

FOUNDER OF IDEA OF AMERICA NETWORK

Dr. John Oliver Wilson

“The revolution was Monday. It was not televised. The seeds of the revolution were sown Friday afternoon when Lord Dunmore visited the Colonial Kitchen at the St. Helena Elementary School and met Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Patrick Henry and a few others he called 'rebels.'”

“A few hours later, standing at the top of the stairs in the school library, he read a proclamation from King George III and announced that as of Monday, the colonists in Virginia would be taxed. Lord Dunmore, portrayed by St. Helenian John Wilson, was dressed in his finest Scottish kilt as he met Jefferson, portrayed by Zantos Segura. Running the Colonial kitchen was fifth-grade teacher Terilynn Buchanan.”

“Fifth-graders have been studying Colonial times since the beginning of January, and last week they dressed in period clothing and became the real-life men and women from the 18th century.” David Stoneberg, editor, St. Helena Star (February 4, 2016)

It has been a long journey from the small mid-western town of Rolla, Missouri located on Route 66 (as interstate 44 was known in my times) at the northern entrance to the Ozarks to portraying Lord Dunmore and meeting Thomas Jefferson in St. Helena, California.

I am a product of the Rolla public schools through and through. I learned certain values at a young age, especially the values of honesty, hard work and fair play. I was fortunate to have the support, and oversight, of mentors. School teachers dedicated to shaping an inquiring mind and making sure I excelled in math, science, literature, music, history, civics and a host of other subjects. A kid from Rolla public schools had to be well-rounded. Local merchants who gave me jobs pumping gas, soda jerking and polishing and greasing cars.

Going to college was a given. But how to pay for college was another matter. Fortunately, the Navy came to the rescue. I was able to win a full-ride to Northwestern University on an NROTC regular scholarship. I graduated with a degree in math and more important to me at the time an Ensign in the U.S. Navy. I volunteered for active duty with the amphibious force of the Marine Corp and so had the best of both worlds, at least in my mind. The U.S. Navy and the U.S. Marines. I would end up giving ten years of my life to military service as a Midshipman and then active duty and active reserves from the era of the Cuban Missile Crisis through Vietnam. The Navy also helped pay my way through graduate school along with a wife teaching fifth graders in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Fast forward. A PhD in economics from the University of Michigan. First teaching job as founder and Director of the Urban Economics Program at Yale University. Several presidential appointments in Washington on leave from Yale, including Assistant Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity (War on Poverty), Assistant Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (for welfare reform planning), and Director of Nuclear Regulation Policy for the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. Eventually moving to California to join the Bank of America as Director of Economic and Financial Analysis (eventually ending a 25 year career as Executive Vice President and Chief Economist) and to also join the faculty at the University of California at Berkeley (teaching over the next 30 years in the Goldman School of Public Policy, the Haas School of Business, the Department of International Studies and the School of Social Welfare).

Currently, I am a member of the President's Council and the Raleigh Tavern Society at Colonial Williamsburg Foundation where I have focused my energy and interests on their educational programs teaching Idea of America values and ideals to elementary and high school students. I undertook the goal several years ago to develop an Idea of America seminar program for civic-minded adults wanting an opportunity to engage in discussion and debate in their local community on the values that shape our society and our nation, and how those values are impacting where we are headed as a nation.

All this gave birth to the Idea of America Network. But as Founder and Director of the Idea of America Network, I have never lost sight of my deep mid-western roots and values. My strong belief in the American Dream which I have been fortunate to live. And my great concern that without a renewal of our commitment to the values on which our nation was founded and the extension of those values to encompass all Americans as our legacy, that we will not be able to pass the American Dream on to a young Thomas Jefferson (Zantos Segura of St. Helena Elementary School and the millions of others who are young, many newly arrived immigrants, who are our future).

My American Dream reads like a story from the distant past. Probably too "apple-pie" for the current generation. Each generation must define its own American Dream given current reality and opportunities. But the American Dream of opportunity, of education, of mentors and of individual and civic responsibility is as relevant today as it was in my day. This is a legacy we must never forget. It is the legacy of the Idea of America.