

Robert “Bert” Davis, DVM

President and CEO, America’s Black Holocaust Museum

Member since 2006



Tennis great Arthur Ashe once said, “Success is a journey, not a destination. The doing is often more important than the outcome.”

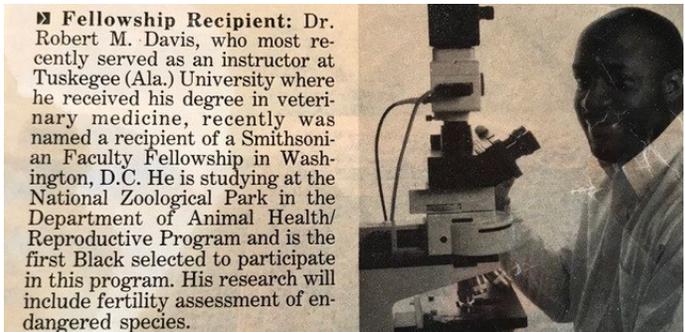
Dr. Robert “Bert” Davis may not have fully embraced that tenet in the past, but these days, he is taking it to heart.

“I’m learning to appreciate the journey that I’m on rather than just wanting to get to the destination,” said Bert, President and CEO of America’s Black Holocaust Museum (ABHM). “I’ve been very fortunate to have accomplished a lot in my life, but I’ve come to realize that enjoying the journey is the most important thing.”

Bert’s journey is brimming with notable achievements, high-profile positions and trailblazing firsts. He was the first African American to receive a Smithsonian Faculty Fellowship, the first African American employed by the Smithsonian Institution’s National Zoological Park as a veterinarian and was the first and only African American in several different roles throughout his career. A graduate of the Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine and a Tuskegee University distinguished alumnus, Bert serves on the board of the Association of African American Museums and is a former board member and vice chair of the American Alliance of Museums.

The former president and CEO of the Zoological Society of Milwaukee, a position he held for nearly 11 years, notably secured the largest foundation gift (\$6.7 million) the society has received to date from a family foundation. And at the helm of ABHM, which celebrated its reopening in February, he secured a remarkable \$10 million donation that will ensure the museum’s future.

Instilled by parents with exacting standards and high expectations, Bert’s disciplined approach and drive for success evolved at a young age. As a high school sophomore, the self-professed nerd declared at Thanksgiving dinner that he was going to become a veterinarian and would attend his father’s alma mater Tuskegee Institute (now University).



Bert was born and raised in Chicago’s middle-class South Shore neighborhood. His dad, a high school industrial electronics teacher, and mom, a registered nurse, were staunch disciplinarians and proponents of education, who resolutely exposed their children to Black history and culture. In their home, the family sat down for dinner together every night. Saturday morning chores came before anything else, and Bert and his younger sister were expected to read books selected by their parents before they could tackle their homework.

“At the time we hated our parents for that—all that reading; it was too much,” he said, laughing. “But we became voracious readers and I spent many, many nights on my parent’s couch with my nose in a book.”

It was a childhood Bert considers fortunate. Vacations included travel to various states—Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Wisconsin, Michigan—to visit family and friends. Bert was surrounded by a close extended family comprised of his parents’ network of friends—or as he calls them, his “love relatives.” He played baseball, track, football and tennis. Throughout his life, he was inspired by Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Thurgood Marshall, author Claude Brown, Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, Jesse Jackson, Shirley Chisholm, Harriet Tubman and Barbara Jordan. He was motivated by numerous passionate teachers.



“That all set a foundation for the person that I am now,” Bert said.

That person is a community leader whose life centers on meetings, organizing, networking and connecting. His work at ABHM, he says, is difficult, but necessary.

“This work at the museum is *not* just Black peoples’ trauma and history, it’s *our* shared history. It’s the history of the United States, but it’s told through the prism of Black folks in a way that gets to the truth of who we are as Americans. It’s emotionally, physiologically and psychologically hard work. I’ve taken an obligation to become engaged with this work, which is so necessary—especially now—in our little eco system of Bronzeville, in Milwaukee, in the United States and even abroad. Through it all, I’ve learned that our differences are minute compared to our similarities,” he said.

The ABHM experience, according to Bert, can spark intense emotional pain and distress and a myriad of emotions—feelings that “come with things that are important. Yet, we also celebrate the triumphs and success of people of color.”



He invites his fellow Rotarians to visit.

“This museum doesn’t just belong to Black folks. It belongs to everyone. Come visit and give fair feedback. We’re still in our data-collection phase and any information people can provide about their experience at the museum is extraordinarily valuable to us.”

Outside of work, Bert is an avid golfer, cigar aficionado (though he smokes less often these days) and he enjoys sipping a fine bourbon. He got hooked on documentaries during the pandemic and still loves to read (currently “The 1619 Project” by Nikole Hannah-Jones and is re-reading “A Time of Terror: A Survivor’s Story” by James Cameron, ABHM founder).

Bert also serves on several professional boards and committees and does volunteer work in the community.

“We all do have a purpose in life and I’m finally realizing that my purpose is providing leadership and guidance to those I come in contact with. When I’m thanked for helping or motivating someone, that’s what inspires me. That’s what drives me to provide service and value to my community and to continue to do it each and every day.”

America’s Black Holocaust Museum, 401 W. North Avenue, Milwaukee, is open Tuesday-Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sunday 12 p.m.-5 p.m. Adult tickets are \$7.

Editor’s Note: *Rotary People of Action is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Mary Bolich.*