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## Best in the Business

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# Best in the Business

**Harriet Geannopoulos '49 looks back on her pioneering career.**

**Story by SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07**

When Harriet “Harri” (Vanes) Geannopoulos graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 1949, she struggled to find her calling — especially among the limited employment opportunities typically available to women at that time.

Harri had majored in home economics, but soon discovered that her dream of being an interior decorator wasn’t all she had hoped for. Luckily, she had a second course of study to fall back on. “I knew I did not want to be a teacher, so I minored in business administration,” she explains.

In the late 1940s, very few women pursued a degree in business. “Business wasn’t geared toward women in those days,” Harri says, recalling only two other women in her accounting classes and one in her business finance course.

Raised in LaSalle, Ill., she relished the ability to connect with a wide variety of people while a student at Illinois Wesleyan. In addition to her studies, Harri swam and also played field hockey and basketball. She pledged Kappa Delta, and still keeps in touch with her sorority sisters. In the University’s press office, she also wrote news releases on student achievement for 25 cents an hour. Her own achievements were recognized when she was listed in *Who’s Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges*.

After graduating from Illinois Wesleyan, Harri set her course on a career in the business world, but soon found that getting her foot into the door of that world wouldn’t be easy.

“I was a proficient typist, but I didn’t want to be a typist,” she says. “I didn’t want to be a secretary. I did not want to be an administrative assistant. I was too independent.”



**Harriet (Vanes) Geannopoulos '49**

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Her job search eventually led her to Star Employment Service, where she was trained to be a personnel consultant. “I was very successful in it, and I was learning so much. Every time you interview someone and find out where they had worked and what they did, you’re learning. For me, it was a personal-growth experience.”

After 10 years with the firm, she became executive director and vice president. With 60 consultants, the company grew to be among Chicago’s largest employment agencies.

Harri left the job when she married, but returned to work as a part-time management consultant. In 1968, her brother urged her to start a placement service, Thirty Three Personnel Center, that worked exclusively with college-educated women.

“I was trying to think of what niche we could fill, and the people who were most in need of assistance were the college women,” she says. “We were encouraging major corporations and small businesses to consider hiring college-educated women into responsible positions.” By 1970, in response to anti-discrimination law, Thirty Three began placing college-educated men as well.



**At Star Employment Service, where she was trained to be a personnel consultant, Harri rose quickly up the executive ladder. Above, she was awarded a pink Jeep with a striped surray top from Star President William Oswald in recognition for her outstanding work.**

Harri also became active in both the Illinois Employment Association and National Employment Association. She held several officer positions with the state association, including functioning as program chair of the Midwest Conference for six years, overseeing all Midwest conventions and statewide conventions for Illinois and Midwest agencies. Harri was also a popular speaker and recalls being invited by then-Illinois Wesleyan Dean of Students Anne Meierhofer to speak at a campus conference.

She also worked as an activist when necessary, challenging what she saw as oppressive government regulations against her industry. Her campaign for less government interference was rooted in her strong belief in the free market, she adds. “I feel that’s what makes America great. I believe in capitalism. I believe if you want to start your own business, why not?”

That attitude — combined with her straight-laced, ethical approach to business — led to Harri receiving the Lincoln Award. The award, which honors an individual who advances the

cause of free enterprise at the state level, had only been given to two people before. Harri was the third recipient and first woman to receive the award.

Harri retired in 1990, allowing time for her to travel extensively with her husband of 47 years, Nick, a Northwestern University graduate “who also had a very successful career, and has been a constant source of encouragement and support to me,” Harri says.

The independent streak that inspired it all, she says, was fueled by her Illinois Wesleyan education. “I think Illinois Wesleyan made me independent,” she says.

“Illinois Wesleyan opened up a whole new world for me. I came from a small town, led a sheltered life, and Illinois Wesleyan offered me a wide range of experiences and interactions with people from all over the country. I blossomed there.”