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'I'm beginning my second one hundred': Mr. Western turns 100

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Lee Robertson, affectionately known as “Mr. Western,” blows out the candles celebrating with family, friends, co-workers, city and state officials and a Bowling Green, Ky., on Thursday, June 16, 2022. (Grace Ramey/photo@b)

Grace Remay/photo@bgdailynews.com

Lee Robertson, affectionately known as “Mr. Western” for his strong ties to Western Kentucky University, celebrated his 100th birthday Thursday with a huge crowd of friends, co-workers, family and acquaintances at a packed Eva and Jim Martens Alumni Center.

The list of attendees included WKU President Timothy Caboni and former President Gary Ransdell, Bowling Green Mayor Todd Alcott, all four city commissioners and WKU athletics’ Todd Stewart, Travis Hudson and Rick Stansbury.

Guests had the chance to be photographed with the newly-minted centenarian, who said he isn’t done with birthdays quite yet.



“The way I’m trying to approach it is not thinking about it, it’s just another day,” Robertson said. “I’m beginning my second one hundred.”

The Hilltopper icon said he's proud to see what the university has accomplished.

"I want people to know how valuable this place is, how much it means to the community, how much it means to the state of the world and how great some of our graduates are, what they're doing out there and how valuable it is to the communities they live in," Robertson said. "We produce some awful good people."

When asked what his favorite part of the festivities were, he gave an emphatic answer.

"People," Robertson said. "I love everybody. The people that are going to be here today, they made some great sacrifices to be here. And they came here because of ol' Lee – and that's humbling."

Guests came from far and wide to be in attendance. Tim and Patty Delph, a pair of WKU graduates, drove up from Bartow, Fla., to take part in the celebration. Tim Delph, who graduated in 1982, played baseball on the Hill. He said Robertson was a friend of his father's and made quite an impact on the young ballplayer.

Martha Martin, a 1977 graduate, flew in from Houston, simply because "it's Mr. Western!"

Ernie Small, a Bowling Green native, said Robertson may be Mr. Western, but "he's way more than that."

Hudson, the Hilltoppers' legendary volleyball coach, said WKU has become the place he loves so much thanks in part to people like Robertson.



“He’s someone I admire and pattern myself after,” Hudson said.

Robertson came to WKU on the GI Bill and played baseball as a southpaw pitcher, even catching the eye of legendary Hilltopper coach E.A. Diddle. Robertson graduated from WKU in 1950 and earned a master’s degree in educational administration in 1957. It was that same year that he became superintendent of Barren County schools.

He returned to WKU in 1960 when then-President Kelly Thompson asked him to become director of alumni affairs, where he remained until his initial retirement in 1985. He left for Florida to work in the private sector but couldn’t stay away from the Hill, returning to serve as director of the university’s Glasgow campus and later serving as WKU’s golf coach for six years.

Kentucky Rep. Patti Minter, D-Bowling Green, presented Robertson with a legislative citation from the Kentucky House of Representatives. Alcott and the city commissioners proclaimed Robertson's birthday as "Lee Robertson Day" and presented him with the key to the city.

Caboni presented Robertson with a custom WKU baseball jersey with the number "100" on the back.

"We intentionally chose not to frame this because we hope you're going to have many opportunities to wear it on special occasions throughout the year," Caboni said.

Instead of gifts, attendees were encouraged to make donations to the Lee Robertson Scholarship Fund, which has existed since his first retirement in 1985. The scholarship is awarded to a WKU junior who submits the most impactful "What Western Has Meant to Me" essay.

Despite the enormous crowd of supporters present to celebrate his life, Robertson remained humble.

"When you think about it there's only one Mr. Western, of all the great people that've been here and the great things they've done – somewhere, I got that title," Robertson said. "And I don't know if I deserve it, but I sure do appreciate it."

For anyone else hoping to make it to 100, Robertson gave out his secret to a long life:

**“Moderation in everything and a positive approach,”
Robertson said.**