

Ep.50 - Dr. Roy Wilson

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Dr. Wilson

A Announcer 00:01
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.

E Ed Clemente 00:28
Hello, I'm your host, Ed Clemente. And I'm extremely privileged and fortunate to have President Roy Wilson, and I should also mention Dr. Wilson, because he is a, well I shouldn't say you're practicing anymore, but you still lecture right on ophthalmology?

D Dr. Wilson 00:45
I do, yes, I do.

E Ed Clemente 00:46
Yeah. And I think I mentioned one of my best friend's dad was an ophthalmologist and an epidemiologist, both.

D Dr. Wilson 00:55
I'm an epidemiologist, also.

E

Ed Clemente 00:57

I know I was like, well, that's why I mentioned it, because I read your long bio and obviously, in this era of what we've been going through, I'm sure people even ask you just like your friends are even probably bugging you about what you can and can't do, do I still have to keep doing this. Um, anyway, you're the President of Wayne State University and I really want to thank you for being here today. And you, you know, this is a ridiculous question, but I'll ask it anyway. But what would you say Wayne State's biggest mission is or what you think it's important that the University represents?

D

Dr. Wilson 01:36

Yeah, actually, that's a very important question. You know, every university should know what its mission is. And ours is very clear, we want to be the very top number one, research intensive university that that is highly ranked in social mobility. In fact, we want to be ranked number one in the country for social mobility for what's called R1 universities. There are three different classifications of universities, and R1 or Research One is the highest research ranking. There are three of them in Michigan, University of Michigan, Michigan State and Wayne State. And there's probably around 150, 160 of R1s around the country. And, you know, there are a number of universities that do a very good job with social mobility, bring people in with low socio-economic backgrounds, and, and after a certain number of years, make sure that they have higher status, socio-economic status and earning, you know, more money. But many of these universities are not R1s. And so to be an R1 and to rank highly on social mobility, I think is unique. And that's what we that's what we are. That's our mission.

E

Ed Clemente 02:57

Yeah, and I know, Carnegie Mellon does, don't they do the rankings?

D

Dr. Wilson 03:02

Yeah, Carnegie does the ranks. It's not Carnegie Mellon, it's just Carnegie.

E

Ed Clemente 03:06

Okay. That's it. Yeah. Okay. Sorry. And so, you know, you talk about social mobility, why don't you give sort of a layman's definition of what that means to you?

D

Dr. Wilson 03:17

Yeah, so social mobility is measured in different ways. But one common way of measuring is to measure what bracket you are with respect to education, not education, with respect to income, when you come to school, you know, and usually, it's like the, you know, 10th% 20th%

30th%, and so forth. And then what are you, you know, 10 years after graduation, what income bracket or in based on tax returns, and what you want, you want to, you know, rise up that that social ladder. So then if you come in, in the first or second decile brackets, that, that you end up in the, you know, somewhere in the middle class or higher. And that's probably the simplest way of explaining how much money do you earn 10 years after you graduate, versus when you came in? Now, there are some universities like Harvard, for example, you're going to, you know, most Harvard graduates are going to earn a lot when, you know, 10 years after graduation, but they may not be high on social mobility, because they may have come in at a very high level with family incomes that are in the, you know, in the stratosphere in some cases. But you know, Wayne State takes a lot of students who are not well off, you know, we take a lot of Pell students, meaning that the federal financial aid, about 46% of our students are Pell eligible and then we do a good job of graduating them and making sure that they have good jobs, and that they're earning a good income after a certain number of years.

E Ed Clemente 05:00

Yeah, I worked with actually your predecessor when I was in the legislature and I know how much we would try to make sure that that mission was even, you know, true at that point. But I think you put a finer point on it, you know, since your administration, and you know, there's nothing I think that solves all problems, better than like, a healthy middle income class of America, right? I mean, its puts less pressure on all the other social infrastructure stuff that's needed to support that. Because if people can make a decent living wage, disposable incomes, that's kind of what you're talking about. Right?

D Dr. Wilson 05:37

Sure, and at least that some, that's part of what higher education should do, right? I mean, that should be part of the mission of higher education. And we're very proud to always rank in the top in Michigan, in terms of social mobility, but we also highly ranked nationally. We're ranked 46th, nationally, but if you just look at the R1s, were 6th or 7th, they're probably five or six institutions that are ahead of us. So our aim is to catch them and, and get ahead of them in the next five years.

E Ed Clemente 06:09

Yeah, we had one of your faculty actually, on a podcast, previous Dr. Weisong Shi and he talked a lot about, you know, mobility, but mobility, automotive mobility, kind of, but he talks a lot about computing, edge computing, and, and he was one of our more popular podcasts because people were starting to really learn about what that edge computing is. And that's kind of the research things you're talking about. Because there's a lot of jobs for people in that field, right?

D Dr. Wilson 06:36

Oh, absolutely. You know, we do a lot of research, our research expenditures are \$320 million a year. And so we do research related to everywhere from, you know, engineering to health-related research, but most of the types of research we try to do, is research that directly

impacts the community that we're part of. And so most of the kind of diseases we focus on are disease that's prevalent in Detroit area. And like you mentioned, the the research that you just mentioned, this has not only local impact, but global impact, and a lot of our research has global impact.

E Ed Clemente 07:16

Yeah, in fact, when we put his on LinkedIn, a lot of the people that responded were from around the world, so he has an interesting ecosystem on his own tied to other universities, as well, overseas universities and East Asia a lot. You know, it was pretty impressive.

D Dr. Wilson 07:34

What you know, since you mentioned around the world, I mean, part of our mission is to have both local and global impact. And what a lot of people don't realize is that Wayne State actually has a lot of international students. And we actually have students from something like 80-some countries or something like that. And so we have different articulation agreements with a number of different countries, partnerships with universities across the globe. And that's something that's really important to me, because I am bicultural, I grew up in Japan and in fact, Japanese was my first language and so having that, that, that influence early on in life, had made me understand the importance of globalization, understanding other cultures, and being, you know, conversive and fluent in some other language. So, you know, all of this actually is, I talked about in my memoir that I wrote during the pandemic.

E Ed Clemente 08:46

Yeah, why don't you, ecause that is unique to be born in Japan. I don't know many people, but how did what's your path? How did that happen? Or how did you get here?

D Dr. Wilson 08:56

Yeah, well, my dad was in the Navy. And he got stationed in Japan shortly after the Korean War. And obviously he met my mother, and I was born in 1953, which was, you know, right after the Korean War. And, and lived mainly with my mother for the forwhile while my dad was stationed in other places for a while. And so it was just me and my mother. And so I grew up really understanding Japanese as my first language. About when I was about four or five years old my dad came back to Japan and was stationed there so that my mother and dad could live together again. And and I had a family. But it was a difficult childhood, and I talk about that in my memoir. The memoir is called *The Plum Tree Blossoms Even in Winter*, and the significance of the plum tree is that unlike most blossoming trees, like the cherry blossom, that blossoms in May, or in spring, the plum tree blossoms in the dead of winter, in February. And so the significance of that, or the metaphor for that is that even when times are dark and dreary, and it's cold, that something wonderful can come out of that, something beautiful can come out of it. And what I'm hoping to do from that memoir is to inspire the kind of kids that we have that come to Wayne State, that have difficult family circumstances, difficult challenges in their lives,

and to giving them the message that, that even though they're facing tough times, that something great can happen and to persevere. And that's what the plum tree is a sign of perseverance and resilience.

E

Ed Clemente 11:03

I will get this, but it's got to be available like an Amazon?

D

Dr. Wilson 11:07

Yes, it's available for pre-order now, so if you go on Amazon, and either type in my name M Roy Wilson, or, or the name of the book, The Plum Tree Blossoms, Even in Winter, it'll pop up. And the it's on pre-order now, so they're going to mail it out I think it's the fourth of May is a release date.

E

Ed Clemente 11:29

And I should mention the M. Why don't you give a little bit about the M.

D

Dr. Wilson 11:33

The M is, well, let me just start off by saying that in my entire life, my name was Roy Wilson, I never had a middle initial or middle name, felt like I was missing something. When my mother died, and she died young to honor her, I wanted to add a name, a Japanese name. And I had found out shortly before she died, that she had wanted to name me Masao, [M. A. S. A. O.] but my dad wasn't having any of that. So I decided to officially change my name. And so it's actually Masao Roy Wilson, but since I was an adult when I changed my name, and everybody knew me as Roy Wilson, I use the M. on all my official correspondences and all my friends still know me as Roy.

A

Announcer 12:26

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E

Ed Clemente 12:42

A lot of your career you served, and you have and you still do, like underserved populations, too. I know in the field of ophthalmology, right? Like you've traveled around the world, haven't you for helping out?

D

Dr. Wilson 12:54

D Dr. Wilson 12:54

Yes, I I've done a number of major studies in the Caribbean and in West Africa. As you mentioned early on, my specialty is ophthalmology and specifically glaucoma. And, and one of my, my significant studies have been showing that glaucoma is much more prevalent in African Americans or in blacks than in white populations. It's well known now, but it wasn't at the time I did my study, and then doing studies and in West Africa, particularly in Cameroon, both in terms of blindness, and also vitamin A deficiency in children.

E Ed Clemente 13:34

And I know that I think you got your MD. I know you've got quite a few degrees, but your MD was at Harvard wasn't it, medical school. [Yes, that's correct] So you actually had firsthand to find out how some of that financial advantage actually existed when you went to school there, tto for kids, but versus your background?

D Dr. Wilson 13:59

Yeah, you know, talk about social mobility, I mean, you know, Harvard gave me a chance. I mean, it's, you know, my parents were not well off, and had a lot of financial aid, and did well for myself financially. And I feel very passionate that that's what education is about. And that's what I'm trying to do here at Wayne State.

E Ed Clemente 14:20

Well, and that ties a little bit into your metaphor, again, about sometimes the blossom happens during the winter, not necessarily when all the other blossoms are happening.

D Dr. Wilson 14:29

That's exactly right. I mean, you know, when the when the when times are the jury so the times that you know, you have to have hope and keep your head up.

E Ed Clemente 14:39

Yeah, like the acorn that needs a forest fire to open up sometimes. Right?

D Dr. Wilson 14:43

That's right. And, you know, the the inspiration for the book really was the stories that I hear about the students that come to Wayne State all the time. I mean, it's just, it's just heartbreaking but, you know, somehow they persevere and somehow they they want to continue to stay and get their education and, and the obstacles that they have to overcome is, is just really impressive. And so I thought I'd want to tell my story because they're such an inspiration to me that I'm wanting to be an inspiration to them also.

E

Ed Clemente 15:22

Yeah, I think I told you, I was a trustee for Wayne County Community College and part of my district was southwest Detroit, but, you know, Dr. Ivery, you know, it's a very similar story there, too, you know, with, it's not so much that kids, you know, really aren't interested, but they've never had the exposure to role models or to other opportunities that a lot of us just take for granted sometimes?

D

Dr. Wilson 15:46

No, absolutely, no he's a great role model. Absolutely. And Wayne County Community College does a lot of what I'm talking about in terms of social mobility, also. You know they take a lot of kids who don't have too many other opportunities, and give them an opportunity to get into the middle class.

E

Ed Clemente 16:06

Yeah, and I think that that's really gotten more sunshine in the last probably 10 years than it's ever had before. We've had guests, and I'm sure some of your people are probably working on this, sort of like building out sort of broadband to urban communities that you would think should have some sort of internet, like, we found that out, during the pandemic, how many kids at home now had to take their classes online?

D

Dr. Wilson 16:30

Yeah. And the disparity, I'm really concerned that the pandemic has had a real disparate impact on minority communities versus non-minority communities. You know, they're just, it's just a fact of life that not everyone has access to internet and have access to a quiet room where they could, you know, take class remotely. And all of that came to light, I think, with the pandemic, when everything was so suddenly switched from in person to remote instruction.

E

Ed Clemente 17:09

Or even really, if you think about it, most people have access to a cell phone or a smartphone, but you realize a lot of the formatting, just simple technical things can't be done on a phone.

D

Dr. Wilson 17:20

No, absolutely not. I mean, you know, the way teaching is done now, even the way virtual teaching is done now, it's so sophisticated with so much technology, that even I have been teaching for a long time, but not virtually, I would have a very difficult time with the technology. So it's very sophisticated. And it's not the kind of thing that you can just put on your phone.

E

Ed Clemente 17:50

And you know, a couple of things here, and you've touched on a few of them, but do you see any sort of major challenges or trends on the horizon that not only for your institution, but for the demographics too you're looking for? You just touched on one with sort of the digital divide, but anything else you see coming on the horizon for us?

D

Dr. Wilson 18:10

Yeah, I think the the type of education that people need is going to be different. It's the workforce is going to be different, and the needs are going to be different. We can see, for example, that not, you know, everyone benefits equally with traditional education, perhaps, you know? Maybe having stacked credentials is a way for, you know, some individuals or some sort of skills. And I think we have to be much more flexible in meeting people where they are and helping them get the education that they need for an increasingly complex world. You know, it's just not enough to get a high school degree anymore, and just go out and get a job, you've got to have some other credentials. And I'm a real advocate for higher education, I believe in four year degrees, but one thing I've noticed, partly because of the pandemic, is that there are a lot of people out there who've taken some college but didn't finish and there are adults now and they also want to come back and finish getting their degrees and their needs are a little bit different than the 17 or 18 year old kid who just came straight out of high school. I mean, we cater to that also and in fact, that's the main type of student that we have. But I think we have to be very flexible and be able to meet other types of students where they are. You know, particularly since the high school demographics are not that there are more high school graduates in Michigan, they're becoming less. [Oh, really?] Oh, yeah. No, the trend is going in the opposite direction than we were like in higher ed. No, absolutely. There are less students graduating from high school in places like Michigan.

E

Ed Clemente 20:09

Wow, that's interesting. I think, and you probably have I know you've done this many times but, if you could maybe even let's make it simpler for yourself., but if you could go back and talk to your high school self, or I know you do the commencement speeches, but what would you tell yourself? You know more about maybe? So EQ versus maybe IQ? What would you tell yourself?

D

Dr. Wilson 20:35

Yeah, well, you know, there's probably two things. You know, one thing that I say all the time, is that, you know, don't pick your career based on financial expectations. Pick your career because of passion, because of something that you really are passionate about. Because the finances will come along. If you really enjoy what you're doing, put your heart into it, become really good at it, everything else will come along. So passion has got to be what drives your career and not finances. And I suppose the other thing, and something which I wish I had done a better job of when I was younger, is to is to be in the moment and give people who you're talking to, or who you're interacting with your undivided attention. And, you know, a lot of us

we're thinking about the next thing when we're talking to someone, we're not in that moment, we're somewhere else. And I regret that because I think first of all, people deserve your undivided attention, but you get to learn so much more about people. And I think you have a richer, fuller life that way.

E

Ed Clemente 21:52

But that is really hard to do. I wouldn't be too hard on your high school self. I think sometimes, I always, you know, that's something that really does come with experience though. To really realize, I should have enjoyed myself more, I should have taken more trips or I should have talked to my family more or whatever it was right? But that's a challenge, but I think hearing it at least, should make you more conscious, like people should think about that, but it's, with the with the phone in your hand it's harder and harder. I think.

D

Dr. Wilson 22:25

I think you're absolutely right, it is harder and harder. And you go out to dinner now, and you see people sitting at same table, you know, texting each other.

E

Ed Clemente 22:35

Yeah, I know. Well, we're down to the last question. And this is a simple one. And let me put a plug in for you too that Wayne State, I've done a lot of work with your university, especially the international, and I'm on Global Ties Detroit, I just want to compliment you for all the work Wayne State's done with us. And we're bringing international students into, you know, Southeast Michigan. But I also want to ask, what would you think you've been here a while now, what is your favorite thing about Michigan? I mean, what do you like doing? Is there a festival? Is it?

D

Dr. Wilson 23:13

Well, you know, I'll tell you that the weather is not my favorite thing.

E

Ed Clemente 23:19

You're from Japan, a cold weather in Japan when you grew up.

D

Dr. Wilson 23:22

But that was a long time ago when I was there, but no, you know, seriously, you know what I really like about Michigan, particularly the Detroit area, and it may be that way in other parts of Michigan also, it's just the people. The innovation, the entrepreneurship, the spirit, they can do spirit, the, you know, Detroit versus Everyone kind of scrappy, may not do it the way everyone else does it, but you know, we're going to get it done kind of mentality. And I just love that.

E

Ed Clemente 23:55

Yeah, we we have a chip on our shoulder, but we don't it's not a real chip, it's just we always know we're working from a handicap a little bit, so we work harder, I think.

D

Dr. Wilson 24:06

Yeah. A little scrappy, you know, a little gritty. Yeah, I think all that's good.

E

Ed Clemente 24:10

Yeah, I grew up in that kind of neighborhood. Trust me, I saw a lot of stuff. But, you know, you're doing a tremendous job at Wayne State University. And I know, you have a challenge always you know, but I think at the same time, I think everybody's proud and people, you know, I think you're doing a great job, too. So keep up the good work. And once again, our guest, you know, again, was President Roy Wilson, also Dr. Wilson, but thank you very much for taking time and good luck with the new book and I hope it keeps, and a lot of people get a hold of it for you.

D

Dr. Wilson 24:47

Well, thank you very much, and this was enjoyable. I appreciate the invitation. Thank you.

E

Ed Clemente 24:51

You're nice guy. We appreciate you taking time to talk to us today. Tune into our next guest former Mayor of Kalamazoo Bobby Hopewell and his unique business in the mobile health industry. Plus he knows Yankees Derek Jeter.

A

Announcer 25:06

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