

FREE

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Head of the class!

Richmond Public Schools teacher Rodney A. Robinson, who mentors and inspires students at the Richmond Juvenile Detention Center, wins 2019 National Teacher of the Year

By Ronald E. Carrington and Jeremy M. Lazarus

Rodney A. Robinson, the 40-year-old history and social studies teacher who inspires students each and every day inside the Richmond Juvenile Detention Center, where he has worked at the Virgie Binford Education Center since 2015, has been named 2019 National Teacher of the Year.

The announcement was made to a national television audience Wednesday on “CBS This Morning,” where Mr. Robinson was interviewed on the show’s New York set by Gayle King.

He was chosen from a field of four finalists for the award presented by the Council of Chief State School Officers and is the first Richmond Public Schools teacher — and the third in Virginia history — to receive the national title.

In the announcement, the council lauded him for creating a positive school culture by empowering his students, many of whom have experienced trauma, to become civically minded social advocates who use their skills and voices to affect physical and policy changes at their school and in their communities.

He uses a whole child approach to help his students gain the academic, social and emotional skills they need to move beyond their past mistakes and pursue

their dreams for a better future, the council stated.

“Every student in this country deserves access to a teacher who is committed to their success,” said Carissa Moffat Miller, executive director of the council that identifies exceptional teachers across the country and seeks to recognize and amplify their work.

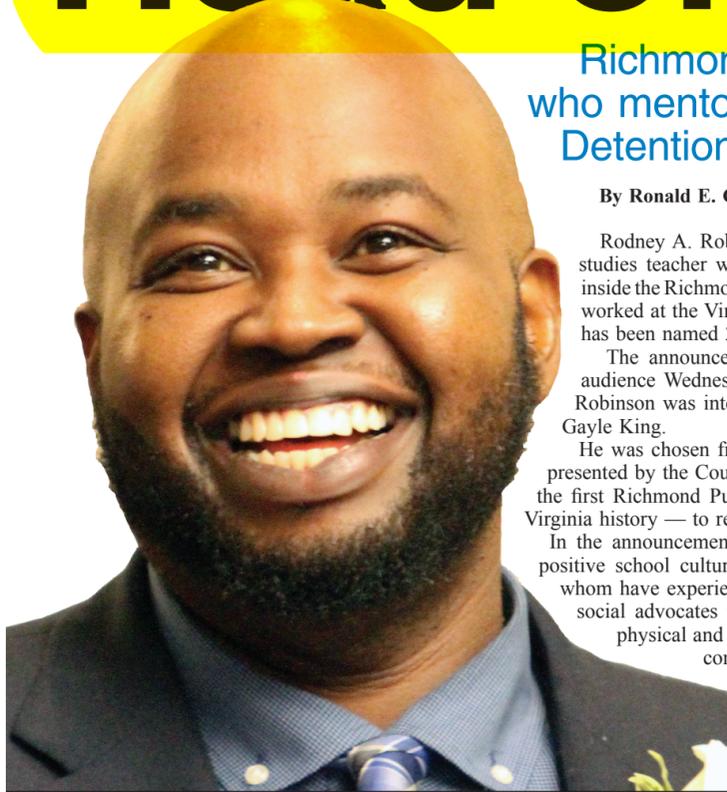
“I congratulate Rodney Robinson on this outstanding recognition and look forward to him engaging in conversations across the country about ways to address the school-to-prison pipeline and improve educational equity for all students.”

Mr. Robinson’s characteristic vibrant smile and humble attitude shined through during the interview with Ms. King, that also included video of Virgie Binford principal Ta’Neshia Ford recounting how she convinced him to come and work with the unique population of students in juvenile detention. Two of his former students — he has been teaching since 2000 — also were interviewed. Both are now teachers themselves.

In a telephone interview later Wednesday morning with the Free Press, an excited Mr. Robinson said he learned about six weeks ago that he had won the nation’s top teaching award, but had to keep it a secret until the formal announcement.

“I wanted to scream from the top of City Hall!” he said, but he shared the news only with his wife, Summer Joy Robinson, who teaches in the elementary school program for gifted students.

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Mayor Stoney

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

Budget blowup splits mayor, City Council

Relations between Mayor Levar M. Stoney and City Council disintegrated Wednesday as council poised to make a modest cut in departmental spending and reject his proposed 9-cent increase in the property tax rate.

In a stunning move, the mayor responded by eliminating \$11 million in revenue that the city is poised to collect and that council was counting on to help balance its version of the budget.

Then, his No. 2, Chief Administrative Officer Selena Cuffee-Glenn led a walkout of administration officials, to punctuate the point that the mayor has junked his campaign promise to build better relations with the governing body and instead is no longer willing to work with the council on the 2019-20 budget plan that is

to go into effect July 1.

In the wake of the walkout, at least six members of City Council voted to hire outside counsel as they consider suing Mayor Stoney to force him to certify the \$11 million in funds.

The walkout came after a nearly eight-hour budget session during which council members began looking at changes to the mayor’s budget plan.

Among other things, the council jettisoned the mayor’s proposal to provide nearly \$1 million to GRTC to beef up service in the East End and South Side and \$3 million to provide incentives to long-serving, higher paid employees to retire so they could be replaced by lower-salaried employees.

In other discussions, the council appeared to clear most of the \$18 million in new funding that

Richmond Public Schools had sought, although a portion is to be placed in a special fund with requirements that RPS submit separate requests to use the money.

The blowup over revenue came five hours into the session after at least five City Council members voted to hold the property tax rate at its current level of \$1.20 per \$100 of assessed value.

The final straw for Mayor Stoney came after five members, council members Andreas Addison, Kim Gray, Chris Hilbert, Kristen Larson and Reva Trammell, voted for a 1.5 percent across-the-board cut in spending for all city departments, except police, fire, social services and public schools to save about \$2.9 million.

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Ms. Gray

Agelasto out, but not soon enough for critics

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

Parker C. Agelasto is ready to leave his seat on Richmond City Council nine months after he and his family moved their residence outside the 5th District he was first elected to serve in 2012.

Bowing to a demand from Richmond Commonwealth’s Attorney Michael N. Herring and facing the prospect of mounting legal bills, Mr. Agelasto reluctantly issued written notice Tuesday that he would resign his seat effective Nov. 30 in a bid to avoid the “prospect of expensive legal action.”

His action came as he took part in City Council deliberations to prepare a balanced budget and deal with the mayor’s proposal to impose a cigarette tax and increase the tax on real estate to raise new revenue.

Giving up his effort to serve through the end of his second term in December 2020, Mr. Agelasto said his action, announced in an email sent to constituents and his colleagues, enables his council colleagues to request that the Richmond Circuit Court set a special election to fill the seat. It also opens the door for potential candidates to consider entering the race to succeed him.

Mr. Agelasto, who also serves as executive director of a Richmond area land conservation group, urged his colleagues to request that the special election coincide with the Nov. 5 general election.

In issuing his notice of his resignation, Mr. Agelasto essentially accepted a deal from Mr. Herring, who sought to ensure a smooth transition and to avoid filing his own legal action with Richmond Circuit Court to



Mr. Agelasto

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The Market @ 25th opens Monday with fanfare and high expectations

By Ronald E. Carrington

A new grocery store reflecting Church Hill’s history and contribution to Richmond is set to open next week in the East End’s food desert.

The Market @ 25th will have its highly anticipated grand opening 9 a.m. Monday, April 29, with fanfare that includes a ribbon-cutting, remarks from elected officials and others, including the store’s developer and operator, Norm Gold.

The Armstrong High School Marching Band and a Franklin Military Academy color guard will lead the celebrants into the new 25,000-square-foot store at the intersection of 25th Street and Fairmount Avenue in Church Hill.

In a recent Free Press interview, Mr. Gold said he wants

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The highly anticipated 25,000-square-foot grocery store, The Market @ 25th, will open Monday, April 29, at 25th Street and Fairmount Avenue in Church Hill.



Regina H. Boone/Richmond Free Press

Easter on Parade

Six-month-old Maryiah Tims looks over the shoulder of her aunt, Zaire Tims, during Sunday’s Easter on Parade event along Monument Avenue. Like Maryiah, hundreds of people dressed in holiday finery and bonnets for the annual free event. The future of Easter on Parade is up in the air as sponsor Venture Richmond backs out. Story, more photos, B2.

Ora Lomax, longtime NAACP leader, civil rights advocate, dies at 86

By Jeremy M. Lazarus

For decades, black women could only work behind the scenes at white-owned retail stores in Richmond during the harsh era of segregation.

Ora Mae Perry Lomax helped change all that.

In 1960, as sit-in protests mounted over whites-only lunch counters in Downtown and the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, Raylass Department Store chose her to be the first African-American clerk to wait on customers on the floor.

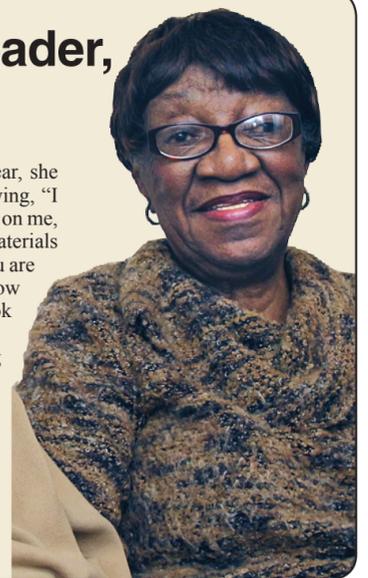
Mrs. Lomax trained for the opportunity working for more than five years at a nearby African-American-owned boutique in Jackson Ward, where the owner took her under

her wing.

In a public radio interview last year, she recalled the owner, a Mrs. James, saying, “I want to train you. So she went to work on me, and we talked about fashions and materials and colors, you know. She said, ‘If you are going into fashion, you’ve got to know about colors and what’s going to look good on you and somebody else.’”

Mrs. Lomax recalled shrugging off being called the “n” word as she began changing the complexion of the Raylass sales force. And then she moved on to other stores, including Lerner’s, LaVogue and Miller & Rhoads department store, one of the

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RPS teacher Rodney A. Robinson, wins 2019 National Teacher of the Year

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Mr. Robinson will receive the award May 2 in Washington as he and other state teachers of the year gather for a gala and presentation that will include a meeting with President Trump.

He will spend the next 12 months speaking at schools and educational events around the country and internationally “advocating for kids and for cultural and economic equity,” he said. “That means ensuring (students) have the resources they need to be successful and that more resources are provided to students that need them and, on the cultural front, that they have teachers that appreciate them and, if possible, look like them.”

The main message he also plans to share?

“I want to talk about how to work with all students — that you have to love them, appreciate them and value them.

“I teach from love, empathy and compassion,” he continued, “and always try to treat each student as the most important person in my life.”

RPS Superintendent Jason Kamras, who was National Teacher of the Year in 2005 when he was working in the District of

Columbia, was joyful about Mr. Robinson’s award.

“There is no one more honorable or more deserving of this extraordinary award than Mr. Robinson,” Mr. Kamras texted to the Free Press. “Mr. Robinson stands for everything we stand for at RPS.”

A native of King William County, Mr. Robinson was inspired to become an educator by his mother, Sylvia Robinson, who had an in-home day care center and taught GED classes at Richmond’s Armstrong High School when he was growing up in Church Hill.

He graduated from Virginia State University in 2000 and later earned a master’s in educational administration and supervision from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2011.

His first job was teaching civics and economics at Richmond’s Lucille M. Brown Middle School in 2000, followed by teaching world geography, history and government at George Wythe and Armstrong high schools before teaching at Virgie Binford Education Center.

He was chosen 2018 RPS Teacher of the year in November 2017, and was recognized as the 2019 Virginia Teacher of the

Year in October during a ceremony where he was brought to tears. He talked at the time about how he has his students at Virgie Binford engage in volunteer work to help them understand the need and importance of giving back to the community.

Among their volunteer work: Voter registration drives, work with Boys and Girls Clubs, cleanup efforts at historical African-American cemeteries and at the former Lumpkin’s Jail site in Shockoe Bottom, a former slave pen that in 1865 became a school and the origins of Virginia Union University. He considers the experiences a part of the life experiences that students can learn from.

“You always have to walk what you preach,” Mr. Robinson told the Free Press on Wednesday. “I always try to model the best example for my students, co-workers and colleagues,” he said.

“This year, I hope to be the voice for my students and all students who feel unseen, unheard, unappreciated and undervalued in America.”

The three other finalists for 2019 National Teacher of the Year were Donna Gradell of Oklahoma, Kelly Harper of Washington, D.C., and Danielle Riha of Alaska.

The Market @ 25th opens Monday with fanfare

Continued from A1

people to be assured that The Market @ 25th is truly a community store, featuring more than 70 local vendors and a staff of which more than half live in the area.

In addition to carrying locally sourced produce, meat and seafood, The Market @ 25th will have a hot food bar and salad bar, a sushi station, coffee bar, florist and pharmacy.

“Quality is extremely important to our shoppers,” said Mr. Gold, a California native and former chief operations officer with FeedMore, which runs area anti-hunger programs, including the Central Virginia Food Bank. “They will find experienced staff, with 10 to 15 years of expertise in their respective areas. Our patrons will get an exceptional grocery experience from the time they walk in until they ring out.”

The interior of The Market @ 25th is adorned with photographs and a timeline of the community from the 1600s to present day. It reflects the breadth and depth of the research and curatorial efforts of Elvatrice Belsches, a Richmond-based historical researcher and author.

The various food sections and aisles are named after important community institutions. For example, the store’s George Mason Fresh Produce section is named for the century-old elementary school on North 28th Street. It will feature locally grown produce from Shalom Farms, Cornerstone Farms and Browntown Farms, a 100-year-old family farm previously run by Linwood Brown Jr., one of the founders of the National Black Farmers Association.

The Kennedy Kitchen, named for the East End high school, will sell hot chicken and sides from Mama J’s, the hugely popular Jackson Ward restaurant that was a recent finalist for the James Beard Award in customer service. Also featured will be items from Summa Dis — Summa Dat, a local catering and personal

chef company.

Fairfield Bakery, named for a community and school in the East End, will feature fresh pastries, breads and cakes made by a team of local companies.

Prepared foods, vegan and gluten-free items, as well as fresh seafood, will be stocked daily.

Mr. Gold said residents requested that the market have a pharmacy. Hope Pharmacy, which is independently owned and operated by Richmond native Dr. Shantelle L. Brown, will be located within the store. Dr. Brown, who worked at the former Edloe’s Professional Pharmacy on 25th Street, is believed to be the second African-American woman to own a pharmacy in the East End — the first being Clara H. Smyth, a Howard College of Pharmacy graduate who owned a pharmacy from 1905 to 1909, according to Ms. Belsches.

Mr. Gold said he approached several area banks to establish a presence in the East End

market but they declined, citing little interest in the location.

However, Richmond Heritage Federal Credit Union, founded in 1936 by 10 African-American educators, stepped up to begin a relationship with The Market @ 25th.

“We are going to start with an ATM at a special place to promote their credit union,” Mr. Gold said. “The goal, maybe nine months from now, is to have a full branch in the store.”

Randy Cooper, Heritage’s president and chief executive officer, is excited about the opportunity to expand and build the credit union’s membership through serving customers at the new store.

Heritage and the READ Center, an adult literacy nonprofit, will partner to teach financial literacy and money management in the market’s community room, Mr. Cooper said.

Additionally, The Market @ 25th has partnered with Lyft transportation network to give

roundtrip rides to the store for shoppers within a 3-mile radius for \$3. Van Go Inc., a more specialized transportation service, also will offer free roundtrip transportation to the store from the five senior apartment buildings in the area from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. initially during the first two weeks of each month.

“We know our shoppers’ expectations,” Mr. Gold said.

The store is part of a growing East End complex that will include apartments, a VCU Health center and The Kitchens at Reynolds, a 25,000-square-foot culinary campus run by J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College that is scheduled to open in October.

“We are here to serve the people living here by providing them with the best service and product they can’t get anywhere else,” Mr. Gold said with confidence. “We are designing a model that can be used across the state, as well as the country.”



Aisles and food sections at the new store are named after significant landmarks in the East End community. Historic photos also adorn the walls. The Franklin Frozen Food section is named for Franklin Military Academy on North 37th Street in the East End.

Agelasto out, but not soon enough for critics

Continued from A1

have Mr. Agelasto removed from office based on his failure to comply with a requirement in the Virginia Constitution and a state statute that local and state elected officials live in and be eligible to vote in the district they serve.

However, any hope Mr. Agelasto might have harbored that his delayed resignation would satisfy two former council members who have filed separate legal actions seeking his removal in the same court were quickly dashed. Both lawsuits remain in process. No trial date has been set for either one.

“This is preposterous,” Sa’ad El-Amin, a former 6th District councilman, said of the announcement. “How can you resign a seat you have already abandoned? There is no way he can be allowed to continue to serve when he does not live in the district,” Mr. El-Amin said, vowing also to continue his legal action.

Upset that Mr. Herring has been willing to allow Mr. Agelasto to remain in office through the end of the year, Mr. El-Amin earlier this month filed for a special writ in Richmond Circuit Court to have Mr. Agelasto removed. Judge W. Reilly Marchant has been assigned to the case, he said.

In his email, Mr. Agelasto bemoaned the cost and disruption he would face in having to defend himself against the action, calling it “senseless litigation” that amounts to “a vendetta being pursued by a self-interested, former city councilman who resigned when sentenced to serve time in federal prison in



Mr. Richardson



Mr. Herring



Mr. El-Amin



Mr. Jackson

2003 after misrepresenting a legal client and defrauding the government.”

Mr. El-Amin’s filing came on the heels of a separate case brought by former 5th District Councilman Henry W. “Chuck” Richardson in January and updated in February asking the court to issue a declaratory judgment that Mr. Agelasto has vacated the seat. A judge has yet to be assigned, Mr. Richardson said, while Mr. Agelasto has asked the court to throw the case out.

Mr. Richardson, who also said he has no intention of dropping his lawsuit, called Mr. Agelasto’s refusal to leave office immediately “unacceptable.”

“It is unconscionable to have a person who has acknowledged he has violated the law decide when he is to accept his punishment,” Mr. Richardson said. “That is the very essence of privilege.”

Mr. Richardson called it improper for the city to have paid — and continue to pay — Mr. Agelasto’s \$25,000 annual City Council salary while knowing he is not a legitimate council member. Mr. Richardson also raised concerns about the legality of the votes Mr. Agelasto has cast and will cast since moving out of the district last July.

In his email to constituents, Mr. Agelasto described Mr. Richardson’s lawsuit “as grandstanding,” in complaining that Mr. Richardson had declined to compromise.

Both Mr. Richardson and Mr. El-Amin dismissed Mr. Agelasto’s criticisms as the sour grapes of a scofflaw.

The issue of Mr. Agelasto’s residence burst into public view in November, just before it was made public by his campaign consultant, Michael G. Brown, a 5th District resident who served as head of the state Department of Elections in the early 1990s.

Mr. Agelasto acknowledged then that he and his family had moved during the summer into a larger home in the city’s 1st District and he said he would not seek re-election after completing his term in office in December 2020.

Mr. Brown also has campaigned to get Mr. Agelasto removed from office, but was halted initially when city Voter Registrar Kirk Showalter determined she had been stripped by the state legislature of authority to consider the voting eligibility of Mr. Agelasto so long as he lived within the city’s boundaries.

After several City Council members sought to bring up the issue, the council ducked the issue based on advice from City Attorney Allen L. Jackson that the residency of members was not a matter for the governing body to consider.

“I appreciate Mr. Herring’s efforts. He has gotten Mr. Agelasto to acknowledge he does not live in the district,” Mr. Brown said on Wednesday. However, Mr. Brown said he and others concerned about Mr. Agelasto’s residency would continue efforts to force him to step down or be removed before November.

“We cannot allow him to stay for another seven months now that he has admitted that he does not live in the district,” said Mr. Brown, who has acknowledged that Mr. Agelasto has broad support in the district and that only a handful of people have openly considered his lack of residency in the district a problem.

As Mr. Agelasto noted, other council members have maintained sham district residences while living elsewhere, although none have faced lawsuits to remove them from office.

A few years ago, former 9th District Councilman Douglas Conner lost his bid for re-election after it was found that he maintained his home in Chesterfield County while listing a separate Richmond address.

In his message, Mr. Agelasto insisted that his intent had been to maintain his legal residence for political purposes at his former home on Floyd Avenue in the 5th District. He said he had “zero intent to flout the law” in moving to a home on West Franklin Street in the 1st District.

He blamed bad legal advice from Mr. Jackson, who never issued a formal legal opinion. Based on what he was told, Mr. Agelasto shaped his narrative for keeping his seat on a 2014 attorney general’s opinion regarding an elected county official who took a temporary job for a few months outside his district but never gave up his residence or leased it to others, unlike Mr. Agelasto, who has rented out his Floyd Avenue property.

In his emailed statement, Mr. Agelasto told constituents he has “faithfully tried to serve your interests and the city’s broader interests” since first taking office in 2013.

He cited legislative achievements, including his efforts to start a welding program for ex-offenders to gain employment and his work to help “vulnerable populations ... receive the care and attention they deserved.”

He noted his support for removing from city applications the box asking if the applicant had ever been convicted of a felony. He also noted his support to provide equal benefits to married same-sex couples, calling those examples of the “socially progressive causes” he has sought to advance while at the same time promoting fiscal prudence.

Budget blowup splits mayor, City Council

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As the council began discussing an additional cut to funded but vacant positions, Ms. Cuffee-Glenn strode to the microphone to announce that the administration would refuse to certify the extra revenue.

The package of revenue includes about \$6.6 million in additional real estate taxes the city is now projected to collect because of increased property values but which was not reflected in the mayor’s budget, and at least \$2.5 million in sales of tax-delinquent property.

Mayor Stoney had advised City Council in recent weeks that he would certify that revenue, but had not officially done so.

What happens now is unclear. The council is to meet again Monday, April 29, to continue its budget work. But deadlines are looming. The council must vote on a schools budget and property tax rate by May 15 and must have a completed budget by May 31 or see the mayor’s proposal go into effect.