

# Teacher, Social Justice Pioneer

**D**r. Robert Barnett Binswanger, 88, – a teacher, educational advocate, and civic steward for over six decades – passed away March 16th in Hanover, New Hampshire, in the company of his family.

Robert Binswanger was a builder of educational institutions, an engineer of systems change, and a social entrepreneur before there was a label for such practitioners. Robert believed everyone should have an opportunity to succeed, and that meant a high quality education for all. He was an advocate for equality and civil rights to the most disadvantaged Americans because he saw it as an act of patriotism and an extension of his civic duty.

Upon learning of Robert's passing, former President Bill Clinton said, "Bob Binswanger was a pioneer who proved that students can succeed against challenging odds in schools with a rigorous curriculum and great teachers and principals who believe in them and their ability to learn. He was a national treasure and an inspiration to me."

A graduate of Deerfield Academy and Dartmouth College, Robert began his career in the Philadelphia real estate business founded by his father, but quickly realized his path lay elsewhere. Under the guidance of his mentor Frank Boyden, longtime headmaster of Deerfield Academy, Robert began his teaching and coaching career at Deerfield and was encouraged by Boyden to earn master's and doctorate degrees at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Robert was a teacher to students in many venues between 1955 and 2015, including Deerfield, the Peace Corps (where he was one of the first training officers), Harvard's Graduate School of Education, the University of Maine, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Boston Latin Academy, Hampton University, and Dartmouth College. His students enjoyed his teaching and regularly sought his mentorship, career advice, and coaching. He maintained relationships with former students for years and encouraged many to enter and become leaders in the field of education.

In addition to his teaching positions, Robert played a role in shaping education policy, beginning with his role as the Executive Director of PACE, a local citizens' group that worked to help improve the quality of education and race

relations in the Greater Cleveland area schools. Later, he worked as the head of the Experimental Schools Program at the U.S. Department of Education during the Nixon and Ford administrations. Robert also helped reshape curriculum and academic policies as Vice Chancellor of the University of Maine and strengthened the teaching and academic curriculum as Headmaster of Boston Latin Academy, a public exam school serving mainly low-income students from communities of color.

During the course of his career, Robert was consulted on a wide array of educational programs. He was a proud Jew who helped build – and taught in – two synagogue communities. Robert also recommended reforms to academic standards at parochial schools run by the Archdiocese of New York and served on a Department of Defense Commission recommending improvements to the education provided to children living on U.S. military bases around the world.

"Bob devoted himself to public service and improving the minds and the lives of young people in Maine and throughout the country. His passion for teaching and his commitment to high standards has left a lasting impression on his community and on the students and colleagues whose lives he touched," said former Maine Senator and Secretary of Defense William Cohen.

Robert also served on the Boards of Deerfield Academy (where he also received the Heritage Award), Macalester College, Hampton University, and the Jackson Laboratory. He received his first honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, from Bowdoin College, and gave several high school and college commencement addresses over the years.

During the course of his life, Robert was a participant in many civic activities, ranging from organizing social gatherings at Psi U. and Casque & Gauntlet while at Dartmouth, to marching in the annual Philadelphia Mummers' parade, to serving as a background actor in productions by the Cleveland Opera, to joining weekly luncheons at the Rotary Club in Hanover, New Hampshire.

Robert began his adult life as a Wendell Willkie Republican and migrated to the Rockefeller wing of the party before becoming a strong supporter of President Clinton. In the fall of 2004 Robert moved to Columbus, Ohio, to volunteer for the presidential cam-



paign of Senator John Kerry, and in 2008, at the age of 78, Robert moved to Green Bay, Wisconsin, to volunteer for the presidential campaign of Senator Barack Obama.

Throughout his life, Robert marched to the beat of his own drum and kept marching even when it meant risking his own career ambitions. He also firmly believed in service to country, community and family. He was extremely proud to be a U.S. Army veteran. Robert was a world traveler who met with Popes and Prime Ministers, and was close friends with business leaders and entrepreneurs. His favorite place was Rockport, Maine, but he also delighted in finding the most authentic, out of the way, and often uncomfortable places to visit. His energy, enthusiasm and sense of humor were infectious both at work and at play. He took a personal, lifelong interest in the lives of his children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, cousins, friends, and the friends of his children, all of whom were targets of both his love and his elaborate practical jokes.

Robert and his beloved wife Penny were married for over fifty years. Robert deeply enjoyed Penny's company, her wry humor, and her efforts to check his more exuberant impulses, until her passing in 2017. He is survived by his three sons, Ben, Josh and Morgan; daughters-in-law Karen and Kim; grandchildren Lucy, Colin, Sally, Samantha and Sam; and his brothers Frank and John.

Friends, students and colleagues wishing to attend his memorial service at Deerfield Academy on Sunday, June 23rd, 2019 should RSVP to [binsgathering@gmail.com](mailto:binsgathering@gmail.com).

For over 20 years, Robert enjoyed serving on the Selection Committee interviewing and recommending recipients of the Ron Brown Scholarships. Contributions in his memory may be made at [www.ronbrown.org](http://www.ronbrown.org) or mailed to: Ron Brown Scholar Program, 485 Hillsdale Drive, Suite 206, Charlottesville, VA 22901.