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## **North Shore woman believes school funding reform is everyone's concern**



**Lali Watt greets guests before a screening of a education documentary by her group, United We Learn, at Northwestern University. (Brian Cassella, Chicago Tribune / September 15, 2010)**

### **Her activism was inspired by state Sen. James Meeks' efforts to enroll city students in suburban schools**

Dawn Turner Trice

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Lali Watt comes from a family that stressed the importance of education. Her father is a retired certified public accountant, and her late mother was a nuclear physicist in an era when few women aspired to such jobs.

By the time Watt, who was born in Calcutta, India, in 1960, made it to college in Scotland, she had attended schools — public and parochial — in New York City, India, Tanzania and Zambia.

In Tanzania, her middle school class was one in which children of ambassadors sat next to children of guerrilla fighters, each with their own complicated and varied stories.

And yet Watt, a 16-year Wilmette resident, admits that for years when she looked at the failures of underperforming Chicago Public Schools, she believed the problems were fairly easy to identify.

"I bought into the thinking that it was the teachers union or unmotivated students," said Watt, also a CPA.

Then, two years ago state Sen. James Meeks, D-Chicago, came to the North Shore to bring attention to the disparity in public education by attempting to enroll CPS students in two area schools.

When the visit was over, Watt said many residents breathed a sigh of relief. But she and a few others weren't satisfied. After studying the issues, they decided Meeks had a point. The state's school funding formula needed to be overhauled not to be so dependent on property taxes.

How to do both remained the thicket.

Watt said her group, called United We Learn, doesn't have the answers. But members are challenging everyone, no matter their race, income or ZIP code, not to accept the status quo.

"Our core group of eight members is diverse," Watt said. "We've got one woman who has family members who are Holocaust survivors, and a man who's a black Republican who doesn't live in the area but wanted to help. We've got a woman who came from Jamaica and another who's half white and half Japanese (American). But we're all connected by this commitment to change."

In addition, United We Learn has two teachers. One taught English at New Trier for 32 years and now teaches at Truman College. Another was a math teacher, school principal and superintendent in Evanston.

Last week, the group launched its video, "The Education They Deserve," a compilation of interviews from students, parents and teachers whose experiences illuminate the stark differences in some of the area's best and worst schools. At the meeting, held Thursday night at Northwestern University, more than 50 participants pledged to host showings of the video.

"You look at the video and you know there's more to this than the fact that our per-student spending up here is over \$18,000 and the CPS' is about \$12,000," Watt said. "You listen and you realize that part of it is students having to use very antiquated textbooks and live with limited resources, and teachers entering the system starry-eyed and leaving brokenhearted."

At first glance, it may appear she herself is starry-eyed. You might wonder why Watt — who lives with her husband and children in an ivy-covered Colonial that sits amid large American elms — is so passionate about students living in neighborhoods that are miles and worlds away.

Watt said she vehemently believes that if Chicago's public school students are ill-prepared for the work force, it doesn't just affect them, but everyone — even the well-heeled. That's because the cost to society as a whole is tremendous. She said she became involved because she also knew that she can't make a difference if she doesn't try.

Watt's first foray into activism came in March 2002, when she got involved in what was then viewed as the impossible task of saving Wilmette's Mallinckrodt building, a 1917 convent slated for demolition.

"We got this \$25 million bond issue passed, and we got the Park District to buy the place," Watt said. "The head of a statewide environmental organization told me, 'In Lake County we can't get 10 cents passed.'"

She said that was the first time she realized that individuals had power if they chose to exercise it.

Watt went on to work on the campaign of 2004 presidential candidate Howard Dean. The following year, she ran for the Wilmette Village Board and won. But she failed to be re-elected in 2009 after taking strong stances in favor of affordable housing and the environment.

Watt said she doesn't believe society can move ahead unless more people can rear their children in an environment that's safe and has sustainable schools. Although the issue of school funding may be as contentious as it is complex, she believes there's something people can do immediately.

"I would love to have every wealthy person on the North Shore who funds our politicians to, before they write them a check, ask what he or she is doing to work on reforming funding and our education system," Watt said.

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