



2014 DPA Communicator of Achievement

John E. Watson

Civil Rights Activist

John Watson became a civil rights activist in 1952 when he and fellow Student Strike Committee members protested deplorable and overcrowded conditions at the racially segregated R. R. Moton High School in Farmville, Virginia. John, who was editor-in-chief of the school's first yearbook, "The Eagle," says, "There were 500 students in a school built for 200. Often there were three classes at a time being held in the gym.

We went out on strike looking for a better school, including indoor plumbing and no more classes in the gym or in the old bus permanently parked beside the school or in god-awful tarpaper shacks that leaked when it rained and were too cold in winter and too hot in summer to get anything done. But when the NAACP said we should be looking for desegregation, we took a vote on it, and, with the backing of the entire black community, we voted in favor of it."

Their lawsuit, which mandated desegregation in U.S. schools, was joined together with four other cases and successfully brought before the United States Supreme Court in what was to become known as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). It's now been sixty years since the Court struck down the doctrine of "separate but equal" in that unanimous landmark decision stating that students were to be admitted "to public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed."

John attended the unveiling and dedication of the Civil Rights Memorial on the Virginia State Capitol grounds in Richmond, July 20–21, 2008. The monument was dedicated in honor of those, like him, who led the student strike; in honor of those denied an education in Prince Edward County for five years following the Supreme Court decision because the school board refused funding and closed the schools for five years rather than desegregate; and in honor of those who fought to change the law.

In service to his country, John entered the U.S. Air Force in the fall of 1953. He was a radio operator with "select clearance," meaning that he had to convey and interpret important encoded messages. During 18 months of his four years in the Air Force, John was deployed in Libya, North Africa.

Broadcasting Career

At the end of his tour of duty, John began a broadcasting career as chief engineer and disc jockey at WELV radio, Ellenville, N.Y. He later was co-owner of a radio station in Virginia and served as program director, account executive, and news reporter. He entered the world of talk radio at WQBK in Albany, New York, and hosted a weekly television public affairs program and a weekly news program in that same market.

He next hosted talk shows on WWDB in Philadelphia, and then was recruited by 1450 WILM NewsRadio, in Wilmington, Delaware, where from 1985–2012, he hosted the award-winning show "NewsTalk," which covered local, foreign, and domestic politics, in the 9–11:30 a.m. time slot, Monday through Friday. When rare opportunities arose to interview national and international figures – including US President Bill Clinton, infamous assisted-suicide advocate Dr. Jack Kevorkian, and noted Booker Prize award-winning Indian-British author Salman Rushdie, who received death threats on publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* but was knighted by Queen Elizabeth – it was John Watson who was contacted for the interview.

Additionally, John became WILM's director of public affairs in the 1980s, and in other on-air stints, he broadcast from numerous fairs and festivals. In statewide polls, published annually in *Delaware Today* magazine, John has been named the best talk show host in Delaware.

In recent years, John has hosted talk shows on a part-time basis on 1150 AM WDEL and continues to urge his listeners to call in, to be a part of history, by engaging in discussion about "where we are going and what we are thinking about as citizens of the United States of America." As he says: "You can't be part of history by standing on the sidelines." Now, at 80+ years, he also has been a recent commentator and online columnist with WHY TV 12 (public television) and its website, www.newsworks.org.

Community Service Focused on Children and Families in Need

During his wide-ranging career, John has been committed to community service. He has been involved with many charitable organizations and fundraising events for children and families in need. A member of CHILD, Inc. (provides youth services and emergency shelter for children and for abused women), John also has worked on family and children's services public relations committees, and he has served as an advisory board member of the prestigious Cab Calloway School of the Arts in Wilmington – an important position that continues to ensure fairness in the admissions process so that students from all backgrounds are given equal consideration.

A member of American Legion Post #21 for many years, John also has given great service to the Wilmington Kiwanis Club where he was the club president during an important recruitment drive that has helped keep the social services organization strong. He remains a longtime member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and he also has continued to mentor boys and young men through The Village Center in the Southbridge Neighborhood of Wilmington.

Awards and Honors

John has been a member of Delaware Press Association since 1996. Most years since joining, he has submitted entries in the DPA annual statewide communications contest and has won numerous awards. He also has received national awards for Best Radio Interview or Talk Show Host in the NFPW Professional Communications Contest, including the national first-place award for Best Talk Show in 2009 ("Final Presidential Debate"). Other honors include nomination for a national Marconi award from the National Association of Broadcasters as Medium Market Personality of the Year, and, in 2014, he was named runner-up for the National Communicator of Achievement award, the highest honor NFPW bestows on its members for a lifetime of excellence in communication and in service to community and humanity.