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**Podcast with Ken Futernick from TeacherStories.org and Robert Nelsen, President of California State University, Sacramento.**

**Interview conducted at CSU Sacramento on 11/15/2019**

**Podcast available at [teacherstories.org](http://teacherstories.org) and on iTunes.**

**Ken Futernick:**

Hi everyone. This is Ken Futernick from TeachersStories.org. My guest today is Dr. Robert Nelsen, President of California State University, Sacramento -- a position he's held since 2015. Sac state is one of twenty-three campuses in the CSU system here in California and serves about thirty thousand students. It happens to be the University where I worked as a teacher educator and researcher for about twenty years.

Dr. Nelsen recently participated in a Celebration of Teaching event on campus for about two hundred students who had been nominated by their professors as promising teaching candidates. I was there and I heard you share a fascinating story about your path into academia and some of your teachers who played a role. But before we get into that story can you say a little bit about Sac State and in what you do here.

**Robert Nelsen:**

Well, I'm the president of Sac State. We have thirty thousand students, thirty thousand one hundred fifty-one students to be exact. I consider them all my kids I feel like I'm at home with them. I used to be a creative writer. I'm no longer creative writer but I do the faculty find them at least a little humorous even if they disagree with them. But I love Sac State. I love our mission. We have turned around our graduation rates one hundred and sixty-seven percent, which is pretty remarkable at this point. And we're closing the achievement gaps with our students and all students are rising at the same level.

**Ken Futernick:**

As I learned from you recently, you were not always working in this field of academia. Share with our Teacher Stories listeners about your earlier career path and how it changed.

**Robert Nelsen:**

Well I grew up in Montana, and we didn't have a lot. We had eighty-seven cows and that's not enough to really survive on. We survived on venison and with the vegetables we could grow and everything else. So, we didn't have a lot we didn't even have TV because you couldn't get TV there in the sixties. And I read every book I could in my school library. The one I remember

most is Givens' The Rise and Decline of the Roman Empire. I remembered it most because it was so fat, and I get to be able to spend enough time in it that I could lose myself the like.

So, I wasn't reading to really get any knowledge. I was just reading to entertain myself. I preferred the rodeo, and I figured I was going to go into the rodeo. And at that point in high school I had actually been in a rodeo and I'd been successful and got a paycheck and that was a lot of money at that point you know. Two hundred fifty dollars I think is what we got and it was a suicide race. It was a lot of fun and I thought that's where I wanted to go. I can work on the ranch during the year and during the summer and rodeo and really enjoy myself. So I didn't expect to go to college.

But I had a teacher, and his name was Mr. Sullivan. Mr. Sullivan was a big guy. He had to be at least 6-4 for maybe 6-6, and he'd been a policeman in Butte, Montana. And while, as a policeman one night a gang actually beat him up, and they took and shoved a metal fence post in his mouth and ruined all of its mouth and everything else. While he was in the hospital he decided that he was going to be a teacher because he was not going to have kids not have chances, and he didn't want to see kids in gangs.

So he moved from Butte to Ennis, Montana. He introduced me to George Orwell. He introduced me to so many books, Herman Hesse. I read so much stuff with him. But I read it again, not to learn anything but to enjoy myself and really to escape from the world.

He was very unhappy with me because he wanted me to go to college. I'd read all the stuff. I was one of the best students in the class and even just frustrated I wasn't going to go. So he set me up. We were there and a young girl named Peggy, Margaret, Peggy was her nickname. I wrote a poem. And he asked me to critique the poem. And I said, "Well I think it's crap." And he looked at me and he gave me the chalk, and he said okay, "Define crap." So I went up to the board and I wrote "S" and then I wrote "H" and I knew that if I wrote the next two letters -- I looked at him -- he was gonna knock me from one side of the room to the other side of the room.

So I erased it quickly, but I was still being a smartass and I wrote "detritus," garbage, okay and he did not knock me from one side of the room to the other side of the room, but he made me fill out an application to college as my punishment. I filled out that application. I didn't really figure I would go and what have you got to lose if you're going to do something so that Mr. Sullivan is okay with you. We send it in, and lo and behold it came back with a notice of a scholarship. The scholarship was one hundred dollars. Now that doesn't sound like very much money, but one hundred dollars at that point...it was the fifty dollars a semester, it paid for the whole year. So I looked at it and said...that paid for the whole summer because I went during summer...I looked at it and said "Now, not working in the fields might not be a bad thing. Not bailing hay might not be a bad thing."

And so I had also for the first time my life experienced air conditioning. And we'd been into a movie theater, and they had air conditioning and that made me think—Colleges, I bet they've

got air-conditioned buildings. So, it could even be a better thing I can sit in there and keep reading books and I don't have to work in the fields.

**Ken Futernick:**

So, it really wasn't about pursuing a career or learning. It was really about some pretty basic things like cool air and not working in the fields.

**Robert Nelsen:**

I figured I'd start in political science. I figured I'd be a politician, but then I met a lot of politicians and I realized I didn't want to be a politician and tried to study philosophy, and did that and read Wittgenstein and learned that all meaning is just the use of words and so I solved all of that. There was no need to study philosophy anymore and I started writing fiction and ended up where I am today.

**Ken Futernick:**

Somewhere along the line you got interested in western clothing, right?

**Robert Nelsen:**

I had to put myself through college because I didn't really...I only had the scholarship that one time that first summer. To put myself through college I worked as a janitor every morning from four until eight o'clock. And in the evenings, I worked at a sporting goods store selling fish hooks. I was in the fishing department. I got promoted there and they had western clothing as part one part of the floor. I had two classes left to graduate, and not knowing what I was going to do when I graduated because it was in Poly Sci and I had already decided I was not going to be a politician. But I was very good at selling blue jeans and other clothing and the like. The company decided that they were going to move from Utah where it was at down to southern California and open up western clothing stores. And they asked me to go down to Pasadena, California and Arcadia exactly right across from Santa Anita race track and open up the first store.

So I went down there. I had a new baby. Seth was just about six months old, and I figured okay this is the way I'd be able to feed him because it was now fourteen thousand dollars they were paying me. That was a lot of money back then, and I thought okay why not make this my career, you know. I'd never really thought academia was my career.

And my wife and I were there. We got in a little yellow bug and drove all the way down there, got an apartment. We had a great time when we see each other, but we didn't really see each other very much because I spent all my time in the mall because it was a new store and we're opening up other new stores in other cities down there.

After about a year my wife came to me and she said, "You haven't read a book. You have not written a story. You are boring. You're either going back to college and finishing, or I'm leaving you."

Well, forty-four years later we're still together, so I guess I went back to college. I got there, the professors knew me, they knew that I only had the two courses to go and they said, "Well why don't you enroll in graduate school at the same time?" And they let me teach a course and I remember teaching the course and there was a book called, Small is Beautiful and I taught that in Poly Sci and I fell in love with teaching. And that's why I said to the dean at the time, "I'd like to teach, okay. Where should I go so I can get a job when I'm through and be a professor?" He said, "Go to the University of Chicago." I applied the University Chicago. I went to the University of Chicago. I had a lot of luck there, had great professors like Stephen Toulmin, I had Wayne Booth. I had people like Saul Bellow. I had really amazing professors who just changed my life, and I finally got the chance to be able to teach.

**Ken Futernick:**

So, at the recent Celebration of Teaching event, in addition to sharing part of the story with two hundred some odd students that were potentially future teachers, you made a comment about the craziness of these times and how important **it** could be to become a teacher. Can you just talk a little bit about why you think today it's important for people to think about becoming a teacher?

**Robert Nelsen:**

I don't use words the words so that I'm gonna use very often because I'm someone who lives day to day, but I believe that teaching is a sacred, and I mean sacred, profession. Teaching, you change lives. There are so many lies out there today. There's so many people who say all news is fake news, which we know is just nonsense and we know that there are lies.

I worry about our democracy. I really do. When I look at the elections, when I look at the things I see on TV, it's hard to believe that this is happening to the United States. If we are not teaching truth, if we're not allowing young minds to think, then we're failing. And I think that's what we as teachers do. It isn't that we impart knowledge. Google does that. What we do is we teach people to think and to care. And to really be human.

And I'm worried today because I look out there and I see a lot of people that aren't humans.

**Ken Futernick:**

I think with that I'm going to conclude and just sign off here. What I want to say to our Teacher Story listeners is, if you enjoyed this podcast I want you to hit the "like" button next to the story, and you can use any of the social media icons – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram -- to share Dr. Nelsen's story with your friends and colleagues. Also, please go to [TeacherStories.org](http://TeacherStories.org) and tell us a bit about your own teacher story if you have one.

This concludes another Teacher Story podcast. Thanks again to my guest, Sac State President, Robert Nelsen. Bye everyone.