

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. JACK WILSON  
CONDUCTED BY MIRIAM MARGALA

**An entrepreneur, innovator,  
scientist, educator and  
philanthropist.**

## A TRUE RENAISSANCE MAN.

*It is not easy to try to make justice describing somebody as accomplished as Dr. Wilson – a former university president who worked and interacted with congressmen, senators, governors, four US Presidents; an innovator in all his endeavors: the founder and CEO of what became a \$500 million IT company, the founder of a successful online university school; a fundraiser (during his presidency, the funds raised more than doubled); an educator, mentor and philanthropist and so much more. I therefore asked for comments from some of Dr. Wilson's closest colleagues, themselves nationally and internationally recognized educators, administrators and politicians, as the most fitting way to introduce him to our readers.*

*Current University of Massachusetts President and former long serving US Congressman Marty Meehan puts it very aptly when he says that "Jack is a pioneer in cultivating and catalyzing innovation and entrepreneurship. His success as an academic, researcher and entrepreneur allows him to bring unique perspectives to the larger conversations around entrepreneurship."*

*Dr. Jacqueline Moloney, current University of Massachusetts (UMass) Lowell Chancellor, the first woman ever in that role, further emphasizes Dr. Wilson's expertise and influence when she explains that a strong "commitment to entrepreneurial thinking drives Jack Wilson. His expertise is a tremendous asset to our students, to his colleagues, to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and to the Nation." Dr. Wilson's vision of economic prosperity and its connection to university research is eloquently described by Associate Vice-Chancellor for Entrepreneurship and Economic Development at UMass Lowell, Steve Tello, who notes that "as past Chair of the National Council for Innovation, Competitiveness and Economic Prosperity of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, Jack championed the need for higher education, industry and government to work together. He understands the important role universities play in promoting innovation and economic development, and as President Emeritus of UMass, he continues to support these efforts as a teacher, researcher and entrepreneur".*

*I am quite sure that Dr. Wilson's life long curiosity and interest in anything that can possibly make a difference immediately or in the long run and his ability to get people to work with him is due to his personal charisma, enthusiasm and willingness to always listen to other people's opinions. He feels just as comfortable talking to his undergraduate students as to influential CEOs, politicians or such luminaries as Nelson Mandela, upon whom Dr. Wilson bestowed an honorary degree (pictured).*

*Anything Dr. Wilson discusses is inherently infused with the underlying notion of doing good. To use the words of the former highly liked and respected UMass Lowell Provost, Dr. Don Pierson: "Jack Wilson is a tremendous asset to the expansive community he influences. He is a charismatic leader, a wise mentor, a trusted colleague, an inspiring teacher, and a generous benefactor."*

**Dr. Wilson, thank you very much for this opportunity to talk to you. I will open our conversation with a task for you - how would you describe yourself in a few words?**

I have a phrase that I always laugh about that appears at the end of every job description: "and other duties as assigned". Pretty much every job I've ever had and the way I've lived my life was – other duties as assigned. I like to look around for things that I believe should be done and then try to figure out how to get them done. I particularly enjoy it when I'm told that many tried and failed. That's like waving a red cape in front of a bull – I am ready to charge. That's how I became a scientist or an entrepreneur – scientists do not want to research something everybody understands, they will go and research something nobody understands. Entrepreneurs do the same – look around for things that should be done, could be done and haven't been done. For example, when I did research in

liquid crystals back in the 1970s, nobody thought it was terribly interesting or useful. But I thought it was – and my group (one of only a few) quickly discovered we could make display devices using liquid crystals. I built some of the first liquid crystal displays ever. Even though many large American companies became excited about liquid crystals, at the end, they did not have the foresight to see how this was going to change the world. However, there were plenty of people from Japan visiting my laboratory interested in liquid crystals. And today, as we all know, we buy all the liquid crystal display devices from Japanese and Korean companies that exploited that technology. I will admit that looking for things that haven't been done but could and should be done may lead to a somewhat eclectic life.

**Why do you say 'admit'? Isn't it good to have an eclectic life?**

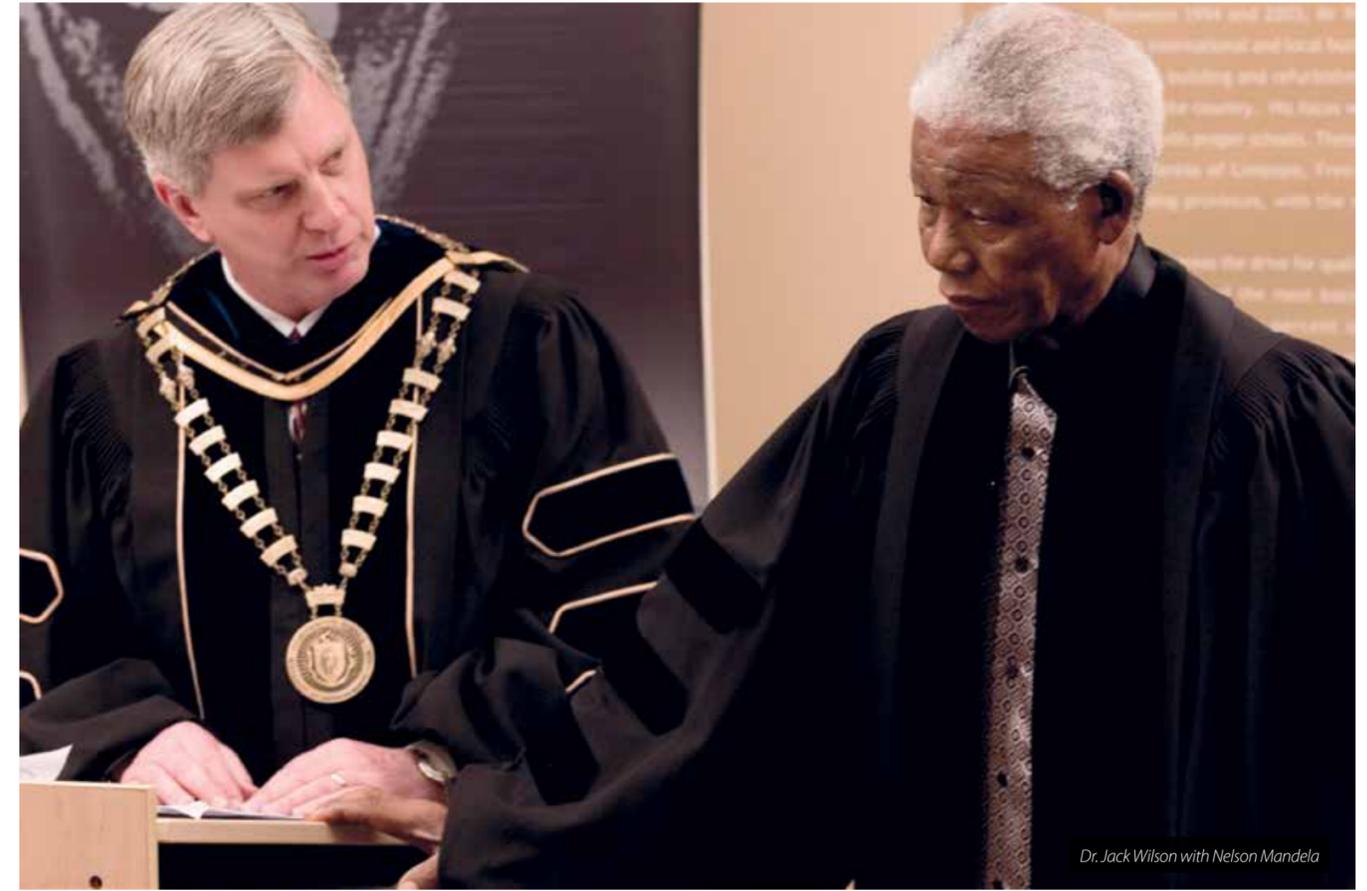
Oh I believe it is good to have an eclectic life but

many of my colleagues would disagree. They prefer to focus on one thing only. Instead, I looked around for problems I could solve to make a difference.

**This leads to an interesting question – the idea of a career as climbing the typical 'career ladder' is becoming obsolete. Instead, one should look for opportunities. You are an interesting amalgam of both. Your academic career seems to have been the typical university ladder path (professor, chair, dean, provost, president), but you have also been incredibly entrepreneurial, turning your research into a business; you ventured outside academia to take on jobs that indeed were all about solving problems as they came.**

I did both, that's true – but I was also quite lucky. I did climb the ladder, but only because it presented interesting problems to be solved. I followed things I was curious about – and was often

PHOTOS: ARCHIVE



Dr. Jack Wilson with Nelson Mandela

criticized for it. When I moved away from the hard-core physics into computational physics, people said that I was abandoning my field to play with these toys called computers. But I quickly became a leading person in developing computers for complex problem solving. Eventually, I got hired as a consultant by AT&T, IBM and others. But I did not become interested in this area because I would be hired by them; I went into the field because I found it interesting. When I was still far too young, I was asked to become a department chair. I said yes because I saw it as an interesting thing. Pretty much, as I kept looking for interesting problems to be solved, every job thereafter was something that came to me through serendipity – even becoming the President of the University of Massachusetts.

**Curiosity is certainly something strongly associated with you. When people are curious enough they put themselves out there and become noticed – and then things happen...**

I think that's true and I've tried to teach my students the same thing. Instead of planning your future in a systematic fashion, you should learn as much as you can about as many things as you can and do interesting things that make a difference. Don't take on problems that are easy to solve; take on hard problems, difficult to solve. Besides, it's fun taking on harder problems and a huge joy to win on them. You don't always win but you do get noticed. That's how the University of Massachusetts asked me whether I'd be interested in starting their online school. I said yes. I'd realized early on, be-

fore UMass asked me, that having only the in-class model of learning meant locking the people who could not come to classes because of their jobs or families out of education. I thought – we could use technology to provide education for them. I started developing this technology and eventually, built a successful company offering online education. So when the University of Massachusetts asked me whether I would build an online school for them, I said – when can I start? Today, UMass online enrollments reached 75,565 students. In terms of the revenue, we surpassed \$100 million. It was definitely worth it, to go and give it a try, to solve a difficult problem and make a difference.

**Your eclectic career spans almost 50 years. What drives you? What inspires you?**

Seems like a long time, but I keep changing what I'm doing every few years. I still find new interesting things to do and am still able to make a difference. I am opportunistic in a sense that I don't systematically plan ahead. When I become aware of a thing that needs to be done, should have been done a long time ago but wasn't, people tried and failed – then that's an opportunity for me to give it a try. A good example would be our UMass Law School. There was no law school when I became President and founding a public law school was not on the list of my priorities at all. If it hadn't been for a young woman who recognized and approached me in a restaurant one night, asking me upfront why UMass didn't have a public law school, I may have not paid attention to it. There are many private, expensive law schools – which

is where she got her degree and ended up with a huge debt to pay off. She wanted to make a difference and do public interest law but couldn't because of her debt. I realized she was right. For 150 years, Massachusetts had been failing its citizens because it was not providing them this opportunity to study law at a state law school. I recognized that founding a public law school should be done. There was a lot of negative publicity, especially from all the established private law schools. But I persevered and today, the University of Massachusetts has a public law school, fully accredited and fiscally healthy. It was a problem that was far away from how I started: a scientist, physicist, engineer, entrepreneur. But it was a problem that needed to be solved and an opportunity to make a huge difference – and that always drives and inspires me.

**It seems that stepping out of your comfort zone is something you seek and enjoy; it seems to be your mode of operation.**

(Laughing) Yes, that's true. To be fair, I like to step out of my comfort zone if it allows me to do something that should be done – not just for the sake of it. But I have to admit I do enjoy stepping out of my comfort zone if it means making a difference.

**I have known you professionally for a few years now and I think that "the sense of purpose" is not a cliché for you but has a strong moral and ethical value. Could you address this in more detail?**

I agree with you. When you hear the phrase today, oftentimes it's way too high minded. But there is

a sense of purpose: I have certain skills and talents, one of which is a thick skin so I can endure things that other people perhaps could not. I certainly can take a punch. I do not like being hit of course, but I don't mind it either if we're getting done what needs to be done. To me, the sense of purpose means that we're all stewards. Each of us is given about 80, 90 years and we're going to have to use these years productively. It's like a relay race – it's a metaphor for life. Somebody picks up the baton and runs as fast as they can then hands it to the next person who runs as fast as they can ...and so on and so forth. So in life, people hand you a baton – run! Do all that you can. Get it done! At the end, I want to be able to say – ok, I did my part. I made some mistakes, I didn't get everything done, but the next runner may get it done...

**And that takes me to the question of leadership. Again, in your case, it means something very concrete, tangible. When you became President of the University of Massachusetts, the first thing you did was to change the old, entrenched attitude of certain defeatism since the university is part of an educational landscape where there's far too many elite private universities (Harvard, MIT, Boston**

**University, etc.). You successfully and fast changed this into the sense of pride for all those who work and study at UMass. How did you get about 70,000 students and 17,000 staff to change their attitude?**

Well, I don't know how much credit I deserve, because that's just the way I am. I don't accept defeatism. I get most frustrated when I see uncommitted people. Frankly, it irritates me and that makes me very assertive and pushy. One of the statements I made when I felt irritated was: "the path to economic and social development in Massachusetts goes through UMass" (now an iconic and still applicable statement, MM's note). Of course I knew it was going to be controversial. The truth is even my friends, Harvard, MIT and BU presidents themselves told me I was right! Naturally, the press criticized me. But I had statistics – 80% of all our workforce come from UMass! One of our medical school professors is a Nobel prize laureate. We have hundreds of millions of dollars in research grants. Our alumni work as CEOs and other high ranking officials in the biggest companies here in Massachusetts and elsewhere. We should be all excited about that! The University of Massachusetts now leads as an institution in many measured aspects of higher education.

**What are the most fundamental characteristics of a successful leader?**

That's a tough question – it's a multidimensional issue. To put it simply, you have to care and be passionate about things that are important, not yourself. True, most leaders have a strong ego; they must believe that things can get done. But you really have to have a passion for what you do. In my case, I was very eclectic about the things I cared about. It could be physics, engineering, education or entrepreneurship, which I am a great believer in. Entrepreneurship has created great futures in many places. If you look at places that are not entrepreneurial, it's been very tough for them. But if you encourage entrepreneurship, you see great things happen because it fosters innovative and engaged individuals for whom problems are opportunities to come up with innovative solutions. Even if they fail at the beginning, entrepreneurs do not complain but ask - why? What do we have to do differently to succeed? What did we learn from the failure? I think a great leader also has to think this way.

By Miriam Margala

**TO BE CONTINUED**



Dr. Jack Wilson with former US President Barack Obama



*Dr. Miriam Margala enjoys a rewarding and eclectic professional career. She is a university lecturer, teaching academic writing, communication and philosophy of language. She mentors other professional women through an organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Women Accelerators, where she is a member of the Board of Directors. She also translates literature, both poetry and prose, writes academic articles, conducts interviews for various publications, presents at international conferences and is involved in international projects dealing with innovation in education and diversity in industry. She is also involved in art projects both in the United States and Europe.*