



Influential Weber State black activist recalls 40 years of changes in Utah

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BENJAMIN ZACK/Standard-Examiner

Forrest Crawford teaches the Exploring Teaching class at Weber State University on Thursday, Feb. 15, 2018. Crawford has worked at Weber State for more than four decades. During that time he has also been a local activist and a leader in Utah's African American community.

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SERGIO MARTÍNEZ-BELTRÁN

Standard-Examiner

When philosopher and activist Cornel West took the stage Jan. 18 at Weber State University (<https://www.weber.edu/>), he thanked the audience and the faculty for their hard work at the public institution.

And then the Harvard professor singled out one particular person among Weber State's faculty.

"He's been here 41 years," West said. "He has helped shape this place in a magnificent way."

West was talking about Dr. Forrest Crawford (https://www.weber.edu/teachered/TEFacultyStaff/Bio_crawford_1.html), a professor at Weber State's Moyes College of Education (<https://www.weber.edu/coe>).

Crawford has been working at Weber State since 1977, when he became a counselor in the Division of Student Affairs (<https://www.weber.edu/studentaffairs>).

And he has done everything, from counseling to teaching to becoming Weber State's first assistant to the president for diversity.

But his career at Weber State started on the football field.

BLACK ACTIVIST AND ATHLETE

Crawford was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1952. He played football at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College (<http://www.neo.edu/>), then Northeastern Oklahoma Junior College.

In 1972, Crawford's coach was hired to coach at Weber State and asked him to join the team.

"I was very hesitant about making that kind of a jump and I knew very little about Utah," Crawford said. "I'm thinking 'ain't no black people in Ogden, Utah.'"

Crawford's mom paid for his bus ticket from Oklahoma to Utah. Once in Ogden, his life took

a turn.

"I always tell everybody that I started my career in Utah on 25th Street," Crawford jokes.

On the bus, he met a black pastor, Rev. Robert Harris, who was also an activist in the community and Utah's first black legislator. Harris invited Crawford to his church and a friendship developed.

Crawford was among a dozen of black athletes at Weber State.

"As black athletes, we were still trying to navigate our identity out of the context of football," Crawford said. "We tried to find our sense of place."

He joined the Ogden NAACP (<http://naacpogdenchapter.org/>) and was an early member of Weber State's chapter of Black Scholars United.

"The challenge was: How do you balance being an activist while also trying to keep up with trying to make the team," Crawford said.

And as his college career was coming to an end, Crawford was thinking about his future.

Story continues below photo.

FINDING HIS CALLING

"I was preparing to return to Oklahoma after my bachelor's," Crawford said.

A couple of days before moving out of state, Crawford learned he had been accepted into the social work graduate school at the University of Utah (<https://socialwork.utah.edu/>).

As part of his training, Crawford worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (<https://www.bia.gov/>) and lived in Bethel and Hooper Bay, Alaska. He was responsible for tracking down Alaska Native dropouts to help provide them services through the bureau.

The experience gave him an idea of what he wanted to do in the future.

"It also made me understand that my real work was in the urban setting," Crawford said.

He finished his master's degree in social work in 1977, and then went back to Weber State, this time not as an athlete, but as a clinical social worker.

Darnell Haney served as associate dean of students at Weber State and as a professor for 16 years. He had Crawford as a student.

"He's always been very hardworking and very intelligent," Haney said. "He was very instrumental in the African American community."

Crawford said going back to Weber State was hard, as there was not a lot of African Americans in teaching positions.

"The teachers that we had in the schools were pretty much scattered between Ogden and Salt Lake," Crawford said. He considers Haney one of his mentors and a personal friend.

Crawford then decided he wanted to become an educator.

"There were training and teaching opportunities during the course of my counseling role; I was always invited to do education-related presentations," Crawford said. "I sort of grew out of the MSW (master of social work) and desired to be more in the classroom practice."

In 1989, he earned his doctoral degree in education from Brigham Young University (<https://www.byu.edu/>). He later became Weber State's first special assistant to the president for diversity.

Story continues below photo.

LEGACY BEYOND OGDEN

Crawford's work for equality transcends the classroom walls at Weber State and the mountains of Ogden.

He served in 1991 as the chairman of the Utah governor's Martin Luther King Jr. Human Rights Commission (<https://heritage.utah.gov/multicultural-affairs/mlk>) and, because of his work, Utahns have celebrated Martin Luther King Day since 1992.

"We didn't call it Martin Luther King Day, we actually called it Human Rights Day," Crawford said. "We wanted it to be referred to as Martin Luther King Day."

He has served on boards and commissions, for groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah and the Utah Humanities Council. He also served as secretary general of the International Society for Teacher Educators.

Adrienne Andrews (<https://www.weber.edu/DiversityOffice/chiefdiversityofficer.html>) is Weber State chief diversity officer. She said working with Crawford inspires her every day.

"He is a man of integrity, commitment, determination and belief," Andrews said. "He is a man who will find a way when there is no way because he believes every good thing is possible if we are willing to work together."

Contact education reporter Sergio Martínez-Beltrán at smartinezbeltran@standard.net (<mailto:smartinezbeltran@standard.net>) or 801-625-4274. Follow him on Twitter [@SergioMarBel](http://www.twitter.com/SergioMarBel) (<http://www.twitter.com/SergioMarBel>) and like him on Facebook at [Facebook.com/STANDARDEXSergio](https://www.facebook.com/STANDARDEXSergio/) (<https://www.facebook.com/STANDARDEXSergio/>).