

Robert Douglas: Joy, laughter, and Black Lives Matter

A quick scroll through blogger **Robert Douglas's** Instagram feed will quickly give you an idea of exactly what he's about. A capsule of the joy that he finds with wife Sherrienne, six-year old 'J', and two-year-old 'R', mixed with important takes on the issues of today, Robert's passion is palpable. Here, he speaks about Black fatherhood, everyday racism, and the power of the online community

Writing | Kathryn Wheeler

Hi Robert! What drew you to begin blogging your family life?

I'd just joined Instagram in 2016, and I came across dad blogger Simon Hooper, 'Father of Daughters'. I was following his journey, and I connected with more dads, but then I quickly realised that the space was predominantly white.

There's been a reputation about Black dads not being present and not being engaged. I wanted to put my stamp on the blogging world and say: "We're here. We exist. We do exactly the same things as everybody else. Let's break down stereotypes."

That's still one of my focuses, but it's also about bringing joy in times of heaviness. We naturally have a laugh in the family anyway, and so hopefully we put a smile on people's faces.

You're also open about anxieties surrounding fatherhood. Do you consciously try to strike a balance?

At first, I was really conscious of what I put online and I was thinking, this needs to be a polished picture. Then after a while I just thought to myself, this isn't real. So, I started writing about my worries.

I got a lot of messages from other dads to say: "It's great that you're talking about this because I feel exactly the same, but don't know how to express it." I think that gave me the confidence to share more, and to make the account more real.

Especially in this time, with the Black Lives Matter movement, it's opened all of the wounds and emotions that myself and others have hidden for a long time, because we don't want to disrupt things, or because it helps us cope.

You've recently begun sharing examples of times you've experienced racist discrimination. Could you speak to that?

I had a friend who had an issue with a family just up the road from him – he was white and the family were white. It got to the point where he wrote a letter to them. We were about 14 at the time, so it didn't say anything too bad, but he told me he posted it.

On the Monday, I was sitting in my English lesson and a teacher I didn't know asked to speak to me, in earshot of everybody else. She told me that I'd been accused of harassing a girl who went to my school. She told me everything that she thought I was, and how much trouble I was going to be in.

I tried to speak, but she just said: "Don't respond. You've been caught. I'm going to call your

parents, and I think the police need to get involved.”

I was a 14-year-old boy who had never been in trouble, and who had been working hard at school. I didn't know what to do. I remember just saying: “Call my dad, call my dad.”

I was made to sit in a room on my own, and make a written statement. Then I went home that lunch, and saw my dad, where I told him about it. After lunch, I went back to school where I saw a police car pull up. But then everything disappeared. I wasn't spoken to again.

It wasn't until after a recent conversation with my dad that he actually told me he'd got a call before I'd come home for lunch. He went to the school that afternoon and had it out with them, there and then. He wrote a letter of complaint and the teacher had disciplinary action against her. Years later, I found out from other people who had similar experiences that she would target Black boys.

Recently there's been some talk in the online parenting community, Candice Brathwaite in particular, about the point where young Black boys go from 'cute to scary', which reminds me of the stage you're talking about.

Absolutely, it's those teenage years. A lot of people look at my Instagram, they'll see pictures of the children, and I'll get comments about how cute they are, how lovable they are, how smiley they are.

But I want people to understand that, at some point, they will go from cute to being demonised –

people crossing the road when they see them coming. They're the same joyous children, but before you get to know them, you'll judge them.

As a father, how do you even begin to rationalise that?

It's really difficult. You have to keep the balance of not putting something in your child's head that will limit them, but also share with them the reality.

You have to try to explain to them: “People are going to treat you differently, because of nothing that you have done. As

an individual, you could be the happiest, most positive person, but because of this aspect – which is the colour of your skin – you are going to have to work harder. Expectations of you are going to be low. You may face teachers, like I did, who don't want to see you succeed.”

Are you having conversations with your children about the BLM movement?

We're drip-feeding our six-year-old. We had a BLM protest close to us – we didn't join walking consciously, because of the children. >>>



But we drove alongside them on part of their route so he could see what the protest was about.

Some family members were marching as well. We saw them walk past our car with their signs. We did that purposely so he could see that this thing is real, and that it affects our family. But he's such a sensitive child that we have to be really careful about what we say.

He's recognised the differences already and, towards the end of last year, he actually said: "I want to be white because white is better." Of course, we were crushed by that.

That just shows us how much work there is to do to combat this thing, even at that level, with children. That thought is going to stay with him for a long time, and it's going to take a lot of work to get that out of his head.

You're having these conversations online as well. What's the response been?

It's been absolutely amazing. The main thing that came out of it, particularly from white dads, was: "I hadn't ever considered the things that you have to think about."

From the Black dads, it sparks so many emotions, and they open up a lot. Men aren't known, of course, for opening up. But I've had so many WhatsApp conversations and phone calls with other dads, just talking about things that happened to us, things that we were scarred by, or that we didn't realise until now were racist. Things that have limited us, and things that have driven us to do better.



I think something that we've all learned is that our home is based on joy and laughter

Throughout it all, how do you maintain a healthy mindset?

For one, we're a family of faith. We base a lot of what we do in that. But also, I don't want to waste my time on this earth. I pepper my Instagram with real serious issues, and things that put a smile on my face.

There's so much weight, and there's so much to get your head around. If I didn't do that, I'd never move from my sofa, because I'd live in fear constantly. So that's kind of it. It's a desire to have a

good time, enjoy what I'm doing, and enjoy seeing others happy.

After the struggles of the last few months, what lessons have you learned about your family?

It's reaffirmed to me that, as a family, we're so strong. We get on so well, we have a laugh. I think something that we've all learned is that our home is based on joy and laughter.

Follow Robert on Instagram @this_father_life