

James Watson, Jr.



James Watson, Emeritus Professor of Physics and Astronomy at Ball State University, was born on June 29, 1943 and died on December 2, 2009 after a long battle with cancer. He earned a bachelor's degree in physics from Elon College in math and physics in 1965. He was awarded a master's in science degree from the University of South Carolina in 1967, and a Ph. D. in physics from the University of Arkansas in 1976. Jim taught at Appalachia State University from 1967-1971 before receiving his Ph.D. He was a visiting professor at Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches, TX in 1976. He came to Ball State University in 1976 where he served as a professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy until his retirement in 2007.

While formally trained as an experimental physicist, Jim devoted most of his professional career to science education and, specifically, science teacher training. During his career Professor Watson mentored and provided the department's undergraduate physics teaching majors with physics education pedagogy classes and individualized research projects related to physics teaching. Watson and his wife, and lifetime professional partner Nancy, offered summer graduate courses for in-service teachers on the uses of technology in physics and physical science teaching. He directed physics education research papers for many of the students in these workshops who completed master's degrees in physics and science education. Watson also provided physical science instruction for the university's elementary education majors. Many of these students remember his PHYCS 101 course as "Fiziks is Phun", since toys were often used to teach important science concepts. While basically a quiet person, Jim always tried, with frequent references to Garfield and toys, to make science entertaining as well as educational. He also developed instructional materials for K-12 astronomy education and was a pioneer in applications of microcomputers in physics and science education. Jim was a principal investigator or co-investigator on a number of NSF science education grants during his career. One of these grants supported the development of a very popular general education science class dealing with the science of the paranormal.

In addition to his membership in a variety of other professional organizations, including the American Physical Society and the National Science Teacher's Association (NSTA), Jim was a very active member of the American Association of Physics Teachers (AAPT) and the Hoosier Association of Science Teachers, Inc. (HASTI). He served on the Board of Directors of HASTI for several years and served on, and chaired, committees for AAPT for over two decades. In recognition of his service to his profession, he was the recipient of a Distinguished Service Award from AAPT in 2004.

Professor Watson shared his scholarship through publications in science education journals and presentations at professional meetings. In addition to the summer workshops at Ball State University, Jim and Nancy traveled to area schools and conducted workshops for science teachers across the country. Jim is survived by his wife, Nancy, thousands of science teachers who benefitted from his mentoring and countless numbers of science students who profited from his life's work.

Ruth Howes, Professor Emerita
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