



Winter 2007

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IWU Magazine
Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Magazine, IWU (2007) "A Lifelong Bond," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 16 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol16/iss4/8>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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A Lifelong Bond

A friendship begun in Kemp Hall is still going strong, 70 years later.



When Isabel (Hilling) Talbott '39 and her friend Donna (Brown) Thrall '39 moved into Illinois Wesleyan's Kemp Hall in 1935, they weren't sure if they could last a whole year there.

Homesick and in an unfamiliar city, "we thought we'd be the first to leave," Isabel says. "But we enjoyed it once we got used to it."

It was in Kemp Hall, then a dormitory for freshman women, that the lifelong friendship between Isabel, Donna, and Maida (Rettburg) Robbins '39 began. They celebrated their 90th birthdays together in November, gathering at Maida's home in Petersburg, Ill., to leaf through scrapbooks and remember their Illinois Wesleyan years.

Now, over 70 years since they first met, those memories are a window into life at IWU in the wake of the Great Depression.

In 1935, when Isabel, Donna, and Maida carried their suitcases up the front steps for the first time, Kemp Hall looked much the same as it does today. From the broad, sunlit front porch, the hall's new residents stepped into an opulent entryway paneled in dark wood and furnished with heavy Victorian chairs. A wide stairway curved up to the second floor. "I thought the reception area and the stairs were so pretty," Isabel recalls of her first glimpse of her new home.

Donna and Isabel, who had known each other since childhood, were assigned a room on the second floor. Their new friend Maida lived on the floor above.

The housemother, Mrs. Williams, lived next door to Donna and Isabel. Mrs. Williams had a reputation for enforcing the rules, but the three friends had little problem staying out of trouble — usually.

Although cooking in rooms was forbidden, Isabel, Donna and Maida enjoyed making popcorn for a snack. "We'd pick up butter at lunch and take it upstairs so we could have popcorn," Maida says. "We'd stick it under our sweaters, and sometimes it was a little runny by the time we got it up to our rooms."

"Mrs. Williams couldn't help but to smell that popcorn," Isabel adds with a laugh. "But she never said a word about it."

"We had a very nice housemother," Donna agrees. "She was very tolerant."

The women of Kemp Hall had a curfew of 9 p.m. on weekdays and 11 p.m. on weekends, "except for formals, when we could stay out until 1:00," Maida says. "The fire escape was right outside our window," Isabel says. "I remember seeing girls climbing the fire escape, sneaking in at off-hours." There were also strict rules about dating. Maida met her future husband, Roy, on the porch of Kemp Hall during a freshman tea, and Donna also met her husband, Victor — a 1939 IWU graduate — at the school.

“The fellas themselves never went above the first floor,” Isabel says. “We would’ve been expelled if we’d had boys in our room.”

Even with these restrictions, students of that era still found plenty to do on the weekends.

“This was just after the Depression, and nobody had cars,” Isabel remembers, “so we walked everywhere. It didn’t make any difference whether there was snow or not.” Donna says that the three girls often walked up Main Street to neighboring Illinois State University to go to movies and attend dances.

After their freshman year, the three friends left Kemp. Donna and Maida went to live in the Alpha Gamma Delta sorority house, and Isabel transferred to Bradley University as a junior in order to be closer to her future husband, Lou, who was a student there.

As the years passed, their time in Kemp Hall faded into memory but was never completely forgotten. When car trips took her family past the Illinois Wesleyan campus, Maida would point out to her sons the porch where she met their father. They groaned at the story, she says, but something about the place must have resonated with them — they now drive past the landmark with their own children.

Maida and Donna have also returned to campus to attend Alpha Gamma Delta events.

“I’ll never forget how alums would come back and they’d wear their long, old-fashioned dresses,” Maida says. “We’d say, ‘Oh, when we come back we’ll have new dresses.’ And guess what we did — we ended up wearing the same dresses!”

Now in their seventh decade of friendship, the three women, all widowed, are still going strong. In fact, Isabel and Donna live in the same retirement community, one floor between them, in Pekin, Ill.

Although Isabel admits that their apartment complex “isn’t exactly like being back at college,” she says that she and Donna like it there, and Maida often comes to visit on the weekends.

“We had such special, wonderful times [at IWU], and we’ve stayed close over the years,” Maida says.

“We thoroughly enjoyed our days there,” Isabel adds. “I don’t know at the moment that we realized it, but as you get older you do.” —*Amelia Benner '09*



Friends for life (above, from left) Maida Robbins, Isabel Talbott, and Donna Thrall.