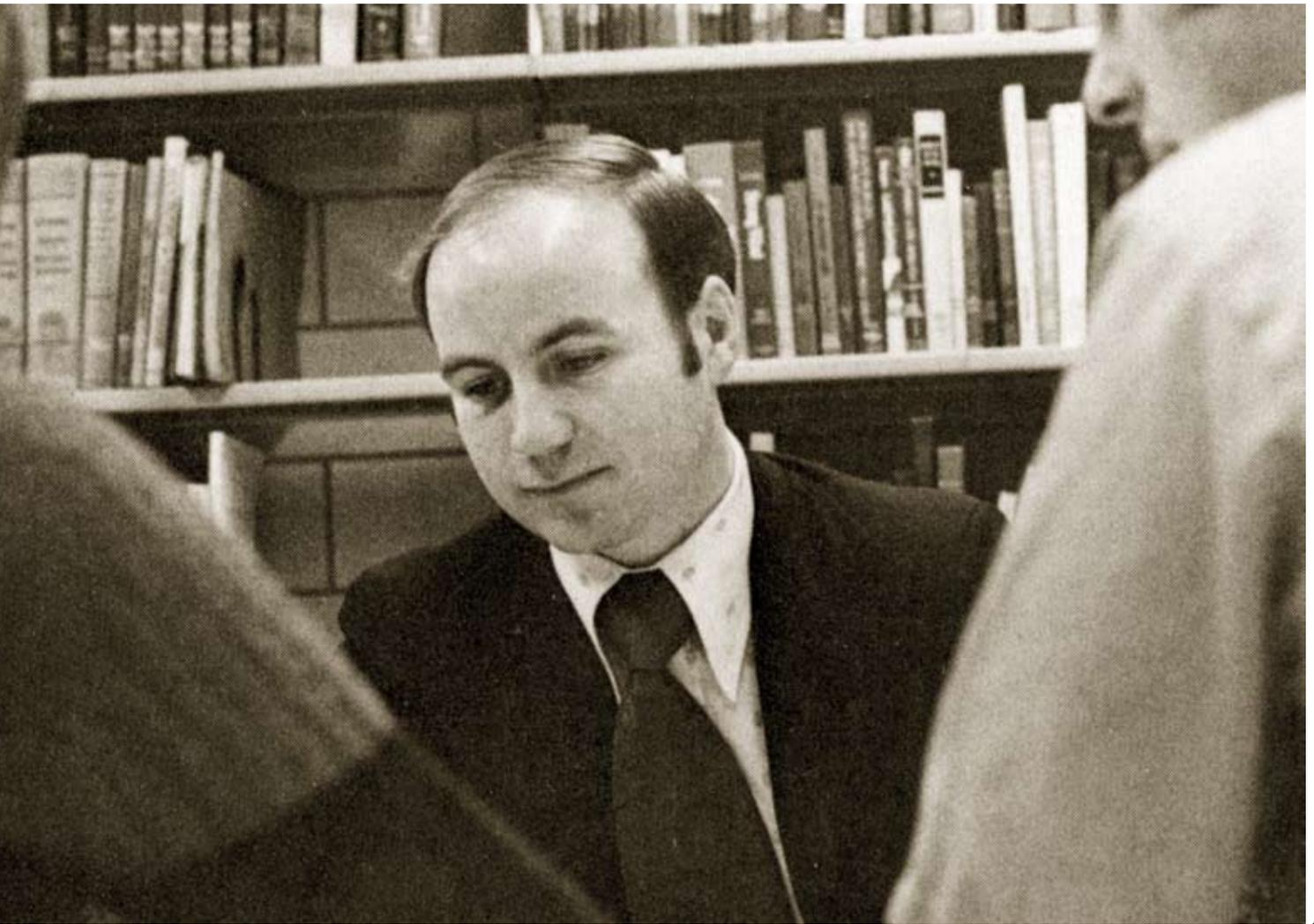


MIKE SOLD ME

By A. James Fuller



A

Mike Watkins '68

The ubiquitous bright red signs in Indianapolis lawns proclaim, “Mike Sold Me!”, an indication of just how successful the Mike Watkins Real Estate Group has become. One of the nation’s leaders in real estate sales, Mike Watkins, a 1968 graduate, relies on the genuine concern for others and team cooperation skills that he learned at Indiana Central coupled with his own infectious enthusiasm as the foundations for a thriving business. From his years at his alma mater to his return there in administration to a second career in real estate, Watkins’ enthusiasm has energized others and made him a dynamic leader. Beyond his career, he lives out the school motto, “Education for Service,” in his efforts as a member of the University’s Board of Trustees and in other charitable civic activities. His passion continues to motivate others, so that in service as well as business, there are many people who say, “Mike Sold Me!”



B

Watkins chose to attend Indiana Central College because of the people. Born in Crawfordsville, Indiana, his family lived in Michigan for a short time, before returning to the Hoosier state. He grew up in Greenfield and was the first member of his family to go to college. All set to go to Wabash College, Watkins changed his mind after visiting the campus of Indiana Central. He felt drawn by the sense of community and remembers that “it was the people” who made the school “feel like home.” At ICC, he majored in education and minored in business. Moreover, Watkins found an extracurricular passion in athletics as a member of the wrestling team. He was much influenced by his coach, Paul Velez, who not only trained him about wrestling, but also “taught [him] about life.”

Watkins recalls other faculty who influenced his future, in particular, professor George Humbarger in Business and professor Alberta Miller in Business. Professor Humbarger “demanded a lot,” but taught in such a way that he enabled his students to meet his high expectations. His teaching stretched Watkins’ abilities and allowed him to grow as a person as well



C

as learn more than he imagined he could. Professor Miller, he recalls, was “so caring,” an example of the warm sense of community that had drawn the young man to the school in the first place. Beyond athletics, Mike was most aware of the college motto, “Education for Service,” as he saw it being lived out by the faculty. He saw them as examples of how to live a fulfilled life and believed that most of them were there because of a calling to the profession. As a poor boy from a family that often faced financial hardship, he empathized with what seemed to be the eternal plight of university professors: low pay. But he was impressed with the way that his teachers worked so hard and were so dedicated to teaching. Indeed, it seemed that they had “taken a vow of poverty” as a part of their calling.

Watkins borrowed money to live on campus so that he could be integrated into the social fabric of campus life. He believes that this process was made easier for commuter students by the tradition of upperclassmen serving as mentors to younger students and by the absence of a fraternity system to fragment students. Since many students lacked transportation and discretionary funds, they were compelled to collaborate in planning activities. Thus, the campus culture could not help but build a sense of community.

Watkins points to his preparation at ICC as a formative time in his life. He had the opportunity to serve as student government president as well as a residence hall assistant. He was instilled with the values and integrity of the campus ethos. He also learned valuable people skills in his interaction with others as a student leader and in the classroom. And his experience on athletic teams taught him important lessons in team values and helped him build a belief system based on those values. In addition to a desire to win, the student athlete learned to “never quit” and to “thrive on competition.” Such values easily translated into his work as administrator and businessman and have helped in his success.

Although Watkins did not possess any kind of religious calling, he found a natural career path in teaching and coaching. He observes that academics and athletics have served as an “outlet” for him, a young man from a broken home and poor family. Teaching and coaching, he realized, could provide “a way out” and a way up in society. Having “grown as a person at Indiana Central,” Mike Watkins became a teacher upon his graduation in 1968. The first year, he taught business at New Palestine High School and helped his family when his stepfather was dying. The next year, he moved to Franklin High School, where he taught Physical Education and coached wrestling and football. He loved teaching and threw himself into it with his trademark enthusiastic energy. Yet, he could not remain content with the status quo. “I’ve always got to be growing or creating or I’m dissatisfied,” he says today as he thinks back to the 1970s and his brief teaching career. He decided that he needed something more and, in 1978, now married, he accepted an offer to work as an admissions representative on behalf of his alma mater.



D

Dr. Lynn Youngblood, who was then serving as assistant to the president, made the offer. Youngblood remembers, in an interview with Evan Gottschalk for an article about Watkins in the Spring 2003 issue of the *Portico* alumni magazine, that he “saw in Mike a dynamism that was infectious to everyone and his personality fit perfectly for an admissions representative, which is what we were looking for at that time.” Indeed, his sales skills and genuine belief in the college served Watkins well as he began “selling” Indiana Central to prospective students. A year later he was promoted to director of Financial Aid. He enjoyed immediate success, which brought him to the attention of President Gene Sease, who offered him the job of dean of students. In that same *Portico* article, Sease recalled that he liked the way Mike “related to people.” The president was sure that Mike would “be successful at the college level” because of his “warm personality,” and ability to establish “great relationships with people.” In his overall assessment of Watkins, Sease observes that “he’s a good listener, and he related very, very well to students. They saw in him a real friend and ally.”

And so, Mike Watkins became the dean of students at the age of 29. He remembers that the job meant “lots of sleepless nights.” Although he had to enforce the rules, he tried to take a balanced approach to discipline problems. His own “policy manual” called for using both the “head and heart” when it came to dealing with students. He tried to use “common sense” and always emphasized that he cared deeply for the students as individuals.

While working as an administrator at the college, Watkins’ interest turned to real estate. Seeing the way the process worked when he and his wife sold their house to build a new one sparked Mike’s curiosity and his desire always to be moving forward, learning and growing as a person. He began to ask himself, “Where do we go from here?” This question contained not only financial consequences—although he was concerned about his family’s economic situation—but also intellectual and personal ones as well. He wanted to know, “What else is out there?”

Initially, Watkins worked with a friend to start a traditional real estate company. He worked closely with Bill Bright, a teacher and coach of his at ICC. Since Bright had many years of experience in real estate, Watkins hired him to serve as his mentor. As he remembered in the *Portico* article, “Bill taught me the way to succeed in real estate. He was the best professor I ever had in graduate and undergraduate studies.” He sold the old company in 1980 and went into commercial development until 1983, when he went back to residential real estate with a traditional company.

In the mid-1990s, Watkins perceived coming changes in the real estate industry and decided to leave the traditional company he had been working with to create his own business. In 1995, he started the Mike Watkins Real Estate Group, which was built on the team concept he had learned as a student athlete, teacher, coach, and administrator. For decades, he explains, “real estate was not taken as a profession,” but was seen as a part-time job for housewives or for people who needed extra money. The stereotypical image was not very positive, as most people thought of real estate agents as part-timers who

wanted to drive a Cadillac or full-timers who couldn't succeed in other fields. Many folks considered real estate agents akin to used-car salesmen or get-rich-quick schemers out to make a quick buck.

By the 1990s, this image, which had never been entirely true, was beginning to change, and Mike Watkins wanted to help in the transition. He joined with others who wanted to run real estate "like a profession," emphasizing education and training. Instead of thrusting agents into competitive commission sales, Mike pays his employees salaries, and they all work as a team on each sale. Days at the office include meetings that remind one of pre-game pep talks by a coach in which Watkins uses the personal touch to encourage his employees to excel. When a house sells, the whole office celebrates like an athletic team after a victory. When times are hard, they pull together, share ideas, develop new strategies, and work all the harder. In fact, Watkins does see himself as the coach and his company as the team, a concept that has paid off. The *Indianapolis Business Journal* has ranked the Mike Watkins Group as the #1 real estate agent in the city for five consecutive years and, this past year, *Realtor Magazine* listed the group as #22 of some 800,000 realtors in the nation.

In his business, Mike Watkins provides a valuable service to people daily. Selling a house for someone or helping them to find the right home to buy is an important matter, and hundreds of families can thank him for a professional job well done. He sees the business as a service, but knows that the "public is

harder to please" today than it used to be since we live in a "microwave world where people want it NOW and in which loyalty is a rare thing." These conditions sometimes make it hard for a Realtor who is trying to sell a house for an impatient individual who has important plans for the future. In each instance, Watkins strives to be empathetic and compassionate in his work, but occasionally wonders if he "cares too much," as he gets so involved emotionally with the process of buying and selling houses. Surely, this is not just a financial or business venture, but also a career of deeper service.

Watkins also cares for his community through other avenues. He had served on the Board of Trustees for Marian College, but later became a member of the University of Indianapolis Board. He is "honored to be on the Board," which allows him to work with "exceptional, brilliant people." He sees his work for the college as one of the most important parts of his life and is sure that he "could never give back to the University what it gave to [him]." Beyond the University, he also serves through his church, the St. Francis Hospital Foundation and other charitable organizations. Another important service has been his financial support for college students. With money raised through book sales and speaking tours promoting his team concept, Watkins has created a program that provides money for eleven students to attain higher education each year.

Mike Watkins asserts that "service is caring" and believes such care is becoming a lost art. Even though there is a lot of talk about service, he does not see correspond-

ing action, a state of affairs that he describes with this oft-quoted business axiom, "Don't over promise and under deliver." He maintains that what holds true in the business world can be applied in regard to service, since too many people don't deliver the compassion they promise.

When thinking about the influences among service, life, and business, Watkins advises today's students, "Don't ever let anybody tell you what you can't do!" He urges them to consider fields that demand that they "cross over" into something new, pointing to his own career as an example of how success can come from such changes. He reminds students that there is a lot more to life than "what you'll learn in a book," and encourages them to make a habit of "learning about people and life." He hopes that they will be "interactive with faculty and fellow students" and that they will "always go above and beyond" their expectations. As he talks about the University, his growing enthusiasm animates his speech. One can see that he is sold on the importance of education at the University of Indianapolis and wants to share how the school made such a difference in his own life. In his life, Mike Watkins serves others with the same kind of energy and passion that he applies to selling real estate. And in living out his ethos of service, he produces meaningful results. No wonder those whose lives have been enriched can say, "Mike Sold Me!"

— *Sease Award*¹ 1995

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- A (p. 146) Photograph of Mike Watkins when he was director of Financial Aid, *The Oracle* (1975). Photograph used with permission of the Frederick D. Hill Archives, University of Indianapolis.
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