

DELRAY SUN

Professor Robert Watson, the phoenix of Palm Beach County | Opinion

By Steve West
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Nov 19, 2021 at 10:22 am



Professor Robert Watson and Steve West co-founded The IN-CROWD, a movement to bring equal opportunity and justice for all in Palm Beach County. (Steve West / Contributor)

Odds are you've heard Professor Robert Watson speak at some live event or on TV. He combines charisma, intellect and insight with character. If you've ever sat in an audience of hundreds at a Watson event, you probably thought he was speaking personally to you. Many sitting there felt the same.

His popularity as a speaker is so immense that he could actually be booked 365 day a year. People never tire of hearing him. Every seat fills whenever he lectures. He's appeared at my Vizcaya Forum over 30 times and draws a full house each time.

I can fill this column listing his accomplishments, honors and recounting his widespread acclaim, but let's get at the backstory and learn what made him who he is: a professor, author, historian, media commentator and community activist. He joined the faculty of Lynn University in 2007.

One might think that such an erudite individual is the product of a cultured liberal family. In fact, he was born into a financially struggling blue-collar family in 1962. His father's side were all hardworking steelworkers with ironclad conservative values, which still dominate his Steelton, Pennsylvania birthplace.

As a youngster, Robert was appalled by the hateful "isms" expressed by so many in his locality. But along with the unfortunate social negativism, there came a fierce pride in America and its history.

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Robert and his father didn't see eye-to-eye on politics, but they bonded during their frequent visits to the abundant Civil War sites in the area. The nearby Harrisburg National Civil War Museum and the actual battle sites made an indelible mark on him. The historic Gettysburg battlefield was a favorite destination. His juvenile imagination was unleashed as he scooted around the emerald expanse of flat grassland frolicking among the statues, canons, wood rail fences and tombstones.

While he resisted his dad's hard-right influence, he was touched by the gentle hand of his loving mom. While not political, she was an empathetic humanist. Her example taught her only child to respect all people and to stridently rebuff injustice.

In that disparate crucible, he had the space to find his own way. His parents' contrasting personalities melded him into an historical scholar with humanistic values. In his teen years, compassion was etched even more deeply into his character by experiencing the injustice suffered by his relatives and neighbors literally dying because of the lack of access to proper health care.

The young man excelled in sports and academics in high school. He became only the second in his family to attend college where he continued his mastery of his studies and earned state championships in football, track and swimming. Without his full scholarship to Virginia Tech, he would likely be a steelworker today.

Tragedy struck home when Robert's beloved mother was diagnosed cancer and dementia. Without health insurance he had to sell everything to keep her going. Although he grew up in a poor home, his mom's illness brought him to financial and emotional rock bottom. That experience cemented his empathy for others and his lifetime battle for the equal opportunity for all.

Like the legendary phoenix, Professor Watson rose to be the person that is so widely beloved and respected for his exceptional mind and big heart. He is my co-founder of [THE IN-CROWD](#). Visit thein-crowd.org for information about the movement to bring equal opportunity and justice for all in Palm Beach County.

Steve West is a social justice advocate and entrepreneur living in Delray Beach.