



Oak Cliff native has bird's-eye view of what hard work can do

12:00 AM CDT on Sunday, September 13, 2009

From the windows of his downtown office, Wayne Watts looks out across his old Oak Cliff neighborhood.

How nice it would be if kids in that neighborhood could look up and see Wayne Watts in that top-floor office.

We make much of the Trinity River as a dividing line in our city. But Watts is wonderful proof that the river need not be a barrier at all.

Watts, 56, is senior executive vice president and general counsel of AT&T – the top lawyer, in other words, to the largest telecommunications company in the world.

And, yes, a proud son of Oak Cliff, too.

When AT&T moved its corporate headquarters to Dallas last year, Watts said, he had no idea what his office arrangement would be. But he

had to laugh when he first set foot in that 37th-floor office with its floor-to-ceiling windows.

"I walked in and said, 'Son of a gun! Look at what I'm looking at!' "

From those windows on the west side of One AT&T Plaza, Watts was basically looking at his life.

A panorama stretching from his old church, Cliff Temple Baptist, off to the left. Then sweeping past Methodist Dallas Medical Center, where

his wife and four children were born. Then on to the expanse of Stevens Park Golf Club, where he landed his first job at 16.

The youngest of four children, Watts had a solid if spare upbringing. His mother, a single parent most of his childhood, made a living selling insurance door to door.

"You don't make a lot of money at that," he said. "We had what we needed, and that was about it."

The father figures in his life were his football coaches – men like Ken Larsen at Lida Hooe Elementary and Red McCollum at Sunset High School.

"At the start of every week, Coach McCollum would say, 'I sure hope those Kimball Knights aren't working harder than we are today.' Or South Oak Cliff. Or whoever we were playing that week."

The lessons about hard work and success stuck.

At age 10 or 11, Watts set his sights on becoming a lawyer. He said it was probably just Perry Mason that put the idea in his head. He certainly didn't know any lawyers.

He worked his way through the University of Texas at Arlington, paying tuition on the installment plan and working nights at UPS. While in college, he and high school sweetheart Billie Sperry married.

After graduating from UTA but before starting law school at SMU, he continued to work nights at UPS and worked days as a janitor at the Dillard's store in the old Forum 303 Mall.

He laughs about his janitor days now. "We needed the money. I took whatever job I could get. Simple as that."

He attended law school on student loans and then went to work for a small downtown law firm. Looking for a little more stability, he applied

for an opening in the legal department at Southwestern Bell Telephone Co.

Well, we know that Southwestern Bell went through a variety of corporate transformations, ultimately emerging with the storied name of

AT&T. And Watts just kept moving up the corporate ladder.

He makes it sound like no big deal. "The thing about AT&T is if you do well one place, they'll give you an opportunity someplace else," he said.

It all led to his elegant office today, right next door to AT&T chairman and CEO Randall Stephenson – and with that fine view of Oak Cliff.

I asked him if he thinks a kid from Oak Cliff still has a chance to rise to the corporate suite today, even with all the challenges youths face.

"Absolutely," he said. "I think it's an advantage in a lot of respects. You learn what it is to work hard. You learn to work with diverse groups of people."

He calls that view from his office window "a little gift." It stirs so many warm memories.

As Wayne Watts looks out and thinks of his past, let's hope lots of kids in the old neighborhood are looking up and thinking of their future.