



RAPPAPORT CENTER
FOR LAW AND PUBLIC POLICY

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– Robert Gipson II

Robert Gipson II: Bridging the Divide

Robert Gipson II is looking for an elevated level of discussion, more nuance. And he’s intent on doing something about it.

“We’re just so polarized and divided,” said the 26-year-old second-year student at Boston University Law, where he is co-president of the Black Law Students Association. “It seems like all of our conversations are lacking the complexity and an intellectual honesty that is going to help us not only reconcile the differences, but then move forward.”

It was with that intellectual honesty in mind that Robert created the United Conversations Network at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in his last semester before graduation in 2017, and it’s part of his calculation when he considers a future that may include a run at public office.

“Our elected officials hold those levers of power,” he said. “That includes the way that we bring people into conversations and the level of the discourse.”

It’s been an unconventional road to B.U. Law and the Rappaport Center.

Born in Southern California to a Filipino mother and Black father from the Jim Crow South who would rise to the rank of master gunnery sergeant in the marines, Robert was still a boy when the family moved to Las Vegas. He set his sights on service via law enforcement and West Point, and after earning the Public Safety Student of the Year at the College of Southern Nevada, he eventually earned his spot at West Point.



It never was exactly the right fit, however. He dropped out.

He battled depression. He took a job at Fabulous Freddy’s car wash and another at his community college alma mater, then enrolled at UNLV in 2016. He experienced the Charlottesville violence from afar and the Las Vegas mass shooting from up close, and he was shaped by all of it.

He headed to Boston to follow Dr. King and President Obama. The Rappaport Fellowship and the opportunity to intern in the office of City Councilor Michelle Wu, he said, felt like a fateful confluence of his wide-ranging life experiences and ambition.

His first assignment with Councilor Wu was to write a statement on George Floyd and systemic racism, and he said it came easily. “Really, when I’m writing about George Floyd, I’m just thinking about the things that happen to me every day,” he said.

It was a thought-provoking start to a valuable summer. “This is where I’m supposed to be, following in the footsteps of my heroes, helping people,” he said. “The Rappaport Center gave me the chance to work in local government, where a lot of the levers of power are when it comes to systemic racism.

The Rappaport Fellowship, he said, “is something I’ll cherish forever.”

Robert’s idea of the future includes military justice as an advocate for sexual assault survivors, a return to Las Vegas for civil rights work, and an eventual run for public office.

“I think it’s perfectly valid for someone to decide it’s not their responsibility to teach other people that systemic racism exists, or that racial injustice is real,” he said. “But for me, if I choose to turn away, I’ll just be another person in this moment who’s turning away.

“I want to have these conversations in an honest way, a way that connects our common humanity.”

– Dave Cummings
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