Cover Story

He broke network news barriers

By Monica Collins
USA TODAY

Max Robinson, the first black man to anchor a network newscast, was a standard-bearer. And, eventually, the weight crushed him.

Robinson, who had not worked in television for three years, died Tuesday morning of complications from AIDS at Howard University Hospital in Washington, D.C. He was 49.

"Max felt strongly that he was the first black to succeed in this little corner of the world," says ABC anchor Peter Jennings, Robinson's former colleague at the network. "He felt he had to live up to it all the time. God knows, that would be a burden for any man."

"In Max's death, there is a lesson to be learned. Those on the cutting edge of change often do not benefit from the change they bring about," says DeWayne Wickham, a columnist for Gannett News Service and president of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), the professional group that Robinson helped organize.

Last August, during one of Robinson's last public appearances, he stood in front of an emotional crowd at the NABJ.
Angered his boss by accusing ABC of racially biased coverage

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to demonstrate some stamina but, as the evening wore on, he grew tired and was taken back to his room.”

While Robinson confided the nature of his illness to close friends such as Wilkins, he would not say publicly that he had AIDS.

Last spring, The Washington Post published an extensive profile. The Post reporter took him to a restaurant at Washington’s Four Seasons Hotel and tried to convince him to speak on the record about his disease. “I’m not going to get into the subject of what I have,” That was all Robinson would say.

After his death Tuesday, Robinson’s family issued a strong statement: “Dr. Robinson expressed the desire that his death be the occasion for emphasizing the importance, particularly to the black community, of education about AIDS and methods for its prevention. He hoped that people would recognize the urgency of developing effective treatments for the disease and more humane policies towards its victims.”

Says Dr. Mathilde Krim, founding co-chair of AmFAR, the American Foundation of AIDS Research: “This legacy of helping us is very important, because it’s coming from him. We’ve been saying this for a long time as an organization, but the public reacts more strongly if it comes from a person, especially if it’s a person the public respects and likes.”

AIDS is most often spread through intimate contact between homosexual partners or by injecting drugs with contaminated needles. No one close to Robinson will say or speculate how he contracted the disease.

Robinson’s demons, his addictions, his torments haunted him. “He was wrestling with demons for most of his life and it was a sad thing to watch,” said Gordon Peterson, a Washington, D.C., anchor who co-anchored with Robinson in the 70s.

“Max had a lot of friends,” says Barbara Matusow, author of The Evening Stars, about network news. “But Max was a very volatile person, easily wounded. Some would say paranoid.”

Robinson, who grew up in a close-knit working class family in Richmond, Va., got his first broadcasting job as an off-air promotional announcer at a small station in Portsmouth, Va. He was fired after he put himself on the air. He told The Washington Post that an apologetic station manager let him go. “He’d gotten these calls from some irate whites who’d found out that one of those people was working there.”

Robinson was sanguine when describing the incident to the Post. But the anger he felt seethed inside him. He was a co-founder of Transafrica, an anti-apartheid group headed by his brother, Randall.

“When Max was comfortable with himself, he was a happy human being and a competent human being,” Jennings says. “When he was worried about whether the establishment was out to get him, he was unhappy. And I think that unhappiness manifested itself in almost everything he did.”

Jennings says Robinson constantly questioned his professional abilities. The anchor remembers walking 50 blocks through Manhattan with him, trying to convince Robinson that reporting was just terrific fun.

Matusow says Robinson ascended the ranks too fast and “didn’t get a tremendous amount of backing from people at ABC.”

Robinson alienated ABC bosses when, in 1981, he made a speech at Smith College in which he accused the network of racially biased coverage. Although ABC News President Roone Arledge issued a sympathetic statement Tuesday, it was he who cut Robinson loose from ABC.

Robinson also caught flak from Chicago TV critics. Former Sun-Times writer Gary Deeb detailed how Robinson covered the Tylenol murders while riding in a limousine and demanding special treatment.

Matusow, who writes about the media for Washingtonian magazine, characterizes the criticism in Chicago as “thickly veiled racial attacks.”

Deeb, who now works for Chicago’s WLS-TV, refuses to reconsider anything he wrote about Robinson. “Well, why should I?”

Friends, however, recall Robinson’s “regal” personality. “Max had a presence,” says Bob Reid, an Entertainment Tonight producer and former NABJ officer. “If you stood next to him, you stood in his shadow.

“Most people will remember him as a network anchor,” Reid says. “I’d like to think that he’ll be remembered as a man who understood that his own success was secondary to the success of all black people.”

Max Robinson’s understanding of that was at the root of his pride — and at the base of his sadness.

Contributing: Craig Wilson, Walter T. Middlebrook, Brian Donlon
Max Robinson, First Black Network Anchor, Dies at 49

WASHINGTON (AP) — Max Robinson, who became the first black to anchor a U.S. network news show but soon was beset with personal and career problems, has died at 49.

Robinson succumbed to complications of AIDS, said Tonya Swanson, a spokeswoman for Howard University Hospital. A family spokesman, Roger Wilkins, said Robinson had been ill for more than a year and had been bedridden for a month.

Robinson had hoped that his death would highlight the urgency of the AIDS problem, Wilkins said in a statement issued Tuesday on behalf of the family.

"During his battle with the disease, Mr. Robinson expressed the desire that his death be the occasion for emphasizing the importance, particularly to the black community, of education about AIDS and methods of its prevention," the statement said.

AIDS is a contagious disease that attacks the body's immune system, rendering it incapable of resisting other diseases and infections. The chief victims of the incurable disease have been homosexual men and intravenous drug abusers. Health officials estimate that heterosexual contact is responsible for 4 percent of cases.

Robinson in 1978 left Washington television station WTOP, where he had won top ratings as an anchorman for a decade, to join ABC as the first black to anchor a network news show. He co-anchored the ABC Evening News from Chicago with Peter Jennings in London and Frank Reynolds in Washington.

"He made an important contribution to ABC News for which we will always be grateful," Roone Arledge, president of ABC News in New York, said in a statement. "It is tragic to see his life end at such a young age."

Ronald Townsend, president and general manager of WUSA-TV, successor to WTOP, said: "Broadcast journalism has lost a strong voice for fairness, equality and human rights."

"He had great presence on the air," said James Snyder, vice president for news for Post-Newsweek Stations, who worked with Robinson.

Snyder and others said pressures on Robinson, a moody man, as a pioneer worked against him.

"When Max went to the network, he was not as successful as he was here," said Snyder. "He had a lot of pressure, pressure from his friends. But he had the opportunity to be the first black network anchorman. He had to take it."

"There were personal demons he was wrestling with," said Gordon Peterson, his former co-anchor here. "I kind of wish he had stayed here. I don't think it (working at the network) worked well for him."

Robinson's tenure at ABC was troubled as he zealously waged a battle against racism at the network.

Carl Bernstein, ABC's Chicago bureau chief in 1980 and 1981, said Robinson was deliberately excluded from any decision-making related to the newscast.

"There are those, I believe, in the industry, who were either jealous or had problems with Max," agreed Dwight Ellis, head of the National Association of Broadcasters. "He was a really outspoken man."

A frustrated Robinson often complained publicly about the network and charged it with racism in a speech at Smith College in February 1981.

After Reynolds' death in 1983, Jennings was made sole anchor of the newscasts, and Robinson was relegated to weekend anchor stints and news briefs.

In 1984, he joined Chicago television station WMAQ. The following June he entered a hospital specializing in alcohol rehabilitation, suffering from "emotional and physical exhaustion," according to Nick Aronson, director of communications for WMAQ. He never returned to the station and did sporadic free-lance work after that.

Robinson started his broadcasting career as a disc jockey in his hometown of Richmond, Va. He moved to Washington in 1965.