

## 2023 DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARD

### FONDA L. AKINS '90



Fonda L. Akins has been educating students with learning disabilities for 30 years and has been employed by the Springfield School District since 1994. She earned her bachelor's degree in special education from West Chester University in 1990 and her master of arts degree in special education from Cheyney University.

Fonda, who teaches full time for the Springfield School District, was the acting department head at Springfield High School during the years when the district implemented the "Full Inclusion" model for special education students. She has facilitated workshops to train faculty and staff on inclusive practices and co-teaching.

Fonda believes all students can thrive and meet with success when given the proper tools, a proper learning environment, supportive administrators and parents. Because of her expertise in the learning styles of learning support students, in 2010 she co-authored an educational article, "Nine Co-Teaching Tips From Two Co-Teaching Gurus," which appeared in Randi Stone's *More Best Practices For High School Classrooms: What Award-Winning Teachers Do*. In 2017, Fonda was the recipient of the Helen Still Education Award and the Franklin Mint Federal Credit Union Excellence in Teaching Award.

Fonda is very active with her students outside of the classroom, sponsoring many service groups including her multicultural club, R.E.A.C.H. (Respecting Ethnic and Cultural Heritages) and the W.E.B. DuBois Honor Society. She also mentors young women and men in conjunction with her sorority, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., and West Chester University. She has also served as the vice-president of WCU's Black Alumni Chapter.

In 2019, Fonda was diagnosed with Stage 1 breast cancer. While undergoing radiation treatment, she conducted a service project where she collected gift cards and care packages for donation to cancer patients at Riddle Memorial Hospital in Media, PA. Since the fall of 2020, she has also collected money through a faculty fundraiser to donate to local breast cancer organizations.

Fonda believes in these three guiding principles:  
Turn Your Test into a Testimony.  
To Whom Much Is Given, Much Is Required.  
It Takes a Village to Raise a Child.

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### **WILLIAM E. BLYSTONE '78**



Bill Blystone graduated from West Chester State College in 1978 with his bachelor's degree in health and physical education.

Bill excelled on the football field and was selected as the 1976 American Football Coaches Association All-American Team First Team running back. He also received the prestigious Maxwell Award as College Football Player of the Week. The honor was based upon his record-setting performance running for 254 yards in a single game, setting a new West Chester school record. After graduation, Bill had a free agent tryout with the Philadelphia Eagles.

Bill turned his professional career to sales and marketing, joining the E.K. Lay Company in 1983, and has been an integral part of the company his entire career. Today, E.K. Lay is the largest and most successful manufacturers representative organization in the mid-Atlantic region, focused on food service packaging and janitorial supplies, and representing more than 25 manufacturers. Bill has been awarded numerous sales achievement awards including salesperson of the year by the manufacturers, distributors, and customers with whom he works. The company has been recognized nationally for its outstanding overall performance.

In 1995, Bill was inducted into the Killinger Foundation Football Hall of Fame at West Chester. The following year, he became a member of the Killinger Foundation executive board, which he has served for the past 27 years. The Killinger Foundation's mission is to provide football scholarships to worthy West Chester University scholar-athletes. Bill has given his time, talent and treasure to support the Killinger Foundation and West Chester University football.

He has volunteered within his community, serving on many volunteer organizations, coaching youth sports programs, and serving his church.

He met his wife, Jeanne Marie '78, their sophomore year at West Chester. They have been married for 44 years and have three sons, Bill, Mark, and John; two daughters-in-law, Diana and Cate; and four beautiful grandchildren, Johnny, Alyssa, Leah, and Luke. Bill and Jeanne Marie live in Unionville, PA.

## 2023 DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARD

### **MICHAEL J. HIRSCH '96**



Michael J. Hirsch earned his bachelor's degrees in mathematics and computer science from West Chester; his M.S. in applied mathematics from the University of Delaware; and his Ph.D. in industrial and systems engineering (operations research focus) from the University of Florida.

Michael was senior principal scientist for Raytheon Technologies until 2014. While at Raytheon, he led small and large engineering teams, developed cutting-edge research, and transitioned that research into fielded programs for the Department of Defense.

In 2014, he founded ISEA TEK, where he continues to serve as president and chief technologist. The company develops technologies using mathematically rigorous techniques from operations research, machine learning, and artificial intelligence. ISEA TEK has been awarded multiple government contracts from the Office of Naval Research, the Naval Air Systems Command, and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency. The company has also worked with several Fortune 100 companies.

In 2022, Michael founded and serves as CEO of the software development company TOXEUS Systems, which develops cloud-based technologies to solve challenging optimization problems.

Michael has published 58 peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings; edited three books; holds five patents; and has presented his research at multiple national and international conferences. He has co-chaired three international conferences; moderated numerous conference sessions; participated in three Ph.D. dissertation committees and co-chaired one; and mentored countless junior engineers throughout his career. He has received numerous awards including the University of Florida Gator100 Award (2023), the Raytheon Mentoring Excellence Award (2013), the Swope Scholarship (1995), and numerous WCU Department of Mathematics awards while an undergraduate.

As a Junior Achievement of Central Florida board member, Michael helps guide and tailor high-school programs focusing on STEM education, business leadership, and entrepreneurship. One of his primary goals is to intellectually inspire and motivate students to reach farther, dig deeper, and take risks to creatively solve complex problems and dramatically impact their future for the better. He is currently collaborating with a team of 12th-grade students from Osceola High School on their senior 3DE project, developing a marketing plan for technologies that route data and information across temporally varying mesh networks. He is mentoring students through understanding of technical concepts and their application to commercial markets.

In 2016, Michael and his wife endowed a scholarship to the WCU Mathematics Department. The scholarship is awarded annually to a junior or senior majoring in mathematics.

Michael has been married to his wife, Jackie, for 13 years and they have one spectacular daughter.



## 2023 DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARD

### JOHN W. VILLELLA '76, M'82



John Vilella earned his master's and bachelor's degrees in music education from West Chester University and his doctorate in higher education leadership from Widener University.

He retired June 30, 2022, from West Chester University with 39 years of service. John was the vice president for University Affairs and chief of staff, coordinating the efforts of senior staff in the Office of the President. He supervised University departments including Communications and Marketing, Alumni Relations, Cultural and Community Affairs, the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, the Office of Sustainability, the Center for Community Solutions, Continuing Professional Education, and WEDnet Services. He was liaison to the WCU Foundation.

John worked with government and business leaders and the University Council of Trustees to ensure timely advancement of initiatives, communications, and policy development and adherence. Prior to this appointment, he served seven years as the associate dean for the College of Visual and Performing Arts. His duties as a faculty member included directing the Wind Ensemble, Symphonic Band, Concert Band, and Marching Band. He also taught in the music education department as a supervisor of student teachers and instructor of instrumental methods and techniques.

In May 2022, WCU awarded John emeritus designation as an administrator and faculty member. He has also been recognized with the Irving Cohen Faculty Merit Award (2008); WCU Council of Trustees Certificate of Recognition (2005 and 2022); and the Division of Student Affairs' Legacy of Leadership Award (2005).

John is also the president of Vivace Productions, Inc., a national leader of summer camps including band leadership training and the marching band workshops. He frequently serves as a guest conductor, adjudicator, guest lecturer, and director of music festivals in the United States, Canada, and Europe. In addition, he reviewed new band music for each issue of the Pennsylvania Music Educators Association (PMEA) magazine, PMEA News, from 2006 to 2015. He was recognized with the PMEA Citation of Excellence in 2015 and inducted into the Cavalcade of Bands Hall of Fame in 2010.

He continues to serve the music field as a member of the Sudler Shield Committee for the John Philip Sousa Foundation. His professional affiliations include membership in the National Band Association, College Band Directors National Association, both state and national music educators organizations, Phi Mu Alpha, Kappa Kappa Psi, Tau Beta Sigma, and Sigma Alpha Iota.

He has been married to Colleen for 36 years and they have been blessed with one son, Evan.