

Bob Watson

UT Arlington alumnus and City Project Engineer for the City of Arlington

*Interview conducted by
Christopher Stone
In 2016 in Arlington, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor
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Biography

Robert "Bob" Watson was born in Pennsylvania but grew up in McAlester, Oklahoma. In elementary school, Watson was diagnosed with a written expression learning disability. Also in elementary school, he started to develop a love for civil engineering due to his family history and a meeting with the father of one of his friends who was a city manager. During his last two years of high school he moved to Texas and attended Pine Tree High School in Longview, TX. After graduating in 1997, Watson briefly attended Kilgore Junior College before transferring to his parents' alma mater, the University of Texas at Arlington, in 1998. Watson graduated from UTA in 2003 with a Bachelors of Science in Civil Engineering. After working for a few years at FBE Construction Ltd., Watson got a job with the City of Arlington's water utilities department. There, he took advantage of a program that would help him pursue a Masters in Public Administration. Watson now works as a City Project Engineer for the City of Arlington. He is responsible for managing numerous capital projects such as building and maintaining streets. He also served on the UTA Presidential Search Committee in 2012 and works with the Boy Scouts of America.

Topics discussed

- Why he attended UT Arlington
- Growing up with a learning disability
- Interest in civil engineering
- Working with the UTA Office of Students with Disabilities
- Working for the City of Arlington
- Improving accessibility and removing barriers in Arlington
- Serving on the UTA Presidential Search Committee
- Thoughts on UT Arlington's commitment to diversity, the Boy Scouts, and closing words

Stone

Hello, my name is Christopher Stone. We are here at University Hall [on the University of Texas at Arlington Campus] in an art gallery apparently. I am sitting here with Bob Watson. This is an interview for the disability archive for the University of Texas at Arlington.

Watson

Hi Christopher, I am real happy to be here. My name is Bob Watson (Watson spells out his name). Yeah we're in an art gallery. Luckily my buddy Seth was able to hook us up with a nice place that's got real good acoustics and not too bad a scenery. It's Saturday morning, and I'm happy to be here.

Stone

Alright, yes, Saturday, April 16th for the record. Alright then, do you prefer 'Bob' or 'Mr. Watson?'

Watson

Bob.

Stone

<topic> Why he attended UT Arlington </topic>
'Bob,' alright, let's do that then. When did you first arrive at UTA [University of Texas at Arlington]?

Watson

I first got here in 2000 and...no, sorry...1998, I believe I was first here. Came out from high school in '97, went to junior college at Kilgore College, and then made my way to UTA because that was my father's alma mater, my mother's alma mater, and I knew a lot of neat things about the University of Texas at Arlington.

Stone

So, your father and your mother both went here, and that's what drew you here?

Watson

Yes, I visited a couple of other campuses before. I went down to [Texas] A&M and saw the football game and the Aggies and all of that real militaristic type of scenery. Pretty excluded, all by itself like a Stanford-type university. It wasn't really my game, a little too rigid. Then Austin, I went down there and when I was at UT Austin, they gave a little forum to the freshmen who were taking a look at it and said in engineering "Look in front of you, behind you, look to the left, and to the right at the people sitting in your class. None of those people will be here when you graduate." (Watson laughs). So I was like, you know I do math and statistics. It's probably not good for me to go to this University.

UTA was definitely the place for me. It's got a high academic engineering school and excellent professors that teach the classes instead of TAs teaching the class. That kind of involvement is what kept me at UTA.

Stone

Alright. (Checks recorder to make sure it is running)...you said you went to high school where?

Watson

In Oklahoma. Then we moved for my last two years of high school. I went to Pine Tree [High School] in Longview, TX.

Stone

<topic>Growing up with a learning disability</topic>
Are you from Oklahoma?

Watson

Yes, I grew up in Oklahoma. I was born in Pennsylvania but grew up in McAlester, Oklahoma. Great experiences there, small town, still a small town (Watson laughs). One of the things my teacher told us there...because I had a lot of help from all my teachers growing up. One of them told me, they pour all of this effort into these students to make them achieve great things while they're teaching them, but the better they train them the more likely they are to move out. So, (Watson laughs) maybe one day I'll be able to repay all those favors that McAlester gave to me.

Stone

Was that the kind of help you were talking about with the teachers, just the encouragement?

Watson

Yeah, and then the extra resources. Going to school...in elementary school I was diagnosed with a learning disability early on in my career. So I was held back from first grade into...I start out in first grade and then they brought me back to what they called transitional first. I just wasn't keeping up with the other students, and they identified a learning disability.

Stone

Did they say what learning disability...if you want to...?

Watson

It was written expression. I had difficulty reading, writing, and then kind of interpreting some of the text. That was my disability. Diagnosed kind of in the first grade and then a few years later, through more testing it was noticed that I had a gift as a gifted and talented student as well. (Stone affirms this). So I would spend some mornings in my special ed classes getting special tutoring and then spend the afternoon in the gifted and talented program. So I didn't

spend a whole lot of time in just the regular classroom. I was either over here learning how to say my ABCs or in this other room learning long division (Watson laughs).

Stone

<topic> Interest in civil engineering </topic>

Believe me, that sounds familiar (Stone and Watson laugh). So you said...going back to UTA. So you came to UTA...I believe you said earlier [while chatting before the interview] that you always knew you wanted to go into civil engineering? (Watson confirms this). What about civil engineering interests you?

Watson

Starting in elementary school, one of my friends...his dad was a city manager. What I learned about him at that young age was that he was able to give a lot of people a lot of jobs. So that first got me interested in the city because there's so many different facets and so many different things you can do. As I got older, a girlfriend of mine, her father became a big influence on me. He was a civil engineer, and he took me out to his mining company, where they strip mined lignite, a type of coal. They would take a machine bucket that you could park two full-sized F-150 Ford trucks in and scrape the Earth away and then expose the coal, the energy-rich coal below. Seeing him operate that small company and being in charge, and having all this responsibility, and putting his engineering to work really set with me because he was like, "This always changes, and there's always new things."

That really drew me to civil engineering, and it's kind of a family tradition of engineers. My grandfather was a mechanical engineer, my father; an industrial engineer, I've got two brothers who are computer science engineers, and a third that's an environmental engineer. I love to give my great grandfather credit as a train engineer (Watson laughs). He worked for Pacific Rail I guess, so we'll count him as an engineer as well.

Stone

<topic> Working with the UTA Office of Students with Disabilities</topic>

Must resist history topics but yes (Watson and Stone laugh). You mentioned earlier in some of our conversations that while you were at UTA, you did briefly meet Jim Hayes?

Watson

Yes, when I first got to the university, Jim Hayes was then the Director of the Office of Students with Disabilities. So when I came in to get accommodations for testing, primarily for extended time and access to a word processor, Jim Hayes was able to help facilitate that, help me work with my professors to provide them the information from the Americans with Disabilities Act, which was still not all that common I guess for universities at that level but of course it had been around since the '90s.

Stone

And you were coming in when?

Watson

In '98ish and that's when...they weren't maybe used to seeing someone with a learning disability in the civil engineering type...you know the sciences...I'm not sure how many of us there were taking on those kind of classes. But he was more than grateful, I mean I had a lot

of documentation and paperwork that I was able to show, and we worked through that. He was a phenomenal guy, never saw any flaws in what we were doing, just was able to see how he could help so that we could be successful. That's what I think Jim Hayes's legacy is; he was able to find what needed to be done so that you could be successful.

Stone

You said, you met Jim Hayes, but there was also someone else that you worked with a lot?

Watson

Yeah, Dianne Hengst actually came in just after I had gotten here maybe in '99...

Stone

How do you spell that?

Watson

Oh, I'm not the speller (Watson and Stone laugh).

Stone

That's alright, I can find it.

Watson

I love to say that I'm b-o-b for a reason (Watson and Stone laugh). Robert is too hard to spell. But Dianne Hengst, now the Director of the Office of Students with Disabilities, I think she is still in that role [As of 2016, Penny Acrey is the Director of the Office for Students with Disabilities. Dianne Hengst is the director of Student Disability Services at UT San Antonio.]. She was able to keep me involved in the program be able to...when I got to work with my...starting to graduate from the University...I needed to...sorry. I graduated and then came back to her to seek help to get licensure so I needed to test for my professional engineer's license. This is a timed test, which I've never done well on, which...signifies the knowledge that you have to practice as a licensed engineer. So I came back to Dianne and I was like "Look, I know I've been away from the college for a couple of years, we have a great relationship, you have all my documentation, what do I need to be able to get accommodations on this full day test?" She said, "Well, what we need to do is send you to special testing." She knew of a person, I went and met with that professional and we went through...I think a day's worth of cognitive testing, testing that I've done numerous times over the years. From her recommendation I was able to get accommodations for the licensure exam. In doing that I was able to pass with flying colors. I scored too high (Watson and Stone laugh). You only need a 70 and I think scored an 81 or an 82 and I studied way too much (Watson laughs).

Stone

They don't penalize you for scoring too high (Watson laughs).

Watson

No, not too high, but all you need is a 70. But yeah without her I wouldn't be able to practice engineering today. Dianne Hengst was very instrumental in being able to make me able to get to this point where I am today.

Stone

That's good. Before we move onto that point, I just wanted to verify the timeline. You came in 1998 (Watson affirms this) as an undergrad, and you graduated...?

Watson

Oh man...in 2003 (Stone confirms this). I had about six-year college career. I attribute that somewhat to [taking] Calculus III four times. I got a well-rounded experience while I was at the University. I worked actually as a student teacher for the PALs...the Peer Academic...(Stone offers "Learners") learners or leaders sorry leaders...yeah [Peer Academic Leaders is correct]. In that program, I was able to teach a leadership class as part of that group, which I thought was really helpful because I would study the material and then bring it and make it entertaining and thoughtful for the students. That was a lot of fun. I worked on campus...as a residential advisor I guess in Centennial Court apartments. Of course, I was active in the alumni association, student alumni association. I just had a lot of great experiences on campus.

Stone

So in 2003 you graduate with a bachelors in...?

Watson

Oh, in Science of Civil Engineering...yeah in 2003.

Stone

<topic>Working for the City of Arlington</topic>

That's right. What did you do right after you left the university? Did you work someplace and then return?

Watson

Yes. I worked for a construction outfit, for a real estate investment firm and...I was also a facilities engineer so I worked for First American Bank and scrubbed toilets did all that stuff (Watson and Stone laugh). It was all under the guise of FBE...Frank English, his company [FBE Construction Ltd.]. So I'd worked for him a little bit during school and then got into that. Mainly I worked as a foreman or superintendent on construction sites so I got a good background in what was needed for ground up construction, remodels of buildings, and doing some large scale residential places.

I did that for a couple of years...it was three companies. I was the new guy so I worked all the jobs, but then there was an opportunity for a career at City of Arlington. This City of Arlington career wasn't available when I first graduated. There was a downturn, I'd say, in some of the construction building so there weren't that many engineering jobs available, and I already had this other career. I'd always kept my eye open for the city because I'm a big...huge fan of Arlington.

When it came along it more than doubled my salary, and so when I went back to Frank and said, "Look Frank, I've got this opportunity. I know I'm sitting here in Las Colinas in this bank, and I've got this corner office with all this brand-new furniture with all these glass windows but...it doubles my salary." So he was like "Yeah, this is what you were trained to do, go and take it." So I did and I moved from that office, which was great, to a cubicle but you know I'm not scrubbing toilets anymore.

Stone

So you went from the foreman in construction to the City of Arlington and you did that before you had decided to go back to UTA for your graduate [degree].

Watson

Yeah, sure did. So it was about two years (Stone confirms this). So about 2005, I'm back at...I'm at the City of Arlington in the water utilities department. The city provides an opportunity for its staff to go back to school, and they will pay for, what amounted to me, about a class per semester. So that's a no brainer (Watson laughs). So I jumped on that opportunity and started taking classes in 2006 and then spent another six years earning my Masters in Public Administration. I'm interested in the administration of the city.

Stone

So, now you're at the city of Arlington still yes? (Watson confirms this). You've probably worked on several projects. What was one of the first major projects you remember working on for the City of Arlington?

Watson

I would say it was the...let's see what was that called...Southwest...Southeast parkway? There are a few elementary schools on it as well as Tarrant County Community College: the south...southern branch here in Arlington. So with those three schools, it was quite a big project to manage all of the traffic that came through there. It was a county-type road before, so the bar ditches created some problems. The plans had been designed six or maybe eight years before we built it, so there was quite a bit of development that took place. So, there was a lot kind of redesign of these existing plans that had to go into it. One of the things that I remember having the opportunity to do was meet with each of the property owners along one of these new developments that fronted the roadway. What we had planned was this large kind of retaining wall with a bar ditch kind of flume adjacent to the roadway. It was just going to be a monstrosity of concrete and cost a whole lot of money.

So I was like, "You know, if we can just take down these peoples' neighboring fences and regrade their lots, we could get rid of all of this and just have it grade to the street like all their neighbors are doing. Management let me go, and I went to each property owner, I think at night (Watson laughs) while they were having dinner and met with them, maybe a dozen or so. All of them signed off on it. We were able to take down their fences, put up new fences, and take all that out. We saved maybe \$40,000 to \$60,000 on just that little thing. So I was real proud of having that opportunity to...management was able to give me the opportunity to go and meet with these people and take advantage of something that I think turned out to be, I think, a successful end to that project.

Stone

That's amazing. So you...I am trying to make sure for the record we have the function or job description...

Watson

Yes. I'm a civil engineer; it's kind of my title at the City of Arlington. I manage capital improvement projects. Today I manage maybe \$40 million in projects. The Center Street Bridge over I-20 that's under construction right now, we're partnering with TxDOT [Texas Department of Transportation] on that \$15 million or so project. Stadium Drive which is between Division Street and Abrams Street, that at one time was a \$30 million project when we were going over the railroad tracks, now it's around \$6 million. We're including a 12-foot wide hike and bike trail. It's part of that accessibility to get us down to the Cowboys Stadium and Rangers Stadium through Mayor Cluck Park. I'm really proud of the enhancements we're doing in that area.

<topic> Improving accessibility and removing barriers in Arlington </topic>

I'm also working right now on the Abrams Street project, which we're in design and we're at preliminary right now but that project is right in front of City Hall, right downtown: Levitt Pavilion and where the Fourth of July parade goes, and the Holiday of Lights parade goes between Cooper and Collins Streets. You know today I take my kids down there...for the parades when my kids were younger, and we couldn't get the stroller down the street because of all these barriers to accessibility. We have curbs in the way, grass where there is no sidewalk...all of the barriers are going to go away with this project.

That's not my doing, but the planners and the council have all decided that this is a key project for the city to remove barriers and promote walkability especially in our urban downtown environment. What we are going to be doing...I think our minimum sidewalk width is going to be 8 feet downtown. Of course, we are going to have ramps...ADA compliant ramps. We're reducing the roadway from a five-lane facility down to just three lanes in the urban corridor. That will still maintain current traffic volumes but where we get to the larger Cooper and Collins, it will widen back out. That's where the delay is at for traffic moving through the corridor. It will make a really convenient walkable narrow street, just super conducive to the parades and the events that we have downtown.

Stone

I imagine that you are very excited about that one.

Watson

I'm super excited about that project. It's about a \$15 million project right now.

Stone

<topic> Serving on the UTA Presidential Search Committee </topic>

Let's see...let me make sure I'm not missing anything...oh yes...I found something...maybe it was the other Bob Watson...you were on the Presidential Search Committee for UTA?

Watson

Yes...and I guess we should mention there that there are three Bob Watsons that work at the City of Arlington (Watson and Stone laugh), it's not too uncommon to...

Stone

But was that you?

Watson

It was definitely me. So serving as the President of the Alumni Association, I had the opportunity to sit on the board that selected the candidate for our fine university. Sitting on that Presidential Search Committee was a big eye opener for me to see all the potential candidates who wanted to come and serve at this university and sure enough I was wholeheartedly behind our current president [Dr. Vistasp M. Karbhari was chosen as President of the University of Texas at Arlington. He began serving in June of 2013, and as of April 2016 he is still the President of UTA] because...not just because he's an engineer (Watson and Stone laugh), not just because of his exceptional resume, but because I think he saw the future for our university getting to Tier 1. Where the financing that he was able to draw from his former university and really help research and...this university has always been a great resource for research. I know the City of Arlington has come to them for different research projects, but I think with his background and his depth he really had that opportunity to grow this university into a major Tier 1 institution.

There were a lot of exceptional candidates, it was so very difficult, and I was really pleased to have all of the other support from other university presidents and of course the Board of Regents who ultimately are the ones who selected the candidate. Being able to be in that room with all of those great minds and other university professors from our institution, it was a great opportunity for me to really see the caliber of president that we have today.

Stone

<topic>Thoughts on UT Arlington's commitment to diversity, the Boy Scouts, and Closing Words</topic>

On that topic, especially with Arlington, I think you mentioned earlier that you were born in Pennsylvania, grew up in Oklahoma, both your parents came to UTA so that brought you here but you specifically said earlier that you love the city of Arlington. What is it that...?

Watson

Kind of attracted me to this place (Stone confirms this)? Well you know, I would come through here with my dad, and he would kind of reminisce about Cooper Street and how they used to walk across...which today would be just a crazy thing. He was here when the Library was constructed at the university. He was here in '62 when the university integrated—from what I recall hearing it was the first one of the A&M system. We were Arlington State College I think at that time. From what he would say, it was just like one day there weren't African-Americans here, and then the next day there were. It was such a peaceful transition. I know that President Woolf did have to go to the administration and get it approved. It wasn't just easy for the twenty students who were applying here, they didn't just get admitted automatically. From the students' perspective they were so welcoming, so open to change that that's the kind of university I wanted to be a part of.

One of my favorite pictures that I've got is my mom in her cap and gown in front of Woolf Hall, which is just across the way from us here, a building still on campus. My dad's standing there, and my mom's standing there in her cap and gown, I guess its 1971 or '72—in another kind of historical year where they no longer have the Rebel [theme]. You know we used to be the Rebels, and they voted that down because of the connotation with the Confederate flag. We've had quite a bit of controversy even to today with that symbol. The university I think was proactive in being accepting of people, not just of diversity but also people like myself

with disabilities. This university is able to change with the times and make sure that everyone is successful.

Stone

Let's see...I think we've covered all the main things...is there anything else that you want to add, before we go into closing, that we haven't talked about?

Watson

Something that we haven't talked about...Let me look at some notes...

Stone

Yeah feel free...you don't want to have one of those where you walk away and go, "Darn why didn't I ask that?" (Watson laughs)

Watson

I don't know...right now my involvement with the Boy Scouts is really something that I'm excited about. I'm a Cubmaster for a local pack and a former Eagle Scout, and I serve at the district for membership. Scouting has always been something you can pretty much put a bellwether against...how I think the membership in scouting kind of reflects some of the culture for our country. If membership is down, I think we start to see some of the difficulties from our societal...you know...I guess values...because for scouting...a scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

There's all of that that this program helps instill...really went through some difficult times over the last few years. I don't know if you are aware of the policy change that they recently did of accepting people with...that may not have...the same sexual orientation. So that started to put some negative connotation on the Boy Scouts, I think from both sides of that issue. Now having a more accepting approach, I think, strengthens our program. Being able to have that type of program for kids you know like mine, that are super urban in a city of 360,000 people like Arlington with all this concrete and roads that I keep building (Watson laughs) to be able to get out in the woods to be able to go camping, learn about nature, learn about leaving no trace I think strengthens our whole community. So if I can give a plug to the Boy Scouts of America and that great strong program in our community and growing it throughout Arlington I think that is also worth mentioning.

Stone

I think in closing I wanted to ask you...based on all your experiences up to this point, what would you say to somebody who has a learning disability or is in a wheelchair or is unable to see or hear properly? What would you say to them...you said in 3rd grade you learned...I'm sure that's not easy at all and what would you say to them though at that point if they find out that you're going to be sitting in a wheelchair all your life, you're going to have difficulty in school, what would you say to them as kind of encouragement?

Watson

I would say from my experience it's...of course never give up. All through my career in school and in business and everything, you're going to fail multiple times. With a learning disability

you have to...for me...you have to work harder, I think, than anybody else. You really have to put in the effort that goes beyond just the average effort. We alluded to it before in getting through college in six years. My dad would always tell me, "If this doesn't work out, you could always go work at Taco Bell." (Watson laughs) That was of course in jest, but a driving force that I can't get up. When I went into Calculus III after meeting with the dean...sorry not the dean...the chair of our department and asking him, "Hey, I've had these struggles, for these reasons, please sign off that I can take Calculus III for the fourth time." Because without that, my career as a civil engineer would have ended. I persevered through that to not give up and to take it that fourth time, pass that course, and then to do what I had to do to move forward on to become a civil engineer.

Seeking out resources, I think, is the biggest thing. I absolutely should take no credit for where I'm at today, but only give that credit to Nancy Sherman who was my resource teacher, I think is what they call them now, my students with disabilities teacher all through elementary school, who took tremendous efforts for every kid under her care to ensure that they had the tools they needed to continue on. People like Dianne Hengst who made sure that I had what I needed in accommodations throughout my university career. Today, seeking out different technological advances, of course the word processor, without spell-check I wouldn't be able to do my job today (Watson laughs). So those kinds of resources, never giving up, that's the kind of charge I would give to anybody with a student with a learning disability or a physical disability because in our society in our time we can overcome great things.

Stone

Thank you very much Bob, thank you for your time. Alright, this has been Christopher Stone with the Disability Archive for University of Texas at Arlington.