouted for the Lions and the Tigers, coached football and basketball, golf and swimming, touched thousands, taught a few enough about their sport to enable them to make a living at it, taught many more enough about life to help them prosper in it.

Even he will tell you he is not young any longer -- an admission he wouldn't have made a few years ago. And too often in our society we give honor only to the young and the strong and neglect the men who were young and strong but are no longer, the men who trampled down the path others now walk with ease.

The people at Detroit Mercy have not forgotten.

In the letter detailing why they are giving him an honorary degree, they noted that Will Robinson had been a successful coach but wrote, too, that this is an honor he deserves because for a lifetime he has been "a positive influence in the lives of thousands of young students . . . a role model to young people by encouraging them to persist in their education and participate positively in society."

Will Robinson has lived not just a full life, but a productive one. A worthwhile one. One that

over AL's worst

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has left a legacy even during his lifetime and will remain a testimonial to him into the next century, when young men he touched, touch others and spread not hate or bitterness but truth and pride and the value of education and hard work.

Nowadays his office is a little cubbyhole off one corner of the basketball court in the Pistons' practice gym, and his walls are filled with citations and pictures of men who were once his students, and stacked on the floor are more pictures and mementos and awards enough to fill a museum.

He coached Spencer Haywood. And Ralph Simpson. And Glen Doughty and Paul Seals. And all of that was so long ago that the names may be found in a Hall of Fame somewhere, but mean little to the young people who read today's sports pages.

Many whom he coached, whom he helped, whom he guided away from trouble, are senior citizens today. His career has lasted so long that some of his old students have died and much of what he has accomplished is remembered only in the yellowed pages of scrapbooks and in the memories of those he helped along the way.

This afternoon his accomplishments will be recalled for today's generation of graduates at Detroit Mercy. Today, he will be held up as an example of a way to live a life.

Not many of us are that lucky; not many of us are that worthy.

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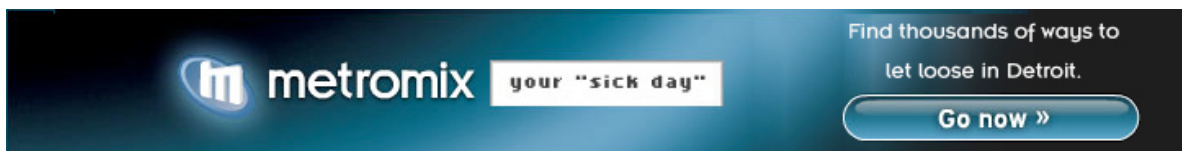
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