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Homecoming 2010, recorded at The Ames Library

Claudia Brogan: Hi, my name is Claudia Brogan and I am talking to you on Saturday October 9, 2010 on the weekend of homecoming here at Illinois Wesleyan and I have been asked to share a few stories and recollections of my experience here at Illinois Wesleyan and I'm very glad to get to do that.

I attended Illinois Wesleyan from 1973 to 1977. I graduated in 1977 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. I majored in Theater and Education and then at the beginning of my junior year, I also added a major in English, so that by the time I graduated I was certified to teach Theater and to teach education—to teach English at the high school level and the world of education and was very glad to have that opportunity and have been very, very proud of my degree and my time at Illinois Wesleyan and the opportunity to be here. It has come up in many stories through my years and I'm very proud to be a graduate of Illinois Wesleyan.

While I was here on campus, I was a Theater major, obviously, and also belonged to the Christian Fellowship and beginning in my junior year, I served as a resident assistant, so it began at the start of my junior year as a resident assistant, which opened incredible doors for me and was an amazing opportunity, so both my junior and senior years I was a resident assistant in Ferguson Hall. It was an amazing experience. I had the great opportunity of working for a hall director there who's one of the folks that changed my life and that was Claire Brugger who was my hall director and I just had good dumb luck at being assigned to her staff in Ferguson Hall and we have remained in touch to this day and she is one of my heroes and one of my mentors—Claire Brugger in Ferguson Hall. What a great opportunity.

I also had the great chance to work as an R.A. during the time when Gary Grace was—G. Gary Grace—was the Dean of Students here. He was an amazing person and he also changed my life and I mean that literally without exaggeration. I was an R.A. for him, which meant that we were in several different staff activities and staff events and staff training opportunities and he called me in during the senior year and did just a touching-base kind of conversation. Little did he know, I suppose, that that conversation would end up affecting me the rest of my life.

I had great respect for him. He was a marvelous leader, very insightful, and very good at nudging and supporting students and he encouraged me actually to think about working in residence life and I said to him, "Well, thank you very much for the idea that you could do this for a living but I'm actually—all I need to do is just be a high school English teacher that I've always—that's always what I've wanted to do and thanks for the idea but here I go."

And I heard him on delayed response and a couple of years later, I continued to consider those words he had shared with me and I ended up taking him at his word, taking his advice, and going to seek my master's degree in Counseling and College Student Personnel and working in residence halls at several different universities around the Midwest including University of Wisconsin at Madison and Indiana University, so I worked in residence life for a lot of years, in student life, student activities, student advising, and have thought of that specific conversation with Gary Grace many, many times. He was a great influence for me and he helped me widen my scope.

If I were to try to describe my experience at Illinois Wesleyan, I would say that's indeed the image that I would share—is so many things during my Wesleyan time really did widen my scope. I came here from Mattoon, Illinois, which is about a hundred miles south of here and Mattoon is—is a small, blue-collar town. I graduated from a high school class of 422 folks. That

perhaps sounds a little bigger than it was. It has a small-town feeling to it. Our school had a small-town feel to it. The students knew each other well and coming to Illinois Wesleyan expanded the way that I thought about things in so many ways and in almost all of them, very good ways.

So I would like to say that one of my favorite things to think about with the culture of that is that being a Theater major was really indeed like being a part of a family. The Theater majors themselves were amazingly talented and very colorful characters, came from a wide variety of backgrounds, and came here to—with some guts and some color and some creativity—to work hard in the theater world. I have always thought that my Theater major has served me so well and really cuts across all disciplines—has been a marvelous preparation for me.

To say to you what the theater experience was like is to start by talking about John Ficca who was just a pillar. He was strong and sturdy and firm. He scared us all and supported us all mightily. He was a great teacher, such a great passion for his topic, and had really high standards for us all, worked us very hard, was both my academic advisor but also, of course, the Director of the Theater Department, and we were all thrilled to have the opportunity to work and study with the John Ficca. He was an amazing person and I learned great things.

I also was here during the time of Carole Brandt who was a colorful character that invited people to think about things from a wide variety of angles and to rethink and reinvent and to spread their wings. Carole Brandt was an incredible influence on all of us.

Another faculty member that really stands out for me is Dr. Burda who taught—in the literature sequences—taught the marvelous Shakespeare courses. And I remember sitting on the edge of my seat for both sections that I was able to take with him, both the comedies and the tragedies with Dr. Burda, and it was so rich. It was an amazing chance to dive way deeply into the words, the literature, the history, the dramatization, the characterization of the world of Shakespeare. I had no idea, in my earlier studyings of it, what lie ahead and I was thrilled with what I learned in the Shakespeare classes. I have visited and revisited Shakespeare differently ever since then and, as an adult obviously, have sought out opportunities for attending live performances, theater productions, whenever I can and wherever I live and have thought of Dr. Burda's good challenges for us in the Shakespeare world many times.

So I would like to say about my experience here at Illinois Wesleyan, being here in the times of '73 through '74, it was a time when students were considering, obviously, issues related to the Vietnam War, who were starting to understand what politics might mean in our lives. We were starting to respond to the Richard Nixon years and to try to understand that in a more sophisticated way and a more deep and thoughtful way.

We also were silly and we wore bellbottoms and there was streaking on campus and there were many days and nights in the Dugout when long, careful philosophical conversations happened and we sang songs and—folk songs—and had the guitar and sat on the floor and folks were earnestly coming together to answer questions and to explore and listen to the answers.

I've been asked to consider about the idea of how diversity is related to my experience and what that meant for me and were there students who I was different from that I had good encounters with during my Illinois Wesleyan days and I would say the answer is an amazing yes. I think that my world opened wider and wider and wider in my four years here. I came out thinking more carefully about questions, not necessarily believing that I had the answers, but absolutely interested in the questions.

When I think about students who were different than I, I think about—as an example, I think about a couple of roommates that I had when I was living in Munsell Hall as a resident and my sophomore year I was lucky enough to live with a woman who was blind, so my roommate was a senior, I was a sophomore, and she was a brave person and a great character, very, very interesting person from the Chicago area and we had a great experience living as roommates.

One of my favorite experiences to talk about in terms of the light bulb going on for me in my insides, looking at the world in a whole different way—I learned so many things from her as a blind person and during the spring of my sophomore year is when they redid the quad, taking the sidewalks from being perpendicular, horizontal and vertical, very strict straight lines, to digging up the entire quad and repaving with a much more artistic, curved lines of the sidewalks on the quad, and I just came from the quad today and it's so beautiful. They take such good care of this place. But during that spring, it was difficult—it was difficult or annoying for the rest of us who were sighted with all of the dirt and sod and rain and mud but it was not only inconvenient but very difficult and challenging for Anne, my roommate, because as a blind student, this completely threw her off.

As confusing as it was for us with sight, we at least had cues as to how to make our way around the large mess that was the Wesleyan quad but Anne as a self-reliant blind woman, had a great deal of difficulty with that and making her way through the mud piles and the markers and the redirected traffic and then once the sidewalks were laid and the new patterns were actually laid out on the quad, it was easy for visual folks to be able to follow the new patterns and the curves and to find their way around. For Anne it was quite difficult, it was all new.

So what she rigged up and I helped her work with was a 3-D model of the new quad and the new design of the sidewalks with all the new angles and it was a raised set of materials that represented the sidewalks and she would study the pattern of that with her hands just like she studied Braille—that it was laid out on a tabletop surface piece of construction paper or cardboard and the patterns of the sidewalks were laid out for her and she would practice those and memorize the shape and then go walk the quad with her white stick and come back again and review and it was a great learning experience for me in that it was a much more difficult experience for Anne.

It was much more challenging and daunting for her than it was for others of us and she was brave and she was resourceful and she was determined and she was very successful in making that great adjustment. You never believe how big the quad is until you try to do the entire width and length of it sightless and so I challenged myself because of that experience to go out at nighttime or daytime and close my eyes and try to make my way around and discovered how many mistakes I made and had such great respect for Anne. It was a wonderful year of living with a person with such a different life perspective and it really stretched my understanding.

Then my junior year, I lived with an African American woman who came from Chicago. I was a junior English and Theater and Education major by then. She was a freshman science major from Chicago. She was so bright. I learned that she was just a brainiac and very, very pleasant person and we had—we had a very easygoing time together. I don't know that we became great friends in that the time—the amount of time that we spent in the room was limited and at very different hours. I was at the theater a great deal and she was in labs and the library for lots of her hours but we came to a place of great respect and I asked questions that started me down the way of understanding the experiences that she had had and how different from my very white background and my very small hometown to start—starting to understand that.

In my professional life, I have worked at several different universities and have been involved with diversity programs, consideration, outreach, especially at Indiana University, I was particularly involved with a program that we have at Indiana University that's a preparation experience for incoming freshman students who are African American coming from around the state of Indiana as well as from around the country, and there's an intentional summer program that happens before those students' freshman year and I was not only the residential living advisor, so the director of the residence hall where they all lived for the summer, but I taught a class for three different years—I taught the class for their particular resident advisors and counselors who were there to be of support for them.

And it blew my mind in some ways. It was an incredibly positive experience for me that I had the chance to understand their experience on the frontline basis for the students, the African American students, who have been chosen to come to Indiana University and for many, most of those students, they would be the first member of their family coming to college and they came to it with the fears and the trepidations and the excitement and the thrill and it was my job to help rev them up for succeeding at Indiana University.

By doing that, it helped me think back to my Illinois Wesleyan days many times—that during my time at Illinois Wesleyan was the first time I began to understand people different than I, to learn to not be afraid of that, to learn to tell the truth about things I know or don't know, things I understand or things I don't understand, to ask questions with respect, and to be clear that just because the way that I feel about a matter, an issue, a concern, is different from theirs, doesn't make either one of us right or wrong and that we benefit greatly from sitting and having the patience and courage to sit through the rest of the conversation, to ask each other questions until we understand.

That started for me at Illinois Wesleyan and that's lasted for me all the years since in the various different universities that I've worked at, the students that I have worked with, and the staff members and faculty members that I have worked with. I have grown to have an even wider understanding and respect for diversity.

One of the challenges for me at Illinois Wesleyan was as a freshman, I was a little bit lost and I don't mean physically but I mean philosophically and I mean spiritually and I mean socially. It was a little daunting for me and I've come to be in my life rather an extrovert and rather comfortable in new situations, so it's interesting for me to be this honest but to say in my freshman year, I had a hard time starting and finding my way. I wished that my resident advisor had been on the lookout for students like me. I wished that she had been watching for who was catching a foothold and who was missing a foothold and I didn't realize until later, until I applied for and was selected as a resident advisor, what a difference that a resident advisor can make for incoming students.

And then I tried to be that R.A. on the lookout for those kinds of folks and absolutely down the road as I was a supervisor of resident assistants in several different capacities, I was very intentional about telling that story to them and urging them and encouraging them to be on the lookout especially for students that are—that are daunted with the college experience, that we all need a place to belong, that we all need, in the fearful days and the fearful nights, we need to find a place to hold onto, we need to find the beginning group that we'll belong to because we'll then belong to many others, and that has been a great learning experience.

I was able to talk very earnestly with my resident assistant staff members when I joined the R.A. staff in Ferguson Hall my junior and senior years as well as with my hall director and that became a great learning experience for me as well as one of the important parts of thinking about a freshman who can be very daunted, persevering all the way to graduation day with great thrill and great pride, and working very hard in all four of my years at Illinois Wesleyan including two different student-teaching experiences where I worked many long nights and learned great things and was greatly challenged—that if a student can go from a daunted, overwhelmed beginning to a successful, thriving end, then I am grateful all the time for what Illinois Wesleyan provided for me. I'm glad of this oral history project. I wish you very good luck with this.