

2015

In Memory of Michael Watts (November 3, 1950–December 5, 2014)

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Walstad, William; Allgood, Sam; Emerson, Tisha; Hoyt, Gail; McGoldrick, KimMarie; Schaur, Georg; and Becker, William E., "In Memory of Michael Watts (November 3, 1950–December 5, 2014)" (2015). *Economics Department Faculty Publications*. 87.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/econfacpub/87>

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IN MEMORIAM

In Memory of Michael Watts (November 3, 1950–December 5, 2014)

William B. Walstad, Sam Allgood, Tisha Emerson, Gail Hoyt,
KimMarie McGoldrick, Georg Schaur, and William E. Becker

Michael Watts, Professor of Economics at Purdue University, died unexpectedly on December 5, 2014, at the age of 64 while on vacation in Antigua. His connection to the *Journal of Economic Education* is a long one. For 20 years, from 1988 through 2007, Mike served as the associate editor for *JEE*'s instruction section, which typically accounts for the largest number of articles published in a *JEE* issue. After 2007, he continued to serve on *JEE*'s editorial board. Mike was a remarkable academic and scholar who made significant and wide-ranging contributions to economic education beyond his valuable service to *JEE*.

Mike was born on November 3, 1950, in Medicine Lodge, Kansas, where he lived until he was six. He spent the rest of his childhood and teen years growing up in Kenner, Louisiana. For his higher education, he attended Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where he earned his BS (1972), MA (1976), and PhD (1978), all in economics. After graduating, he taught for three years at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. Mike was hired in 1981 by Purdue University. He spent the rest of his academic career on the economics faculty at Purdue in its Krannert School of Management and Department of

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Economics. In 1984, Mike also was appointed director of the Purdue Center for Economic Education, a position he held until his death. Through the Center, Mike taught economics to elementary through high school teachers. In 2014, Mike's Center received the Peter V. Harrington Award for its work in economic education in Indiana.

During his academic career, Mike wrote some seventy-seven scholarly articles, twenty-nine of which appeared in *JEE*. He also authored or edited eighteen books or monographs. His publications covered a variety of topics, demonstrating Mike's interest in research and teaching economics at all education levels. Of special note at the undergraduate level is the series of "Chalk and Talk" articles with co-author Bill Becker that reported findings from their national surveys of teaching and assessment methods in undergraduate economics and that appeared in several issues of the *American Economic Review* and various *JEE* issues. His two edited books with Bill Becker, *Teaching Economics: Alternatives to Chalk and Talk* and *More Alternatives to Chalk and Talk* (with Suzanne Becker as a co-editor), showed how to overcome the problems with such passive instruction. The latest extension of the survey work is published in an article in this *JEE* issue that Mike recently wrote with co-authors Cynthia Harter and Georg Schaur.

Mike was committed to improving precollege economic education from the beginning of his career. In 1977, he co-authored a high school economics text for the state of Louisiana with Robert Smith, one of his LSU professors who first got him interested in economic education. At the national level, he was a key writer in the teams that produced the first scope and sequence guidelines for K-12 economics and later the *Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics*. His research work with Bill Bosshardt produced valuable estimates of instructor effects that were used to justify investments in teacher training in economics. Mike also had a deep knowledge of the research literature and shared it in several reviews of the precollege studies. A recent review that he co-authored with me for a National Academies meeting appears in this *JEE* issue. Sadly, it was the last paper that Mike and I wrote together.

Mike's international service was impressive. He worked for many years with the Council for Economic Education on its international grants to build the infrastructure for effective economic education and to train teachers and university professors in Russia and nations of the former Soviet Union. For all of his many contributions to this project, he received the International Award from the CEE and National Association of Economic Educators. A description of some of that activity is contained in a book Mike and I edited: *Reforming Economics and Economics Teaching in Transition Economies: From Marx to Markets in the Classroom*. Mike was a tireless and selfless editor of manuscripts submitted by the chapter authors, some of whom were less experienced writers. Mike was too humble to ask to be listed as the first author based on his extensive editing, so I made the switch for him.

He gave great service to the economics profession that will have a lasting impact. From 2006 to 2011, Mike was the chair of the Committee on Economic Education of the American Economic Association. One of his major accomplishments was his work with John Siegfried in organizing, conducting, and funding the first AEA Conference on Teaching and Research in Economic Education (CTREE). The quality and success of that first conference, held at Stanford in 2011, convinced the AEA to provide on-going funding. CTREE is now held annually at the end of May and co-sponsored with *JEE*. Mike was to be honored for this valuable service to economic education at the fifth CTREE conference (May 2015).

His long fascination with creative teaching of economics led him to make several important pedagogical innovations. He did early work with Bob Smith on using literature and drama to teach economics. Mike expanded that initiative over the years and eventually produced his edited masterpiece, *The Literary Book of Economics*. It included seventy-eight selections of literary passages from poems, plays, or books that were sorted into twenty-one economic topics. For each passage, Mike wrote an insightful explanation of its value for understanding an economic concept. He also dedicated the book to his dear wife Deirdre, “who reads more than I do, and has especially supported this project.” Mike and Deirdre shared a love of literature and the enjoyment of travelling together for conferences and vacations throughout their marriage.

This quest to find new ways to see economics from a different perspective or in a different light led him to his last work, using works of art to teach economics. For this project, Mike developed a Web site and uploaded pictures of several hundred paintings that he had found from his visits to art galleries. He sorted the paintings by the economic concept each one illustrated. The highlights of that project are found in a 2012 *JEE* article that Mike wrote with a Purdue graduate student, Chineze Christopher. Mike was planning to write a book with a selection of these paintings and associated economic commentary, but alas his untimely death left it unfinished. Although Mike often assumed the role of curmudgeon and critic when he worked with people, he did so to get them to think more deeply and carefully about what they were writing or doing. In reality, Mike had a kind heart and gentle way with people. Throughout his career, he enriched the lives his colleagues, students, teachers, and staff members with stories, guidance, and humor. When one talks with people who worked closely with him, all have inspirational tales to tell of what he did for them. Further evidence of his personal influence is found in the testimonials from the *JEE* editors that follow. What I will never forget is that Mike Watts was a good friend and colleague of mine for well over thirty years. I will deeply miss his friendship and our interactions.

Bill Walstad, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

I miss Mike Watts. E-mails longer than *The Odyssey*. References to obscure art and literature. A love of food, drink, and sports—even if he tended to root for the wrong teams. Professionally, I now realize that most of my conversations with Mike ended with my workload higher than it was before. Mike was good at asking innocent-sounding questions like, “Hey, do you want to investigate the long-term effects of studying economics?” How could a young economist say no? Especially a naïve economist who does not understand what it means to survey 25,000 people and convert 8,000 paper transcripts into usable digital form. Or he might say, “Hey, do you want to join the AEA Committee on Economic Education?” This question was only a setup for the real question, “Hey, do you want to Chair the AEA Committee on Economic Education?” Of course, Mike failed to mention that he was starting an economic education conference that would be the responsibility of the chair. All of this is to say that he had an enormous influence on my career and on the field of economic education. There will never be another Mike Watts, and I am thankful for the time I had to know him.

Sam Allgood, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Very few economic educators study economic education in graduate school. There are exceptions, of course. For example, if you studied at UNC Chapel Hill, you would have had Michael Salemi to guide you in economic education; or if you went to Nebraska, you would have had Bill Walstad; or you would have had Mike Watts at Purdue. For those of us who studied (or joined the faculty) elsewhere, there was no mentor in the area of economic education at our institution. That is not to say, though, that there was no mentor available at all. In my own experience, all three of the aforementioned individuals have mentored me along my path, most notably Mike Watts. I met Mike when I was still a very young assistant professor. So young – and foolish – that I thought nothing of asking Mike, one of the greats in economic education, for feedback on a paper. His response was kind, encouraging, and completely unassuming. From that point on, Mike adopted me. As the chair of the AEA's Committee on Economic Education (CEE), he invited me to participate in sessions at the AEA meetings and ultimately nominated me to serve on the CEE. He wrote in support of both my promotion reviews. I am certain that many of the other doors that have opened for me in my career were opened by Mike. Fortune smiled on me the day I met Mike Watts, for he took mentoring seriously, but I am far from the only one that Mike mentored. Mike diligently worked to bring new people into the field of economic education while also working to improve the visibility of the field and opportunities within it. All economic educators owe a great debt of gratitude to Mike Watts. The void that he has left will never be filled; his contributions will continue to impact economic education; and his mentoring, leadership, and kindness will be sorely missed.

Tisha Emerson, Baylor University

He Was a Soul Man: Economic education is better because of Mike Watts. He had a zest for life and a love for all that makes us human – something readily apparent in his teaching and research on economic education. While as an economist, Mike clearly honored the tools and processes of our profession, he also loved the humanities (art, poetry, literature, and music) and brought their influences into economics. Mike appreciated the transformative power of economics in our thinking, but he also knew the universal power of the humanities as the expression of our souls. We will remember his tireless efforts to connect these two worlds that he held so dear. In my first lecture of micro principles each year, I read Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," one of the first poems Mike highlights in his book, *The Literary Book of Economics*. Most freshly-minted high school graduates have read the poem, and most understand its theme of living a unique life. Ask them to listen as economists, and they hear not only the call for a unique life, but sorrow in opportunities lost. We must choose; we cannot do it all. In that moment, when tools of the mind mingle with tools of the soul, economics becomes something both very different to students and at the same time, more familiar. When an economic educator catches that glimmer of a concept in a poem or the perfect example in a painting and then shares it with students who learn economics better because of it, Mike smiles, and probably says, "I told you so."

Gail Hoyt, University of Kentucky

It is difficult to put into words the impact on the field of economic education of the life and work of Michael Watts. He brought a wealth of personal and professional talents to the field, enhancing our knowledge and touching many lives. Mike was involved in scores of research projects providing valuable insights into the state of economic education (in the United States and abroad, and across a wide range of constituencies), but it was his dedication to integrating his passion for literature and the arts with economic instruction that expanded the boundaries of what and how economics is taught. This work was particularly influential for my own career choices as some of my first forays into the field were also of “the road less traveled.” Throughout his career, Mike influenced the paths of many economists, providing advice and guidance as they navigated their way into becoming contributors to the field. This mentorship went beyond his supervision of those earning a PhD to include those (like myself) who had no formal training in the field, but who shared a passion for economic education. I can remember many times walking with Mike between sessions at the AEA meetings talking about the state of economic education and how I might make a difference in that field. He always had time for such conversations, encouraging me to follow my passions and continue my work. I will be forever grateful for those times and advice he provided as it has made me both a better economist and person. Mike Watts’s legacy goes far beyond his published research, and will live on through those lives he touched and those whom are touched in turn.

KimMarie McGoldrick, University of Richmond

I started to work with Mike as a first-year graduate student at Purdue. He was in Germany, and I was in West Lafayette. Almost daily, I received data-work assignments per e-mail. His assistant assured me that Mike was actually very nice. I had no other choice and kept my hopes up. I am glad I did. Mike and I worked on papers related to MBA students’ performance in courses taken abroad, and used data from the Chalk and Talk surveys to examine the impact of faculty and department characteristics on teaching and assessment methods. In 2010, I helped Mike with a new round of the Chalk and Talk survey. In late 2014, we were getting ready for another mailing in 2015. Mike was ready to get it done, but he went to Antigua before the survey could be finished. Mike would have wanted to see the survey completed, so we rolled up our sleeves to finish it. You learn how much your co-author did, when all of a sudden you have to do his job. I enjoyed working with Mike, and I am thankful for more than can be said here. I think Mike enjoyed working with me. I am most proud and thankful for that.

Georg Schaur, University of Tennessee

I got to know Mike when I was associate editor of the *JEE* research section, and he replaced Dennis Weidenaur in 1988 as associate editor of the instruction section. Thankfully, he stayed on when I became editor in 1989 even though his workload increased with each issue. Mike worked at getting good articles submitted and toughly reviewed in his section, growing his section to the largest in *JEE*. He became a confidant I could count on when facing critical issues, which I suspect continue to shape *JEE* to this day.

In friendly and often lengthy banter, Mike and I fed on each other's ideas. I ended up co-writing and co-editing more articles and books with Mike than with any other economist. I so miss that collaboration, which was simultaneously good-natured, contentious, hilarious, and always productive. His and our writings are some of the most cited works in economic education. Mike is one of the few economists that I know to have *The Wall Street Journal* devote an article to his book: *The Literary Book of Economics*. His more recent work on economics in paintings is equally innovative, but unfortunately we will not see his finished product.

My wife Suzanne Becker, who worked with Mike as assistant editor of *JEE*, a co-editor of *Teaching Economics: More Alternatives to Chalk and Talk*, and as copy editor of his *Focus Globalization* volume, noted that Mike never needed much editing, for in addition to being a creative and well-read economist, Mike was a wordsmith, a witty and loveable curmudgeon. George Bredon reminded me of the fun we had with Mike and Bill Walstad going from one wine tasting to another in the hills of Adelaide following a conference at the University of South Australia. Trips with Mike to Honolulu, Liverpool, Latvia, and around this country in the name of economic education are fondly remembered. Of special memory is a conference in New Orleans where Mike arranged for a big group to pile into a car to visit one of his younger day haunts: Tchoupitoulas Plantation. Unknown to Mike, this restaurant had fallen on hard times and had become far more distant from town than he remembered. Those in the party never let Mike forget this experience of Tchoupitoulas. Then, there was 9/11, when I was to present in Mike's Purdue University seminar on teaching economics but was sidetracked by the attack on the World Trade Towers. The seminar went on, however, as scheduled with all graduate students in attendance. Mike delivered what he promised. He brought ingenuity and a smile to most everyone with whom he worked. I was one of the fortunate ones who got to spend over a quarter of a century working with him, and that is what I am thankful for, and will remember and miss.

Bill Becker, Indiana University