

A Tribute from Manchester Citizens Corporation (MCC)

In Honor of Rev. James “Jimmy Joe” Robinson

Legacy, Leadership, Reconnection.

Rev. James “Jimmy Joe” Robinson saw Manchester not as a neighborhood in decline—but as fertile ground for rebirth.

His life’s work, detailed in the memoir *They Call Me Jimmy Joe*, tells the story of an athlete, minister, civil rights leader, and community builder. From becoming the first Black football player at the University of Pittsburgh to marching with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Robinson was a man of action, vision, and deep purpose.

In 1968, following Dr. King’s assassination, Rev. Robinson founded the **Manchester Youth Development Center (MYDC) under the guise of an old plumbing warehouse on 1214 Liverpool Street**—a defiant act of hope. He believed Manchester’s young people deserved institutions that reflected their value. That belief, born of grief and resilience, would go on to shape an entire neighborhood—and give lasting direction to the organization now known as **Manchester Citizens Corporation (MCC)**.

MCC: Founded in 1965, Incorporated in 1971

MCC emerged in response to growing disinvestment and displacement in Manchester. At a time when Pittsburgh’s urban renewal policies threatened to erase entire Black neighborhoods, MCC became a vehicle for defense—and for vision.

But under the guidance of Robinson, Rev. John Long, and Betty Jane and Arthur Ralph, MCC became more than a reaction. It became a blueprint for revival.

The Wound of Route 65

The construction of Route 65 in the late 1960s devastated Manchester. Homes were demolished. Schools were closed. Churches and community anchors were displaced. The highway didn’t just divide the neighborhood physically—it fractured it socially, economically, and spiritually.

Rev. Robinson understood this. He knew that healing required more than saving buildings—it meant restoring what had been stolen.

A Complex Reality: Slumlords and Survival

During the 1960s, as U.S. Steel and other major projects rose across Pittsburgh, many Black men were locked out of opportunity. Ironically, it was sometimes slumlords—exploitative and unaccountable—who connected Black laborers to jobs on these construction sites.

Robinson didn't celebrate this contradiction—but he faced it head-on. His response? **Create legitimate, dignified, community-led systems** of economic opportunity. Through MCC, he, Rev. Long, and the Ralphs helped establish **real pipelines to prosperity**, rooted in justice and self-determination.

Robinson's Leadership in Action

Rev. Robinson's impact on MCC and Manchester was transformational:

- **Redirected church funds** to build youth facilities: basketball courts, a roller rink, and a trade school in that now iconic, plumbing warehouse.
- **Established youth and workforce programs** that laid the groundwork for today's Manchester Bidwell Training Center and Manchester Academic Charter School.
- **Advanced a model of holistic community care**, where housing, education, culture, and employment were interconnected.

He led with three core principles:

Revival over preservation. Empowerment over charity. Action over rhetoric.

Today's MCC: Carrying the Legacy Forward

Now, more than five decades later, MCC continues the work that Rev. Robinson began.

We are no longer just preserving Manchester—we are **reconnecting it**, restoring its identity and positioning it as a **regional asset**.

MCC's Current Mission:

- **Reconnect what was lost** through pedestrian infrastructure, restored community spaces, and new neighborhood gateways.
- **Rebuild community anchors**—from early learning centers to cultural spaces to green gathering areas.

- **Advance economic opportunity** through partnerships in workforce development, arts, and innovation.
- **Elevate Manchester's role** as a cultural, economic, and creative hub in greater Pittsburgh.

This isn't just revitalization. **It's continuation. It's fulfillment. It's Robinson's dream—alive and growing.**

In His Spirit, We Build

We do not honor Rev. Jimmy Joe Robinson with platitudes. We honor him by practicing his values:

When institutions erased our schools, he helped build new ones.
When youth were disconnected, he gave them purpose.
When systems failed to deliver dignity, he built new systems.

His belief was simple but radical:

“If the system fails, you build your own.”

And that is what MCC will continue to do—on his shoulders, in his name, and for generations to come.

Manchester Citizens Corporation Leadership

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