

ROCKvoices: The Oral History Project of SRU

Robert J. Watson Interview

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KM: My name is Kevin McLatchy and this is part of the ROCKvoices Oral History Project. Today we're very happy to have Robert J. Watson to do an interview with us. Dr. Watson, can you give us some biographical information: your full name, the year you were born, where you're from originally, and your education?

RW: Okay. Well, thank you. And thank you very much, Kevin, for allowing me to be involved in this project. First of all, Robert Jay, J-A-Y [is my] middle name, Watson; and date of birth, January 26, 1949. And where from originally? I was born in New Castle, Jameson Hospital, but have lived almost all my life in Slippery Rock. I grew up on Franklin Street in the village of Slippery Rock.

My education: I went to McKay Education Building for kindergarten through sixth grade. That was referred to as the Lab School at the time. I did all of my primary education and elementary education in the McKay Education Building from kindergarten through sixth. I then went to what was referred to as "the new high school," which is the current high school just across the road from us this morning. It was referred to as "the new high school" because prior to that time the high school for Slippery Rock was in what is now Carruth-Rizza Hall, and it then moved to the back wing of McKay Education Building.

So I graduated from Slippery Rock Area High School in 1966. And like so many young people growing up in Slippery Rock and going on to college, there was an interest to do that elsewhere other than Slippery Rock State College. So I was pretty set to go to Penn State. A few of my friends were attending and there were two gentlemen who were very instrumental in changing my mind. One was Murray Shelgren who was a family friend and who lived on Elm Street in Slippery Rock. And to me, he was the consummate out-of-doors man. He was the real person who lived his life outside and enjoyed nature and the animals and plants therein. And he said to me one day--I was working at Wilson's Filling Station downtown, which is now part of the Sheets facility. But Ray Wilson owned that building on the corner of Franklin and Main Street and I pumped gas and washed windows and changed tires and did all that as a high school kid. And Murray Shelgren said to me one day, "Somebody said you're going to Penn State." I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "Why?" and I stopped and I said, "Well, it's a good school. . . ." He said, "Yes. You told me a while back that you wanted to study biology." And I said, "Yes, I do." And

he said, "Well, why are you going to Penn State to study biology? We have an excellent biology program right here in your hometown." He said, "Don't overlook that, Bob." And that started me thinking.

That Sunday in church, at the United Methodist Church--one of the gentlemen who was very active in the church was Jim Egli, who was a professor of physical education and also soccer coach and swimming coach. And he said to me after church, "You're going to Slippery Rock, aren't you?" And I said, "Well, I didn't think I was . . . Mr. Shelgren started me to think a little bit more about that." He said, "Well, you've always called yourself an athlete." And he said, "I know you've earned letters and in two or three sports there at the high school." And he said, "If you're any kind of athlete, you might want to try out for the men's soccer team." But, he said, "If you're not an athlete, then I don't want you trying out." And he kind of put that little bit of guilt on my conscience. Over the next week or two I changed my mind to go to Slippery Rock University. And I played on Jim Egli's soccer team. And my first academic advisor, and my advisor through my four years undergraduate study, was Murray Shelgren, the man who helped me understand the quality program that Slippery Rock State College (then, at the time), had in biology.

And boy, did I get my eyes opened up because I graduated from a high school that was basically teaching anatomy and physiology as part of biology, and I didn't know what was going on the first semester at Slippery Rock when my first biology teacher, who was Murray Shelgren, started talking about DNA and RNA and protein synthesis and I thought, "What is all this?" I took Biology I and Biology II in high school and earned very good grades, and I'd never heard these terms. So it started a new career in so many ways for me, and I was blessed to have wonderful professors. There are not many of my professors unfortunately alive today, but Tom Gaither is, and I see Tom when we're able to attend church together. He was a wonderful influence on my life as well.

I did my undergraduate at Slippery Rock; in 1970 graduated, and then moved away for a couple of years. In the Baltimore area I taught in the county schools at Linthicum Area High School just about six miles south of city center Baltimore, right inside Anne Arundel County. I lived in Linthicum and taught high school students from grades eight through twelve in biology, and also taught some chemistry as well, which was my minor in undergraduate study. At the same time I did graduate work at Johns Hopkins University in the city, and after two years earned my master's degree at Hopkins. I was going to school full time in the summer as well as managing a tennis country club in Linthicum. And then on weekends I also was a lifeguard in Ocean City, Maryland. So I was juggling all of that.

In my last semester at Hopkins I got a phone call from a friend of mine who said, "You know, Slippery Rock's looking for somebody to work in the Admissions and Records Office and that might be something you'd be interested in." And I said, "Oh no, that's fine. I just completed certification for Guidance and Counseling, and I've been given a new position in a brand-new

high school, at a place called Fort Meade, Maryland. I'm going to be a senior class counselor in this brand-new high school.” And I said, “I'm very excited about that. But that's nice that you would think I might be interested in the position at Slippery Rock. But I'm not; thank you very much.” And so a couple weeks went by and I got another phone call. And this time from a different person. And I knew right away that the individual had spoken with the first person with whom I had conversation and he pretended he hadn't but said, “You know, there's a new position at Slippery Rock and you'd get a chance to work in Admissions and Records and you'd work with transfer students and new freshmen and so on. And that might be something you'd really enjoy because you, as an undergraduate, worked in several offices, and you were active in student government, you were class president, you were an athlete. You did all these things as an undergraduate; you can share that in this new position.” And I said, “Oh no, thank you very much, but I'm actually going to be a senior counselor at Fort Meade High School.”

It was probably then about the end of May that I got a call from Bob Lowry, who as fate would have it, had been the Interim President here at Slippery Rock. Bob was the first Director of Admissions at Slippery Rock University. And he came from Kane High School where he was principal and moved to Slippery Rock as the first Director of Admissions and happened to be-- for *my* benefit--he happened to be a neighbor. And so I grew up mowing the lawn and shoveling the walk and the driveway and doing odd jobs for Bob and Donna who were just wonderful people, wonderful neighbors. And Bob Lowry then called me and said, “Bob, I understand you've been informed of this position that's coming on at Slippery Rock. It's a new position and it might give you an opportunity to come back to the area.” And he said, “If you want to go on for doctoral study you could apply for admission to the University of Pittsburgh,” where Bob had done his PhD. And I told Bob the same thing I had told the other two people that I had accepted this new position as a senior counselor, and I was so excited about that and so on. And he said, “Well, promise me one thing.” He said, “It's Friday. Promise me that you'll think about this over the weekend and that you'll call me on Monday.” And he said, “I've gotten to know you fairly well and I think you would enjoy this job, but it needs to be a decision that you make.”

Well, I thought a great deal about it over the weekend. I actually called my mother and father and talked with them. And to this day, Kevin, I'm not actually sure why I changed my mind, but frankly, I thought a lot about it, I prayed a lot about it. And when I called Bob Lowry on Monday, I said, “Can you tell me a little more about this job?” And thirty days later I had applied; I was interviewed and offered the position; and that started my career in July of 1972 at Slippery Rock University.

For the next six or seven years I attended University of Pittsburgh in the doctoral study in Higher Education Administration. My dissertation topic was ironically a topic of historical significance to me, and history was not something I really enjoyed in high school. And I can say that because I don't think any of my history teachers are still alive. But it was not exciting to me, it was boring, and it was so far in the past. Ironically, I was tuned into and turned on to history by a man by the name of Richard Seckinger at the University of Pittsburgh who was a former

secretary of the Pennsylvania Historical Society, a wonderful man. He taught the very first course that all doc students took in their first semester, and that was History of Higher Education. And I thought, “Oh my heavens, this is gonna to be a sleeper. I’m really gonna have a tough time with this.” And in the first day, Richard K. Seckinger walked through the door without one book, one note, without anything except the role. He called the role and he began to open my mind to history. And generally, history of higher education, specifically history of this great university that we’re a part of at Slippery Rock. My first research paper was the history of higher education at Slippery Rock. I don’t know whether Dr. Seckinger was truthful when he said I had done a good job in my primary resource and research and writing, or whether he was trying to get another person into the fold of history of higher ed.

I used to joke with him about that, but in my research that very first semester in the fall of 1972 I learned that my family had been very much involved in the founding of this place. I had heard that at family gatherings at Christmas and Easter and Thanksgiving, and my grandmother would talk about all, “Oh, your great grandfather was involved as a businessman in Slippery Rock.” He owned the general store in the building that is now Elephant Number 8 Thai Cuisine in Slippery Rock on Main Street. And my great granddad and his business partner, Mr. Williams, built that building. So my grandmother would say, “Oh yeah, your great grandfather was very involved” and that was the end of the discussion. She really didn’t know a great deal about it other than he was involved, and frankly, most of the people in the family knew less than she did. So as I got into the original minutes of the stockholders before the institution was founded, lo and behold I saw this John Nelson Watson, and he was involved as one of the three men who traveled to Clarion to investigate this new project in Pennsylvania called a normal school at Clarion Pennsylvania, and he came back and reported to the other stockholders that this was something that we could do at Slippery Rock. And I thought, “Wow, that’s really cool. That’s great.” And so the long story short, there is the next six or seven years. Whenever I could do a historically-related research topic in any of my classes at Pitt I’d do that.

I then graduated in spring of 1979. And so the 1970s were decade of higher education for Bob Watson with a bachelor’s degree in ‘70, a masters in ‘72, and a doctorate in ‘79. So probably more than you wondered about my education (chuckling).

KM: No, that’s great. We have those trustee meetings minute right here in the Archives. And sure enough, I see the Watson’s name in there, and it must have been amazing for you to see it yourself.

RW: Oh it was, it really was. I’ve mentioned one other person who was a wonderful person and a leader to this institution. And that was Leila Vincent, who was the wife of A. P. Vincent. [Brief discussion about audio quality].

I’d like to mention one other person who helped me understand my family’s involvement in the university’s development, and that was Leila Vincent. Leila was married to Arthur P. Vincent, after whom Vincent Science Hall is named. A.P., as he was known in the village and on the

campus, A.P. was a mathematics, physics, chemistry professor, and he was also an athletic coach. He and N. Kerr Thompson were coaches together for many, many years. Leila Vincent happened to be [maiden] named Watson; she was my father's cousin and living as I was growing up in the village. And so I knew Aunt Leila, and actually mowed her lawn and shoveled her walk and so on and so forth. She lived right next door to Bob and Donna Lowry on Center Street Extension in a beautiful stone home that still exists today.

So as I started my work at Pitt I went to Aunt Leila and I asked her a number of questions about the involvement of the Watson family. Leila, for many years, was a member of the Council of Trustees at Slippery Rock State Teachers College, and then State College, and she was personal friends with Emma Guffey Miller. And Leila, although a very staunch conservative, and Emma Guffey Miller a very staunch liberal, they were close personal friends and social friends. And so, Leila would be able to provide me with a great deal of information and artifacts. Emma Guffey Miller had given her information, some photographs, and different things like that. But Leila also had a number of artifacts herself, the overwhelming majority of which now reside in the Archives. But she was a person who helped me a great deal understand the development of the institution and the involvement of the Watson family.

KM: Great. Let me get back to your experience as an undergrad here. What were your first impressions when you got here, and you made this decision to come to the campus? I'm sure you were aware of what the campus looked like, from being from the town. Yeah, if you could speak to that.

RW: Sure. I thought, like so many Slippery Rock kids--we were referred to by the college students as "townies." If you grew up in Slippery Rock, you were a townie. I thought, like so many townies, we knew the university because on Saturdays if it was raining and it was the fall, winter, or spring, we would find Lucky who was the night watchman, Ken Luckett. We'd find him on campus somewhere and he'd open West Gym for us. We were probably 12, 13, 14 years old and we would go in and play basketball in West Gym. That was the original West Gym that had a second-floor banked running track which, when the West Gym was built originally in 1906, it was identified as the most advanced, most modern physical education facility known in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. And so as young boys, we'd take advantage, and we would hoist our bicycles up to the second floor using climbing ropes and we'd get on the banked track and we would have our miniature basic Tour de France on the second floor on the bike track. And I do remember one of my friends broke his arm one day, and that ended the bike race a little early.

We just enjoyed the facilities. I mean, as a townsperson that's it; I was growing up in a time that they were maybe 1500 students, at the most 2000, so I knew all the buildings, knew all the facilities, and knew many of the faculty and staff. I sat in church with many of those people; some of them were my Sunday School teachers. When I worked at Wilson's Filling Station at the Sunoco Service Station there and pumped gas, I would pump gas and meet faculty and staff on a

regular basis. There was no division in any way between campus and community. It was truly a merging of those individuals who were a part of the institution because of employment; they were also very much a part of the community for their social engagement as well.

So I thought I knew Slippery Rock, and frankly, I was very mistaken because I knew it from the perspective of a 12-year old, or 10-year old, or 14-year old just enjoying the facilities or sneaking under the tarp at the football games on Thompson Field there adjacent to Keister Road and [William] "Pop" Storer was the Athletic Director at the time. Pop would see us walking down the road while the football game was on and we were not doing much other than kicking rocks down the road. Pop would say, "Boys, would you like to see the football game?" "Oh, would we ever, Pop! We'd love to see the football game!" So he'd say, "Okay, I can't give you a ticket to get in because we have to count tickets and everything, But I'll just, I'll pull up the tarpaulin and you slide right underneath and then you can watch the football game." And so we did that. That was part of our life; that was part of growing up. I think I have--I remember a picture of myself that my father took, it was in the winter, I believe it had just been my birthday. One of my birthday presents was a Slippery Rock sweatshirt and it says "Slippery Rock 19???" And I still have that picture. And as far as I'm concerned, it's a prophetic picture because indeed it allowed me to understand that.

But I didn't know the campus. When I got involved as a freshman I was overwhelmed. And my parents were not wealthy by any stretch. My dad was a rural mailman and my mom worked in the Cooperative Activities Office here on campus, first as secretary, and then she rose to the rank of business manager for her last several years. And I knew the institution. My dad was a 1940 alum. I knew through his eyes. I knew through my mom's eyes as being an employee at Co-op. But as I got involved as a new freshman, I had to work two jobs to help pay for my tuition and other expenses. My first job was working in the bookstore, hauling books and doing whatever the bookstore manager wanted me to do. And my second job really allowed me an understanding of the campus because I worked for a woman by the name of Connie Stevenson.

Connie Stevenson was the manager of The Grill, which, we didn't have a student union at the time in 1966, we had The Hut which is now part of the Art Building complex. The Hut was a place where you could go and play cards. The bottom level, the ground level of The Hut was a bowling alley, and you could actually go in and bowl duck pins, as we called them there at the time. At the one end, adjacent to Rhoads Hall, of The Hut was The Grill, and you could get hamburgers, hot dogs, French fries, fresh-made milkshakes, all of those things of the 1950s, 60s era. And Connie Stevenson was in charge of The Hut and The Grill. So I applied for a position.

I was Connie's paper boy for many years, probably from the time I was 12 until I was 17. I delivered papers all throughout the town, and it gave me another way to meet faculty and staff, but Connie was always on my paper route. She lived on Keister Road. And so when I applied for a job, she hired me. And I flipped hamburgers and made French fries and made hot dogs and . . .

KM: [Chuckles] I didn't realize that.

RW: . . . all those kinds of things. I can remember as President [Robert S.] Carter would come in and get a cup of coffee or whatever. Connie Stevenson, even though I was a brand-new freshman, low on the totem pole, she would say, "Now President Carter, I want you to meet this young man. You're gonna need to know him. This is Bob Watson. And Bob, this is the president of the college, President Carter." And anybody who came through The Hut and The Grill, Connie would introduce me to. So I became involved, my very first year in student government that continued on . . .

KM: As a freshman?

RW: . . . as a freshman, that continued on. My junior year I was class president and in student government as well. I played soccer in the fall for Jim Egli in my first semester, my first spring semester, I play golf on the golf team for Hank Baierl. After that I played on the tennis team for my sophomore, junior, and senior years. And tennis was the sport that I enjoyed greatly.

But my experience--I really did not know Slippery Rock and all that it had to offer, all that it had to offer at the time. I thought I did, but I was very, very wrong in that. But it opened my life, my world, in so many ways. I was active in a social fraternity, Alpha Chi Ro. I pledged my second semester freshman year and my parents thought that would be my ultimate demise, and that I would turn into something I was not by joining a social fraternity. But back in the 60s, social fraternities were extremely popular socially. And that was if you weren't involved in the social fraternity your social life was not as much as it could be, let me say that. But I enjoyed being chaplain of our social fraternity; at the same time I was social chairman. And that might appear as a conflict of interest to some, but as I used to say, I would bless the parties before they started.

KM: [Laughing].

RW: And so we always had a good time.

KM: [Pause to adjust the audio]. We're back. Sorry for the interruption, Bob. We're back on recording now. So we were talking about your undergraduate years, and The Hut and the experience there, and meeting lots of people, and then your involvement with the SGA and some teachers. Who could you say were the most influential teachers for you when you were here?

RW: That's an excellent question, and frankly at my age, Kevin, I've thought a lot about that over the years, because there are different times in my life that certain teachers would remind me, in a sense, of the importance of what I learned in their classroom. It was always important that I learned the discipline that they were teaching, the subject they were teaching. But there were so many professors, teachers, who taught me so much more than the subject matter.

One clearly, easily, comes to mind in the Biology Department. That was Richard Medve who passed away here a few years ago. And Dick Medve was a person who was a no-frills kind of person and a no-nonsense kind of person. Dick Medve would strive on a regular basis to consistently increase the quality of education the Biology majors were receiving. He taught a

number of different courses, but one of his most famous courses was a summer class in Field Botany. Dick was also the Biology professor who placed you into your student teaching assignment if you were going to earn a certification in Biology, teaching certification, you had to basically go through the gate of Dick Medve. And his gate was pretty narrow. He did not want someone bearing the letters Slippery Rock State College to do anything less than an outstanding job in the public schools while student teaching.

He would meet with the Biology majors who were planning on earning a certification in your sophomore year, in your junior year, long before you student taught. And he would talk about the importance of you knowing the subject matter. You must know the subject matter. And then it was understood among the Biology majors that there was a pecking order in terms of placement into certain high schools. There were some high schools, keep in mind in the late 1960s this whole innovative Biology curriculum developed called Biological Sciences Curriculum Study, BSCS, that was the big wave. They had a cellular approach to BSCS. They had a biochemistry approach to BSCS. They had an environmental approach. So it depended on whether you had the gold curriculum, the green curriculum, the blue curriculum, as to what emphasis you were going to be teaching in the public high schools. But this curriculum just was brand new, and if you were going to go into a high school that was teaching BSCS you had to be really on top of your game, and you had to know what was going on in the biology world.

So Dick Medve would teach this Field Botany class, and the only time you can take it was the summer. We learned after we went through the rigors of the class that this was one of the hoops Dick had created to determine what level you were in your ability to understand the discipline, and then how that would play a role in where he was going to place you. He might place you in a high school that was still teaching anatomy and physiology as biology and that was usually where you did not want to be, because it wasn't where the biology field was going. And so in order to get placed into a BSCS curriculum high school you had to really, really work hard.

So the summer before my senior year I registered to take Field Botany. And on the first day, keep in mind, this was a pre-session class. And at the time, we had pre-session three weeks, regular session six weeks, post session three weeks. And in order to find the plant specimens that Dick wanted the students to find in the field, he had to teach this in pre-session when there were still a lot of the spring wildflowers out, and the wild orchids, and the trillium, and so many of the beautiful plants native to Western Pennsylvania, he had to teach it in pre-session.

So the first day of a three-week class. Now three weeks, five days a week in fifteen classes. And those classes started at eight o'clock in the morning and they ended at twelve. But that's not when your work ended, that's when the class ended; your work had just begun.

KM: Oh wow.

RW: He required the identification and memorization of 250 wild plants in western Pennsylvania. And you had to learn first of all, the identification of the 250, and then you had to



learn the genus, the species, and the common name. So you had to learn 750 words: 250 genus, 250 species, 250 common names. And you had three weeks to do it. And you had to collect 50 subjects, 50 specimens; you had to preserve them the way he wanted them preserved; you had to present them the way he wanted them presented; and then the Biology faculty would review them. It was not just Dick.

KM: Oh wow.

RW: But he shared them with the entire faculty. So my good fortune was I knew Slippery Rock State College campus. I knew the Gerlach and Garlow Farm like the back of my hand; I knew the Sportsman's Club; I knew A.P. Vincent's farm; I knew K. O. Reid's farm. I knew all of these farms around the area. And when I learned that this particular type of sphagnum moss was growing in an area that would have about this much moisture and on a south-facing slope, I knew I could go to Redmond Bottom and find that sphagnum moss. And that helped me immensely.

But for three weeks I never worked so hard, and the last week was the crunch. The last week in this three-week class to memorize those 750 terms, and I could not do it at home, I had to do it in the lab. So we had four hours of class. At noon I stayed and then the Science Hall was closed at nine o'clock at night. He had all the specimens there for you to memorize. I figured, "I can't do this, I cannot get the A I have to get in this class by going home and sleeping." So I smuggled a sleeping bag into Vincent Science Hall and I put it in the janitor's closet. And at 9:00 when they locked up the Vincent Science Hall I was inside. And I got my sleeping bag out, but I studied at 9:00, 10:00, 11:00, 12:00, sometimes by a flashlight as the night watchman or police would come by. Then I would sleep in the sleeping bag. I'd get up in the morning before class began at 8:00, and I'd roll up the sleeping bag, put it in a janitor's closet, and I was dressed in the same clothes I had the day before. But that was just what I needed to do.

I will never forget when I took the final examination and scored very highly, Dick Medve called me into his office and he said, "Watson, I think you showed me something in this three-week class." He said, "I'm going to place you at North Hills High School." He said, "That's the best placement we have for a Biology student teacher. I don't want you to embarrass yourself or this institution. You go out. You do well." And he said, "It will serve you well for the rest of your life."

Now, it was the best placement because you were assigned to two former Slippery Rock University Biology majors, who were Walter Shinko--Walter Shinko was a 1958, '57 graduate, but knew Dick Medve very well. Everything was all set up that the best Slippery Rock student teacher would, or one of the best, would get a chance to go to the North Hills High School. It was that assignment: Hank Malatour and Walter Shinko were my two cooperating teachers, very demanding, but I knew when I finished in May of 1970 my undergraduate work and graduated, I knew I was ready to teach students in the discipline of biology. It came with this emphasis that my faculty member, my teacher, my professor, my mentor Dick Medve instilled in me. And there were just so many people like that. Dick Medve was one of those.

I took a class that was supposed to be just, you know, an elective and I thought, “Oh no, this is not. . . .” It was World Geography and I thought, “Oh, World Geography, ok [grimaces].” Well, I was a junior. I walked into World Geography and this man came in and he began talking and I couldn't understand him. I had such a difficult time understanding him. And he would refer to places like “sook dak-a-tah.” What is “sook dak-a-tah?” I found out it was South Dakota. All these other names. . . . The gentleman was Hungarian, but he was born and raised behind the Iron Curtain. He knew Johnny Weissmuller, who was the original Tarzan in the movie! This gentleman's name was Kalman Bognar. Kalman Bognar, for anyone who ever had Dr. Bognar, it changed your life. You realized what freedom was because in with the World Geography, he would talk about swimming a river to safety and freedom. You learned so much.

I want to share one more: a woman who really changed my life. A woman who just taught me so much more than calculus. In my freshman year I, as a Biology major and Chemistry minor, I was assigned to take calculus. I went in and the professor's name was Shu-Shen Sah, a Chinese woman who very accidentally found herself in Slippery Rock. But I walked in the first day and she began speaking very much in a Chinese accent. And I had not, in my undergraduate or my high school career, I had never heard a person speak with a Chinese accent. I was born and raised in Slippery Rock and there were not many Chinese people in the 1950s and early 60s in Slippery Rock, if any. And Professor Sah began the class like, “Let  $x$  equal sine of tangent of  $y$ , no no, let  $x$  equal cosine, cosine of  $y$ .” And I am trying to imitate her dialect at the time that I would hear, and I had no idea. I was having a difficult time learning calculus. But learning calculus with the strong Chinese dialect was difficult for me. And like a typical 17-year-old, I was 17 my first semester freshman year, and like most 17-year-olds I thought, “This is crazy. . . .”

So what do immature 17-year-old men often do? They make fun of things if they can't do it. If they can't learn it, they oftentimes mock it. And that's what I did as a 17-year-old first semester freshman, I chose the low road in life and that, I'm ashamed to say that, Kevin, that's what I did. And in the first three weeks I thought, “This is crazy.” After class I would talk with my buddies about, “Well, you can't understand her; she doesn't even know what she's teaching. How in the world does she know? We can't even tell what she's teaching.” The very first assessment came at the end of the first three weeks. I remember vividly I earned a 37% in my first calculus test, 37%. I had gone through math at Slippery Rock High School and it was one of my strengths. Now I was attempting to learn a theoretical math, calculus, but I was spending more time on mocking the teacher than I was learning the subject.

When I earned a 37%, Professor Sah said, “If you did not get the grade you wanted (in a very strong Chinese accent) come and see me.” Well, that was a changing point for Bob Watson's life. I took several deep breaths, knocked on her office door in what is now Carruth-Rizza, which was West Hall at the time, and very embarrassed, I went in and asked Professor Sah for help. I said, “I've always done well in mathematics, and I don't know why I got a 37%.” A typical 17-year-old freshman, “Oh, it couldn't be me. It has to be somebody else who's the problem here.” I said, “I don't want to get a 37%. I need to do well because I have to pass this class for my

biology and chemistry requirements. I don't want to earn a 37%. She looked at me and she said, "Mr. Watson, I recommend you spend more time on calculus and less time making fun of me."

KM: Wow.

BW: She knew, she knew how she spoke. She knew there were immature people mocking her. Thank heavens, she took me under her wing even though I did not deserve it, clearly did not deserve it. She took me under her wing and she tutored me three days a week . . .

KM: Wow.

BW: . . . an hour each day. In that period of time over the next fifteen weeks, because we had eighteen-week semesters at that point in time. You studied for 18 weeks. Christmas vacation was not the end of the fall semester; you came back in January and took your final exams from the fall semester. So for fifteen weeks, Professor Sah tutored me. She helped me understand calculus, but more importantly than calculus, she helped me understand a person different from me.

I learned one day when I said, "Professor Sah, how did you ever get to Slippery Rock? I mean, you're the only Chinese person in Slippery Rock. You're the only Chinese person I know." She went on to tell me that she had an interview at a very prestigious Ivy League school in New England. She was driving from Texas up to New England for her interview when--this is just at the time Interstate 79 was beginning to open up, and there were segments or sections of 79 you could travel on 79 as an interstate. She was on Interstate 79 and her car overheated and had a major problem on Interstate 79 near the Slippery Rock exit. So, Frankie McConnell at Wilson Service Station, where I ended up pumping gas, went out and towed her in. She had an older automobile and parts were not readily available, so it was going to be four or five days before her parts could come in and her car would be repaired. And she said, so she ended up staying in a motel room or whatever—actually [pause] at the time she told me that there was someone who gave her accommodation in their home.

She stayed four or five days in Slippery Rock and had to call ahead and say she had to postpone or cancel her interview because of her car breaking down and so on. And she ended up telling me that while she was in Slippery Rock she walked to the campus from downtown, and she found the Math Department and talked with people in the Math Department. Ironically, they had, we had, an opening in the Math Department for a mathematician. I said to Mrs. Sah, "Well, where were you working? What were you doing? Were you working at a university before you came to Slippery Rock?" She said, "I was working in a brand-new business, a brand-new organization." She said, "I was a programmer." I took Mrs. Sah's class in 1966. I said, "Well, what is a program [laughs]?" It was all, at that point and time, it was all about Fortran and COBOL and the beginning of computer science, very much the beginning. But she was a programmer for a company called Texas Instruments.

KM: Oh yeah, right.

RW: And she explained what she did. She explained that she liked Slippery Rock, a nice small town; she explained the people were friendly, and she explained that she liked the Math Department. She said, "I was offered a job and I decided to stay."

Professor Shu-Shen Sah was one of those extremely instrumental people in my life. She taught me that people who are different from me, there was not a right or a wrong, it was difference. We have come to use the term 'diversity' in the last 30 to 40 years. But in 1966, Mrs. Sah, or Professor Sah, was very different from me. That's the first time I had confronted someone who is different, and she helped me immensely in that regard. She actually was one of my favorite teachers. She was one of my mentors. Not so much in the field of mathematics, but in the field of life. She attended my college graduation at my request; and she helped me a great deal. She was a wonderful woman. I would go in and sit in her office, never with an appointment or anything like that, just go in and crash and sit and talk with her about her life and about my life . . . just a wonderful person.

I had so many good people like that, Kevin, who really pulled me up by my bootstraps and taught me right from wrong and helped me understand that the world is much, much, much greater than Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania. I was going to learn that over the next several years, but they helped me understand that; they helped me jumpstart into that mindset. So Professor Sah was one of those other people. I didn't mean to be so long.

KM: Nice, nice story. Maybe we should move on to, I mean, you went out to Baltimore. And then you mentioned earlier, you came here to take a position. It was in Admissions. What did you do after Admissions?

RW: I was assigned in Admissions and Records. Joseph Marks, who is still living, Joe Marks was our former Registrar for years, and Director of Summer School, and so on. Joe Marks actually hired me. And I kid Joe and Ramona--who are both still living today, in their '90s--I kid them [that] I was Joe's greatest mistake in life when he chose to hire me for his assistant. But I worked in the Records Office and also worked directly with the transfer students coming into Admissions, that was my initial responsibility. In my second year, we opened an area in room 108 Old Main is now, I believe, the Council of Trustees meeting room, the Robert Marcus room. That was my first office, and we actually opened an area referred as Academic Services. It was the first effort by the division of Academic Affairs to reach out to students.

KM: Do you remember what year that was?

RW: Yes, 1972. 1970 I graduated and then in '72 graduating from Johns Hopkins, came back in August, and it was late in the fall semester of 1972 we opened the brand-new Office of Academic Services. Basically what we did is, students would be assigned a schedule of classes, usually by their academic advisor, students would have some choice in that, but as time went on through the '70s, students had major choice in that. They had to receive their advisor's signature. But there was something called a drop/add process where if you wanted to drop a class in your

schedule and add another one, you could do that. There was a \$5 charge. You can imagine back in 1972 that \$5 was a lot of money. I mean, that was something you could go out to dinner on twice for \$5. But students would drop a class and add it. They were allowed five days at the beginning of the semester to drop a class and add another one or change the section of a class. Very clearly, many of the times students dropped a class and added a class was because they thought “Professor X” is going to be too difficult, or too demanding, or just didn’t match up with their persona, and so they wanted out of that class and they wanted into another class.

So we set up that office and the lead secretary was a woman by the name of Jean Richardson, who is long time retired. Jean was in the Records Office, the Admissions Office, and then the Vice President for Academic Affairs Office. Jean was a very bright very, very hard-working young woman and she was the frontline person in that Academic Services Office. We would work with students who wanted to drop a class and add another class. Oftentimes students would say, “Well, I want to drop this class, but I want to add this class.” And oftentimes you can understand they wanted to add the new class because their buddy was in the new class, or their girlfriend was in the new class, or someone they knew was in the new class. Well, our job was to make sure that when they dropped the class and added a new class that the new class would actually count in their curriculum toward graduation requirements, that they weren't going to just drop and add and get into something that another year or so down the road they would realize, “Well, wait a second, I can't even use that class toward fulfillment of my curricular requirements.”

So we, in a sense, were starting to do academic advisement. Now, in 1972 the APSCUF contract, APSCUF-PAHE was the union at the time. APSCUF is the association that we have today, but PAHE representing the Pennsylvania Association of Higher Education. The first APSCUF faculty union members were part of also PAHE. So the APSCUF-PAHE contract referred to academic advisement as only a faculty responsibility. Well, I was actually a faculty member and assigned to an administrative post as Assistant Dean of Men was the slot, but working in Records and Admissions, and so I was able to do that advising for the students who wanted to alter their schedule.

If you can imagine at that point in time in 1972 we had about 3,500 students or so. Almost every one of them wanted to change one class or more. Some wanted to change two or three classes, and you had five days to do this in and one place to do it. So Jean Richardson and other secretaries--Leona Porter was a wonderful person; Pamela Fatigan, a wonderful person; Jeannie Bruner was a wonder--they would come in and we would attempt to serve the students.

On the left side of this computer printed card, the student would fill out the name of the course, the department number, a course number and section letter of what they wanted to drop, and they had to get a signature from the professor acknowledging they could drop the class, and then they would get the same information for the course they wanted to add on the right-hand side of the card, and \$5. They would come in, give the card and their \$5 to one of the clerical members, they

would turn around and enter the information on this massive machine called a CRT, Cathode Ray Tube, it was the first effort at a micro-computer. It would not fit in a bushel basket; it was much larger than that. Put it on the desk and you would process on this CRT, the drop and the add. And then you would turn to the student and say, "Okay, your card has been accepted. You are dropped out of this classroom, you're now in this class." And they would file their \$5 into a secure area.

We had a secure area that was actually the bottom of a file drawer. We would, at different times of the day, collect the money, two or more people would count the money, and then take it upstairs to Allen McClymonds, who was the director of the Business Office--the manager of the Business Office. And you can imagine hundreds of students times \$5, there's a lot of money there, and we were all very nervous as all that money would be secured out of the bottom of a file drawer, and counted in the back room by two or three people, and then carried upstairs.

So those five days were extremely busy. What we learned is that we did not have to wait until a day or two before the semester begins to register a student for the semester; we ought to do it in advance. So we created something called advanced registration. By that--Joe Marks was the Registrar and in charge of that--we would issue timecards to these 3,500 students, computer determined, over a period of about three to four weeks. So you had 100 or some students per day over this period of three to four weeks. They would come into the Academic Services Center. They would bring their registration form with all the courses they wanted, signed by their advisor, and we would process that on the cathode ray tube monster. And so, sooner or later, we realized, "Well, wait a second. We're actually, during one semester, we're changing grades from the previous semester; we're adjusting schedules of the current semester; we're registering students for the next semester; and we're taking information from the faculty for two semesters down the road of what was going to be taught." So in one semester the Academic Services Office was working on four different semesters: last semester, current semester, next semester, and the future semester down the road.

That was the beginning, frankly, of Academic Advisement on Slippery Rock's campus. It was the beginning of advanced registration. It was the beginning of students learning the curriculum and understanding their curriculum so well that they knew they could drop this class and add this class and it could still count towards graduation requirements. All of that kind of began in that very rudimentary Office of Academic Services. And that went on and developed more and more and more. There were other services that were created out of that area, such as the Advisement Center, and faculty members hired to coordinate the Advisement Center, and probably the best-known individual--I did that in a sense as part of my responsibility as an academic dean for a while, and then it just got too overwhelming--so we hired a young woman by the name of Amanda Yale to come in as the new director of the Advisement Center and [she] came in, and like many things that she's responsible for, she jumpstarted that responsibility to a new level and thus, we have what we have today in terms of students understanding their curriculum, they're registering, they're changing their schedule, and so on and so forth.

KM: Nice. So it after that you moved on to . . . what was your next position?

RW: That's a . . . interestingly, I was the Assistant Registrar and Assistant Dean of Men at that point in time, was the official title. Then Mr. Marks had a medical problem, and fortunately he was able to recover from this, but it was going to be a few semesters until he was able to come back to work. So I then was assigned the responsibility of Acting Registrar and, also, I was Coordinator of the Transfer Student Program.

In 1972 one of the first things we did with the Transfer Student Program was--I knew a gentleman by the name of Raymond Toman. Ray Toman was the Coordinator of Transfer Counseling at Butler County Community College. Butler County Community College opened as a brand-new community college in 1966, and now in 1972 they're well underway, and there are a number of students graduating with associate degrees in different areas who want to go on to earn a baccalaureate degree.

Ray Toman was the Coordinator of the Transfer Program. Well, I happened to attend the same church as Ray Toman, and we knew each other quite well for years, and after church we would talk about, "You know, we need to do something that's better for students so that if they know in their freshman year and sophomore year at Butler County Community College that they're going to be transferring to Slippery Rock, they shouldn't wait until they get to Slippery Rock to find out how these courses at BCCC are going to be counted and used in their Slippery Rock curriculum. We ought to do something in advance for them."

Ray Toman and I sat down, and this would have been fall of 1972 / spring of 1973. We sat down and we said, "Let's look at the Elementary Education track for Butler County Community College and what you require, and how does that fit into the Bachelor of Science Degree in Elementary Education at Slippery Rock University," and we placed those courses. We did what we didn't call it at that time, but that was actually the first articulation program between a community college and Slippery Rock University.

It started, frankly, with Elementary Education, one of the biggest programs, and Secondary Education, and the biggest program of all at that point in time was Health and Physical Education Teaching Certification, which is now a much smaller program. But at that point in time in the early to mid-70s it was the elephant in the room. And nothing happened in significant ways without the Health and Physical Education Department becoming involved. The Health and Physical Education Department had a number of chairpeople: Bill Meise was one; Brad Keith was one; Bill Herman was one. And then this young guy comes on as the department chairperson, Bob Aebersold. Bob Aebersold and I sat down and we said, "Wouldn't it be good if we did these articulation programs that we have developed with Butler County Community College, and Community College of Allegheny County, and Community College of Beaver County, and Harrisburg Area Community College." Because by that time I have taken the dog and pony show to every community college that would sit long enough to listen. And we

developed articulation with every community college from Harrisburg west and some even east in Pennsylvania.

KM: Well, that must have been way ahead of its time.

RW: It *was* way ahead of its time. And you know what, Kevin, we joke and used to say, and this is not the politically-correct term, but we would joke and say Slippery Rock was eating the lunch of so many other campuses because we had these articulation programs. This was long before laptops, and iPads, and smartphones. I mean, when I'd sit down to talk with a student about articulation, I would say (holds up a piece of paper), "Here it is: on one page. You'll see how your courses that you've taken fit into the Slippery Rock curriculum." Giving them that one page was huge.

Then we kind of woke up the bear. The bear in Pennsylvania was the Pennsylvania State University. It had a number of these branch campuses like Greensburg, and Behrend to the north up in Erie, and so many different--Mount Aloysius, and all these branch campuses. Penn State was teaching 800 level courses at these branch campuses, which meant--frankly, I didn't think it was a very fair thing--but it meant that the 800-level course can count toward an associate degree. But if you came to Penn State, we wouldn't count all those courses even though we taught them to you at a Penn State branch campus. They weren't being counted toward a baccalaureate degree at Penn State main campus.

Bob Aebersold and I said, "That's not right. That's not right for students." So what we said is--I set up appointments to every branch campus on Penn State. Went to Penn State branch campuses and said, "All these 800 courses that you've taken, we'll take them. We'll accept them at Slippery Rock." And for about three or four years we had dozens and dozens of Penn State undergraduate students coming to Slippery Rock to do their baccalaureate degree work because of this nonsense that Penn State taught these 800 level courses. Well, Penn State wised up on that, and they finally renumbered all their courses and accepted. . . .

Then Bob Aebersold said to me, "You know, we're getting a lot of students from New York, and we're getting them from up in Herkimer County area, but we're getting them out in Long Island, or even getting a lot of students from New Jersey, and we're getting some students from Maryland." So the dog and pony show went on the road again, and Bob, as chairperson of the Physical Education, Health, and Public Education Department would sit down and talk with his counterpart at the community college. I would place all the courses into the baccalaureate curriculum so that when we left we had formed an articulation with each of those institutions. Many, many campuses that Bob had communicated with were out of state, and that was something unheard of. Keep in mind, we were a state-owned institution, and we were getting funding from the state house and senate, the legislature, for assistance for primarily state residents, but nonresidents were coming in and taking benefit with that as well. So that was a whole different issue in many ways.



The articulation effort--one of the reasons, if you took a look at how many transfer students Slippery Rock has even to this day. But if you go back into the late 70s, mid 80s, mid 90s, you will look at the number of transfer students that Slippery Rock has compared with an IUP, or a California, or a Clarion, or an Edinboro, or a Shippensburg; it doesn't matter, and perhaps West Chester would take as many if not more. But Slippery Rock was taking, in many cases, 1,000 or more students as transfer students. Well, when you do that, then your freshman class does not have to be as large unless you want it to be. That's why we were able to then grow our freshman class and grow transfer student. . . .

KM: Interesting.

RW: If you look at when Al Watrel was the president back in the 70s, late 60s--from '68 to '76--he wanted the institution to be *large*, and we grew a great deal during that time. Even after Al Watrel's era, we went from that 2,500ish in the mid to late 1960s. I think when I graduated in 1970 there were somewhere around 3,000, 3,100 students. Well, we went from 3,000 to 7,500.

KM: Wow.

RW: In not very many years. It was because young people pursuing higher education, and not just the traditional seventeen to eighteen, nineteen, new freshman, but it was the older students who were coming in as well. We welcomed all of those older students going to associate degree-granting institutions because they were married and had children, or they were married and had a job and they could only take one or two courses at their local community college. There was Slippery Rock with open arms, and they came here in large numbers as well. So that was kind of the beginning, way back with Ray Toman and Butler County Community College.

KM: Nice.

RW: After that, after I was the Interim Registrar, or Acting Registrar, and so on and so forth, it was after that period of being Acting Registrar that I was assigned increased responsibilities and I became the Assistant Dean for--initially it was called Special Academic Programs. That was Admissions, Records, Advisement, The Act 101 state grant programs, The Federal Trio grant programs, and some other areas; Orientation as well. Moving from Assistant Dean of Special Academic Programs, to then later with more responsibility, Associate Dean of Graduate and Special Programs, and then eventually to Dean of Academic Services, and then that name changed to First Year Programs. First Year Programs was everything that went into a student's life as a first-year student. From the time they were admitted, they were oriented, they were advised, they were registered, they were tutored if they were in a state or federal grant program.

But we began to--and that's, at the time, Amanda Yale was in the Advisement area--we began talking more and more about. . . . We had a large number of freshmen, come in as freshmen, who would enroll for their first and second semester, but then they would not stay on as sophomores. We even had some transfer students, which is even more difficult because these students were

really upperclassmen when they were coming to us. Not many, but we did have some who would do a semester, two semesters, and then withdraw.

We began to ask why: why are these young people who are very capable, very talented, very well qualified; why are they not staying to graduate? The answers we got over the next five to ten years were answers that surprised a lot of people. Some would be financial reasons; they simply could not afford it. But rather than sitting down and talking with a counselor about, “My financial aid has changed, or my father lost his job, my mother lost a job, or my parents are separated and now my financial base is less than it was,” or these changes in a young person's life. Instead of their communicating that to us, they simply, in many cases, would have been embarrassed by all of that, and just withdrew. So we began to be what we referred to as “assertive advisors.” We began to be intrusive advisors. We had an Academic Advisement Center, a Tutorial Center, a Financial Aid Center that wanted to know why. Any time we could assist the student with the life-changing situation they were going through, we did that.

That began an entirely new set of services to students: services outside the classroom. Services that--we realized young women were having difficulties that young men, the same age, or in the same curriculum, or the same geographic background, were not having. We found out it was veterans who were having difficulties in one way or another in completing the degrees. What we found when we formed this whole area of First Year Studies--F Y R S T--FYRST stands for First Year Studies. What we tried to do is track that student from the time they applied for admission through acceptance, through orientation, through their first semester, through their second semester, and into the sophomore year where they would be successful academically; they would be successful socially.

Because what our data were showing, what our research was showing--and there was a gentleman by the name of John Gardner down at the University of South Carolina who had this whole massive first year studies research project. What he was showing people, not just in the United States but across the world, was students will stay at your university if and only if their needs are met. Some of those needs are academic, but some of them are not academic. Some of them are financial; some of them are social; some of them are engagement. We realized early on that if we had a student who was involved in two or three academic clubs, or social clubs, student government, athletics, their marching band. . . if they were involved, those students persisted at Slippery Rock to graduation at a much higher percentage rate than the students who did not get connected. And so this whole issue of connectivity came into play.

My good fortune was, I just happened to be here, and be interested, and want to be involved in the lives of students as an academic dean where other academic deans were working directly with faculty and curriculum and so on and so forth, the very important in-classroom activities, I was working with faculty and staff on what we were learning as the very important out-of-classroom activities which probably in the same capacity, if not more, connected that student to Slippery Rock University and kept them here.

After that, my opportunity to serve as Dean of First Year Studies--that takes me up to about 2000, 1999. It was a Friday afternoon, late afternoon, 5:30, 6:00, and I had the habit--my management style was: come in early, get everything prepped for the day, so that I can spend the day having meetings with faculty, staff, and students. At the end of the day, I would stay until I got everything wrapped up so that I didn't have to start the next day with a great backlog. It was Friday and I was wanting to get home to begin the weekend and so on. I heard the knock on--I was in the Lowry Center, that was my office in the second floor--heard the knock on the door downstairs, and I thought, "Oh, someone must need help or something, it's 5:30, 6:00." I went down to the front door and opened it, and here's Warren Smith, G. Warren Smith who is the president. I said, "Hi, Dr. Smith. Come on in. What, what can I help you with?" He said, "Do you have a few minutes? I'd like to talk with you." Now when the president says that on Friday late afternoon when no one else is around you think, "Is this a good thing or is this not a good thing [laughing]?"

KM: Right [laughing].

RW: He came up to the office and took off his coat and scarf and hat. He said, "I had a surprise occur this afternoon." He said, "It took me off guard, actually; I was not expecting anything like that. And I'd like to share it with you." "Okay." He said, "Our Vice President for Student Affairs [inaudible] has accepted a job as Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh, a very demanding job. But she's going to leave in three weeks, and we need a Vice President for Student Affairs.

Well, you know, I worked a lot with the Division of Student Affairs. As an academic dean that was engaged directly with students, we worked a lot together. Orientation had actually been with the Division of Student Affairs for several years until Bob Aebersold transferred it to me in Academic Affairs and Academic Services because he wanted more of an academic influence into the engagement of orientation. So I worked with a lot of the Student Affairs people, and I worked with the housing staff on a regular basis. I worked with the counseling staff on a regular basis, and I said, "Okay. Well, you have a few people in that division who are very responsible people, I'm sure, and they've been at higher levels in the division and are you looking at those people to move in to that?" He said, "Well, that's the situation I'm dealing with." He said, "I think you would be the best choice to serve as the Interim Vice President for Student Affairs."

You could have knocked me off the chair. I said, "Dr. Smith, I'm in the Academic Affairs Division." "I know. I understand that." I said, "Well, I'm an academic dean." "I understand that," he said, "but I don't think there's anyone on this campus who puts students first like you do and I want that attitude in that division." He said, "Now, I'm not going to make you do this. I'm not going to reassign you a new position that you would not want to serve in. But I'm going to ask you to go home and talk with Karen and your family because even though this would be an acting position, I would ask you to assume this position for a year while we study what we want

as a vice president, how that vice president should be engaged with the president's cabinet and the other vice presidents, and what we want for the future.”

Warren Smith had done, by that point in time, a project referred to as Future Watch in the 1990s and into the early 2000. Future Watch was this comprehensive review of Slippery Rock University, somewhat in the past, definitely in the present, but also largely for the future. It was a master plan in a sense but for *all* areas, not just the bricks and mortar or the physical plant, it was a master plan for everything. And so he said, “I'd like to know what this division wants to do in the future and wants to be. I'd like you to seriously consider that. And if you don't, if you don't think that's what you want to do, I will respect that.”

So I went home and I was probably ten feet in the room when my wife said, “What is wrong? What's going on?” I said, “I just had a conversation with the president.” She pulled the chair out in the kitchen. She said, “I think we better talk about this [laughing].”

It was, for me, an affirmation of what I was doing with students and the attitude I had towards students. It was: students are the most important element in the university. Long story short, I accepted the interim position, the acting position.

President Smith stopped over several times over the period of the next eight or nine months and I distinctly remember, it was probably about eight months into this that he stopped over one late afternoon again, only this time I was in 304 Old Main right beside the President's Office, and he stopped over after everybody else had gone for the day. He said, “So how do you like the job?” I said, “Oh it's really demanding, it's long hours, it's rewarding.” He said, “Well good, that's good; I'm glad you're challenged by it. I'm glad you're rewarded by it.” He said, “I hear some very positive things in the division by people who really hadn't been very positive in the past.” He said, “Whatever you're doing, keep it up and keep me informed, and thank you very much.”

I thought, you know, the one thing I asked President Smith to sign for me, to give me, before I accepted the interim position was a statement that guaranteed me my position as Dean of First Year Studies at the end of the year. I didn't want to get into a situation where--and it was Amanda Yale and Elliott Baker, who had jointly accepted responsibilities and even Champ Storch and Wil Hadden had been involved in accepting various responsibilities as well. So I wanted to be able to go back to that position, because I really had no thought whatsoever of moving from Academic Affairs to Student Affairs.

They had announced the position opening, the new Vice President for Student Affairs, and they were receiving applications and nominations. We were about a month, I guess, before the close of applications. I had an appointment on my calendar at the end of the day, I think a 5:00 appointment, and what I usually did when I was Vice President was I held between eight and five the meetings I had to hold with faculty, and staff, and the president's cabinet, and the academic deans and others, and then in the evening I spent time visiting student organizational meetings, committee meetings, SGA meetings, hall council meetings, the police meetings in the evening,

because I was responsible for University Police as well. So I spent that time doing those meetings. So it was about 5:00 and I was getting ready to go out and do some meetings and it was on my calendar, all it said was "staff." And I thought, "Oh, that's odd." So 5:00 came and an entourage of several staff members, probably twenty or twenty-five, began to walk into the office and I thought, I jokingly said, "Okay, if this is a coup you can just have the place. I'll see you later." The group came in and they said, "We'd like to read a memo that we've written and addressed to Robert Smith," who was the Vice President for Academic Affairs, but he was also chair of the search committee for VP for Student Affairs. The staff read this letter to Bob Smith that said they were nominating me for the permanent position. The one gentleman who's still employed here said to me, "And frankly, we don't care what you think about this. We just want you to apply for the job."

I had not at that point in time, and frankly, had not even pulled together a resume or anything like that. I just was ready to move back to my deanship and that was going to be fine. I figured another five years as the Academic Dean or so on and then I was going to retire. But my life changed dramatically then, when I went through the application process, it was a little odd; very strange going through an application process on your home campus and answering a series of questions in the interviews and so on along the way. Then it got to the final five, and then it got to the final three. And the final three were invited on campus for two days of persistent interviews. I was in several situations, Kevin, over those two days of meetings where I almost wanted to say, "You know me. I've been here thirty years. You ask me this question, and I would hope by now you know Bob Watson well enough to answer the question." But I never did that. I took it very seriously and with a great deal of responsibility and went through those two days of interviews. When Warren Smith came over and offered me the job it was absolutely one of the most rewarding times of my life, and only surpassed by what was then the next seven years as opportunity to serve students at Slippery Rock University as their Vice President, their chief advocate as I saw it. So that got me to that point.

KM: Nice. And how long were you in that position?

RW: I was in that position from 2000 to 2006; I retired in 2006. Then I got a call from Bob Smith, who was the president at that time. I got a call in 2007 that the Vice President for University Advancement did not have a contract continued, and Bob Smith asked if I would come back and serve as Interim Vice President for Advancement, if Bob Aebersold would be willing to assist in that effort. And I said--Bob Aebersold is one of my favorite people in life, and so any time I have an opportunity to work with Bob Aebersold--I said, "Sure. If Bob Aebersold's willing to tolerate me, boy I'd love to work with him." So Bob Smith assigned us responsibility. And Bob Aebersold came to me after I had agreed and said, "Okay, I have to tell ya, I really don't have a lot of time to be doing the day-to-day office management so I'd like you to be the day-to-day VP for Advancement and work with the staff, work with the faculty, and so on and so forth, and so work with the university." He said, "I'll be willing to make some calls on individuals for major gifts and fundraising." And that was wonderful. So I did the day-to-day

office stuff and did some major fundraising, and made solicitations as well, and so on and so forth. But that was supposed to be for two or three months or so, and I guess it was about eight or nine months until they'd then hired the new Vice President for University Advancement. She came in and just moved right into the office just fine.

So then I retired again, and that was 2008. And I was retired for, I guess, about four years and we had a new president. Bob Smith retired and we had a new president come on, Cheryl Norton, our first woman president, and we were so glad to see Cheryl come on. I was one of the thousands of people, I'm sure, who met her over the first few months of her experience as a brand-new president. I remember meeting Cheryl the very first time when they had a welcome for her at North Hall. Karen and I attended as individuals involved with the community, involved with the university, and retired faculty, staff, and so on and so forth. I shook her hand, and welcomed her to her to Slippery Rock right along with the several hundred others who came through the line.

So I am absolutely certain she had no idea who I was any more than any of the others. Although, one thing that Cheryl did tell me later: she did put my name with a face and a book. That was when Cheryl became president, I sent her a copy of the university's history, before she even came to Slippery Rock when she was still at Connecticut, Southern Connecticut. I said, "This is not necessarily light reading, but, the good thing is, there'll be no quiz." I said, "I just thought you would enjoy understanding the past, the rich tradition, the rich history, of the institution you are now going to be serving as its president." I wrote a little note to her and sent that well before she came. And she told me later that she, when I came through the line, she said, "I knew there was a reason why I should remember Bob Watson's name, but it wasn't until I went home and saw the book and put it all together." So the next time I met Cheryl Norton was it an athletic fundraiser. We were there and again it was, I believe it was the women's athletic golf outing that I was attending, which I attended regularly for many years, and Cheryl was there to greet everybody, and I shook her hand again and so on and so forth.

That was my understanding of Cheryl Norden until I got a phone call . . . from an individual who had just spoken with the president. That individual said that the president had not renewed the contract of the Vice President for Student Affairs and the president was interested in knowing if I would have interest in coming back to serve for a semester in the role that I had filled for several years. I said, "I'd like to have conversation with the president about that. If there's interest on her part, I would like to know her perspective before there would be any interest on my part." And so, Cheryl and I got together. We talked, and I understood then better why the contract of the previous VP was not continued, and I knew the environment in which the division was, and I also knew that at that point in time, there were at least two or three people in the division who expected to be named Interim Vice President for Student Affairs, and the president did not want to make that appointment. So she said, "I would like you to come back if you're willing to serve your alma mater, if you're willing to serve this institution you've already served for so many years, if you're willing to serve for another six months, I would greatly appreciate that." So, much to the surprise of a number of the people in the division when she announced that Bob

Watson was coming out of retirement to serve in that position--I'm sure there were a lot of people who were surprised, some who were probably shocked, some who probably didn't want to see me because they really felt they should be in that that interim role. But all in all it went, I think, extremely well except, as I said to Cheryl Norton after fourteen months in the position. I said, "You know, I like retirement. I really thought it was a good thing. And you told me six months; it's now been fourteen months. I need to go back to retirement."

Cheryl and I joked about that, and then I left after fourteen months, I believe it was 2013 or the beginning of '14 there, somewhere in that area, that I left and had the good fortune of that last year as Interim we hired in the Cooperative Activities operation, a woman by the name of Wendy Leitera. Wendy was an internal auditor and accountant consultant and so on in private business, and we hired her to come in as Business Manager and that was absolutely one of my best decisions to hire Wendy to come in. She was, she continues to be, just outstanding with regards to Student Government Association, the bookstore, the Happy Bus, the childcare center, and Co-op.

The reason I bring that in is, Wendy had reconciled with the Board of Governors at the state level our affiliated entity position, and we had always had a separate 501c3 organization for student government, but it was never recognized officially as an affiliated entity because the Board of Governors had a separate process by which you needed to go through. The Alumni Association had gone through it, the Foundation had gone through it, but SGA had not gone through it. So that process was completed, and we then needed a board of directors for the Student Government Association, and I was asked to serve on the board of directors, which I currently serve on, which I currently serve. And for the first few years I was blessed to be able to serve as chairperson of that good group. So I continued to be kind of connected to the institution in that regard. Certainly not in any paid manner.

KM: You mentioned your book. I wanted to just show people the cover over here. It's a fantastic resource for us in the Archives, and I recommend it highly to anybody just remotely interested in the history of Slippery Rock. It's fantastic; it's a great book to go to. It covers the whole era, from the normal school era, all the way up to the university and I'm guessing you did this . . . initially you did it for your doctorate?

RW: Correct. From '72 to '79 I did the initial research for what was my dissertation, which was "Slippery Rock State College: The Legend Behind the Name." I then ended up publishing that in 1982 in a soft back edition, all black and white photographs. That was my dissertation plus about three years of additional work to create it into a book format. The book that you have, Kevin, "Slippery Rock University: The Legend Behind the Name" . . . what happened was, I actually never stopped researching in '82. My love for the history of the university kept me interested and engaged. I became an eBay junkie and in the 1980s, 1990s, and into the early 2000s, anything that came up on eBay I would, if I could possibly afford it, I would buy it. I didn't care if it was a postcard, if it was a box of minutiae that some family had found in the attic of their great

grandmother, great aunt, or whatever. I was interested in looking at all of that. I went out and communicated with every auctioneer in Western Pennsylvania actually and said, "If you come upon anything that says Slippery Rock Pennsylvania, Slippery Rock Normal School, Slippery Rock State Teachers College, here's my business card, call me. I will come to the auction and I will bid and probably buy it." I bought hundreds, if not thousands, of pieces of Slippery Rock historical memorabilia, most of which now reside in Slippery Rock University Archives.

Frankly Kevin, I mean, thanks to you, and thanks to Judy [Silva], our Archives is something to be extremely proud of. It is something that when you come in this facility, and I understand its limitations with the pandemic and so on, but that will pass. When you come into this Archive you are blessed with living the history. Whether it's photographs, or whether it's costumes of Rocky, Rocky I or Rocky II, or whether it's information about Emma Guffey Miller, or information regarding any of the presidents, many of the faculty, many of the alumni, there's an opportunity to come in here and learn in the way that I did not have.

Unfortunately, when I started in 1972 at Pitt and researching, I can remember going to the University of Pittsburgh Library, going to Carnegie Mellon Library, and there was nothing, nothing. Then finally finding that many of the original minutes of the stockholder's organization, or then later on the Council of Trustees, resided partly in the president's office, sometimes in the library, sometimes in the Alumni Association. I mean, it was here, there and everywhere, and it was not coordinated. It was not in a manner in which someone could come in and begin to do research, and you and Judy have done all of that. We have something here that is a jewel of the campus, a jewel of the university.

As everyone has heard I'm sure, you can never fully understand the present or the future unless you begin to understand the past. So what you have created is just wonderful and I would encourage anyone who watches this and so many others to come to the third floor of Bailey Library and roll up your sleeves and be ready to be enlightened in this university's history, culture, values, and traditions.

KM: That's a unique story I've really learned to appreciate. And thank you so much, Bob. Thanks.

RW: Thank you.

KM: We appreciate all you've donated to us and thank you for doing this interview too.

RW: Thank you. It was my pleasure.

KM: OK, now let's call that the end of it then unless you have anything else you want to add.

RW: I think . . . oh, if I could get on record . . . while I think of it here. Our family has been blessed with the ability to have five generations involved with Slippery Rock. I made reference to my great grandfather John N., or Nelson, Watson and he was one of the original stockholders, one of the early members of the Board of Trustees. He was also building chairperson, building



construction manager of the West Gym, and he also was a stonemason. The lions that flank the entrance into West Hall are some of my great granddad's work. His son, his oldest son, Grover Watson graduated from the Normal School in 1913. A man I never, unfortunately, I never got a chance to meet my granddad; he passed away before I was born. He went on from Slippery Rock Normal School where he studied math and science, he went to the University of Pittsburgh . . . to get his baccalaureate degree, and then on to the School of Pharmacy. He opened the pharmacy, a general store, and so on, right across from West Hall, Carruth-Rizza Hall, what is now Big Shot Bob's Wings.

That store on the corner there of Main Street and the alley that runs there between the post office and the store was where my granddad had his store. He was well known to a lot of the students in the high school because that was, West Hall was the high school. High school kids would come over to his store at various times, and to the Normal School and State Teachers College.

It was his oldest son, Grover and Florence Watson's oldest son, John Watson who enrolled in 1934 for two years, ran out of money, and went to Ellwood City to work in the tube mill in the steel industry. For two years he lived with his grandmother in Wurtemberg, and earned enough money in those two years to come back to Slippery Rock in 1938 and ultimately did graduate in 1940. John Austin Watson then, was my dad.

I want to say one thing about my grandmother, Florence Hines Watson. My grandma was very proud to be affiliated with this institution, and in a capacity that is not perhaps as prestigious as being a professor, as being a dean, as being a faculty member, but my grandma washed clothes and pressed clothes of students in what was the washroom of the Normal School. That was actually in a building which would be situated, if it were there today, right between Behavioral Science Building--Strain Behavioral Science Building--and Weisenfluh Cafeteria or Dining Hall. Right on the road, there's a little alley that goes down to a parking lot off the main campus loop there; that building was the Facilities Building. It was a tiny little thing that housed tools and so on and so forth. In that area was also the washing area.

My grandma was a wash woman, and washed and ironed the clothes for the students in the Normal School. They would bring the clothes to that area and have them washed, and she loved that job. That then move to the basement of the Behavioral Science Building--Strain--for a while, and she continued.

That was very hard work. They had at that time, they had old washing machines, they were called "wrangles" [mangles], and you could get your hands or fingers caught in those and lose an appendage. You worked with lye soap and all of those kinds of things that just were part of the rudimentary process of washing clothes. In the 1960s, my grandma--they closed down the washroom and she was going to lose her job. But it was her supervisor who identified that my grandmother always saw the glass as half full.

I was blessed as the oldest grandson to have the opportunity to be the one responsible in the family to take care of my grandma's lawn, her shrubbery, her walks, her garden. Whether it was summer or winter, that was my responsibility as the oldest grandson. So I got to know my grandma very well. When she was given the job to be "house mother" in Harner Hall, she thought that was the best job in the world. She said, "Well yeah, they want you to keep the hall clean and ensure you dust, and you mop, and you clean, and you wax, and you buff and that, but you're doing it right there with all the students and they're so nice. Those girls are so nice." I have talked to several Slippery Rock alumni women who lived in Harner Hall when my grandma was a house mother there, and they thought the world of Mrs. Watson, and she thought the world of them. So it was grandma and granddad's oldest son John, my dad, who graduated in '40 and then I came along and started in '66 and graduated in '70, and then worked from '72 until, off and on then, to 2014 I guess.

And then our youngest daughter, Emily Elizabeth Watson. Our first daughter, Kate, went to Penn State. She wanted a large public institution, she wanted pre-med, and she loved her experience at Penn State. She's now a physician at Children's Hospital in Pittsburgh. Laura didn't want large public, she chose something very different, our middle daughter Laura Jean Watson chose to go to West Point, and she accepted her nomination and served in the military and was discharged, and then had the opportunity to serve in a number of governmental-related agencies, and now is at Westinghouse; is a senior manager there, and got to do what she wanted to do in life.

Emily Elizabeth, if she were here today, she would tell you that she was the smartest of the three daughters because whereas the oldest one chose Penn State, the middle one chose West Point. Yeah, you've heard of those institutions maybe, but she was the smartest one because she chose the best-known institution of all and that's Slippery Rock University. Emily got to live her dream in coming to Slippery Rock. One of the elements of her dream was being homecoming queen, which she was in 2006, and then graduating in the spring of 2007. So she is our fifth member of the Watson family to either graduate or be involved. And of course, my wife Karen and I met at Slippery Rock University so it can't get any better than that. Karen graduated in 1973.

KM: Nice. That's great. Wonderful story.

RW: Well, thank you so much and I am working on another group of memorabilia to be forwarding on to you here soon, Kevin.

KM: Okay, great! And if anybody's listening to this, we just welcome anyone to come by. Of course, we're in the middle of this pandemic, so it makes it a little difficult, but once this passes we're so much open to anybody coming in from the public, students especially if they want to do some research, primary research. So thanks for all your help and generosity over the years donating material, and Karen.

RW: If there is a student who can learn from my mistakes in life, and there have been many; if they can learn to be a better student from my mistakes, if they can learn to be a better person

from my mistakes, if they can learn in any way related to the Archives of this institution through which Karen and I have great pleasure in supporting. We would be elated to know that someone has learned as a result of that. So don't let something like the pandemic keep you from being further enlightened in the university.

KM: Yeah, we have a digital presence too. We have online displays, a history of the university, the oral histories, which this will be part of. And we still can make arrangements if someone wants to come by, even during this difficult time. They can get in touch with us on the webpage. Judy still is presenting classes, even by Zoom. We scan the material, digitize it, make it accessible to students. So we've had different disciplines; we've collaborated with different patrons.

RW: Okay.

KM: It's worked out. It's been great.

RW: Good.

KM: Great experience.

RW: Thank you again, Kevin.

KM: All right. Thank you, Bob.