

Durand Distinguished Alumni to Receive Awards

Story by: Anamaria Dickerson, used with permission from The Argus-Press, Owosso, MI

A retired Marine Corps captain and university professor will be honored later this month with 2017 Durand Distinguished Alumni awards.

Durand High School graduates Michael Watkins, class of 1995, and Thomas Fuja, class of 1977, will be honored at a special reception 3 to 5 p.m. Aug. 13 at Durand Union Station. The event is open to friends, family members and classmates.

"Both of these individuals have accomplished a lot," said Jan Harper, president of the Durand Area Educational Foundation, which selects the award winners.

The purpose of the awards is to recognize Durand graduates who have made a significant impact on their communities through academic or career advancement, dedicated service or cultural enrichment, Harper said. This is the third year the foundation has awarded distinguished alumni status to district graduates.

"Both of them have accomplished a lot and it shows what opportunities are available for the young people here," Harper said. I think sometimes people think it's the larger high schools that produce successful students, but that's not always the case."

Harper said the foundation received about 20 nominations for this year's awards, up by more than a dozen from the foundation's inception in 2014.

"Applicants included actors, those with an extensive background in community service and artists," Harper said. "They really covered a whole gamut of things in their personal and professional lives."

Michael Watkins



Watkins, 40, is the son of Larry and Vicki Watkins, formerly of Durand. His tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan in the Marine Corps are what Harper said made him stand out as a nominee.

"We looked at (his military background) quite carefully," Harper said. "He was not involved with an ROTC program at a university like most students are. He enlisted right out of high school and moved up quickly (in rank) by following the correct path."

"Humble," Watkins said about how he felt receiving the alumni award. "It was more of a surprise than anything. I wasn't the best student in high school — or the best kid — so it was not one of the things I anticipated."

After graduation, Watkins enlisted in the Marine Corps. During his first tour in the western Pacific, Watkins took general education classes through Central Texas College based in Killeen, Texas.

In 2000, Watkins and his wife, Stacey, along with their children Trevor, Sarra, Carter and Savanna, moved back to Michigan, where he enrolled at Eastern Michigan University. They currently reside in Goodrich.

Watkins applied for the Marine Enlisted Commissioning Education Program, which allowed him to become commissioned as an officer in 2005 after graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in history. He also earned a master's degree from Marshall University in 2015.

"A lot of industry leaders I worked for had majored in history and it looked more attainable than my original plan of mathematics," Watkins said.

Watkins worked his way through the ranks. He became a pilot, where he accrued more than 1,200 flight hours, including 1,000 hours in the EA-6B Prowler aircraft. He also served as a Marine Expeditionary Force Special Operations instructor.

During his active service, Watkins won numerous awards related to aerial combat and exceptional performance of related duties and awards for courses; including Intermediate Flight School, Assault Climbers Course, Corporals Course, Sergeants Course and Recruiters School.

“(Being a Marine taught me) leadership and confidence,” Watkins said. “Not to the point of cockiness — but knowing what my limits are and being able to surpass those.”

Since retiring with the rank of captain in 2015, Watkins joined Team Rubicon USA, a disaster response veterans service organization, as a Region V administrator, where he continues to serve people.

Thomas Fuja



Thomas Fuja, 57, said he had no idea he would be named as one of the two recipients of this year’s alumni award. Fuja is the son of the late Al and Jean Fuja, of Durand. He has three siblings, Sue, Steve and Jim.

“I was very much surprised,” Fuja said. “It hadn’t even occurred to me.”

Fuja, who has lived in South Bend, Indiana, since relocating in 1998, is the current chairman of the University of Notre Dame Department of Electrical Engineering as well as a professor. Prior to Notre Dame, Fuja was a professor at the University of Maryland.

“His career path was pretty straight-forward, which set his direction,” Harper said of why Fuja was chosen as the second recipient. “That’s the way he went.”

Fuja said it Fred Hesse, a DHS chemistry and physics teacher at the time, who inspired him to study engineering. “I knew I was going to study engineering at that point,” he said.

Set on engineering, Fuja enrolled at the University of Michigan, where he earned two bachelor’s degrees in electrical engineering and computer engineering.

He also earned a master’s degree and doctoral degree from Cornell University in 1983 and 1987, respectively. “I loved my first semester at U of M when I was taking a computer course,” Fuja said. “It was fascinating and what got me into computer engineering specifically.”

At Notre Dame, he teaches classes and conducts research into ways to make digital communication systems more reliable ways to improve the sound and image quality in cellphones, military communication systems and television broadcasts.

Fuja’s background also includes having worked as a consultant to companies such as Apple, AT&T and Vizio in patent infringement cases, testifying in U.S. District Court and at the International Trade Commission in Washington D.C.

During his final year and a half at the University of Maryland, he served as program director for communications research at the U.S. National Science Foundation.

“I was in charge of giving out grant money and making recommendations for what proposals would receive money for communication systems,” Fuja said.

Fuja lives in South Bend with his wife, Cindi, also a 1977 DHS graduate. They have two children, Kaity and Ben. “When Cindi heard I was receiving this award her first reaction was to remind me that she had been named the Argus-Press Student of the Week before I was back in our senior year at Durand High School,” he said.