



Fall 2005

## Across the generations, student life has intersected with downtown

Gail Gaboda '88  
*Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu*

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### **Recommended Citation**

Gaboda '88, Gail (2005) "Across the generations, student life has intersected with downtown," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 , Article 2. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol14/iss3/2>

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](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu).

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## Across the generations, student life has intersected with downtown

Story by Gail Gaboda '88

“In their annual pajama parade a host of stalwart Wesleyan lads took possession of Main Street at one hour before midnight,” according to a 1927 edition of *The Argus* student newspaper. “Cars even came to dead stops to pay respect to the white-legged throng.”

The autumn Pajama Parade from Kemp Hall to the Main Street Courthouse illustrates just how relaxed Illinois Wesleyan students once felt in their relationship with downtown Bloomington. To wear one’s jammies in traffic shows a level of trust that probably couldn’t be recreated, at least with any guarantee of safety, in modern times.

While today’s students are not likely to march en masse in their nightwear, they are finding reasons to visit downtown Bloomington. After a noticeable slump in student awareness of downtown since the 1970s, interest appears to be resurging, sparked by a growing list of shops, restaurants, and entertainment venues that cater to a younger, hipper clientele.

Through most of Illinois Wesleyan’s history, the blending of the campus with downtown life has been an essential aspect of students’ experience. The very first classes were even held downtown, in a church basement, before the campus was built, says Greg Koos, executive director of the McLean County Museum of History. Koos points out that most of IWU’s founders were members of the Bloomington community who had offices downtown, “and those founders were all involved in the development of Bloomington as well as the development of Illinois Wesleyan.”

The University’s campus was established “on the prairies of north Bloomington,” Koos observes, “so there would have been some distance between the campus and the town.” The University became less isolated when the Bloomington & Normal Street Rail Road, with its horse-drawn cars, connected downtown to campus.

As the University grew, downtown also flourished, with many businesses catering to students and their interests, causing one local citizen to comment to *The Argus* in 1909 that “Bloomington is, for the first time, a real college town.”



**Students incorporated downtown into rituals such as the yearly Pajama Parade which ended at the Courthouse steps.**

That town/gown bond continued through the first half of the 20th century. In the *Summer/95 IWU Magazine*, alumni from the 1920s recalled “milk-shake breaks” and “Coke dates” at Nierstheimer’s drugstore soda fountain while “fancy dates” called for dinner at the Village Inn. Another favorite haunt was the legendary Polar Lounge on Main Street. “It was gorgeous,” says Koos. “It was knock-dead modern design; a high-end, cocktail-lounge feel.”

Students shopped as well as dined downtown. As a student, John Copenhaver ’63 recalls buying Madras shirts at Dewenter’s on the square; on the same block was the Bootery and Livingston’s department store. Copenhaver, who grew up in Central Illinois, remembers a bustling downtown scene.



**Denise Boban, Nick Hogren, A.J. Gatesman, and Jeanie Hilgenberg — all from the class of '05 — drink in the atmosphere at Coffee Hound, a favorite student social spot. (Photo by Marc Featherly)**

downtown and spent his senior year interning at the Downtown Bloomington Association (formerly Uniquely Bloomington), which is designed to help develop and market the downtown district. Part of his mission was to get students off campus and into downtown.

“The downtown and the IWU atmospheres coincide and they work well together,” Hogren says, adding that because student turnover happens every four years, there must be a constant process in place to educate students on “things to do” downtown.

“It was the commercial center of the county,” he says. “All the great stores were here, great places to eat, hotels.” Students went on dates to downtown’s movie theaters: The Castle, the Irvin, and the Esquire. They shopped at Woolworth’s and Kresge’s.

Says Copenhaver, “Every time the fraternity had dances and social affairs, it was downtown,” often at the Bloomington Club, a private men’s club.

“Downtown was a bustling place when I was growing up,” says Bloomington native and University trustee Steve Wannemacher ’73. When he was a student, “downtown still had a place.” The Homecoming parade used to originate in downtown, says Wannemacher, who fondly recalls fraternity luncheons every Friday at the Illinois House, a former hotel that has since been converted to office space. “It was a very elegant place,” he recalls.

Although downtown declined as a retail and entertainment center in the 1970s, it has always been a hub of government and commerce — and, as such, a good place for students to find jobs and internships.

“IWU uses downtown as an opportunity for students to gain a training ground for the future,” says Nick Hogren, ’05. A marketing major, Hogren lived

“We gear our efforts toward an urban, artsy atmosphere,” says Hogren, who believes that what most IWU students are looking for downtown “is a unique intellectual experience. And that’s what downtown Bloomington is all about.”

The Lucca Grill, Central Station, and Grand Café have been downtown icons for many years. Now they’re joined by Crazy Planet Kitchen, Pumpernickel’s deli, Golden Dragon, Boo Boo’s Dog House, Lancaster’s, and Creole Café.

Among the newer downtown hot spots, Coffee Hound may be the biggest campus draw. “A lot of students go down to Coffee Hound to study and get coffee,” says Hogren. The local café has also drawn employees from the University, such as graduating seniors and Chicagoland natives Denise Boban and Julianne Jeffrey, who both worked there as students.

Boban wanted a job downtown because she was attracted to its funky, urban feel. As a self-professed “coffee addict,” Jeffrey had been coming down to Coffee Hound long before she took a job there. “It’s my favorite place in all of Bloomington/Normal. I love this strip because it reminds me of an urban setting. It’s a different world inside of Bloomington.”

If students are not coming downtown, it’s because they don’t know about it, Boban says. Many don’t like to leave campus even though downtown is only a five-minute walk away. Pete Bloom — a junior international business major from Evanston, Ill., who last school year joined Hogren as an intern at the Downtown Bloomington Association — recalls that as a first-year student he was aware there was a downtown south of campus but had no clue what was actually there.

After finally exploring the area, “I was impressed by how big it is,” Bloom says. “It has great, historic buildings,” blending old-fashioned architecture with modern shops. After his initial visit, he knew he would be coming back.

“The fact that it’s so close to campus is a huge benefit,” Hogren says. Many first- and second-year students don’t have cars, so they don’t travel around town. “What they *could* do is walk downtown,” Hogren says, adding, “You sort of get in a rut when you spend every day on the campus.”

Bloom and Boban agree that adding some more attractions geared for students on tight budgets would be helpful. “If Bloomington started catering even more to college kids, there would be more of a reason to go downtown,” Bloom says.

Or else someone could always throw a Pajama Parade.



**New attractions, such as the renovated Castle Theater, are enticing students back to the downtown district. (Photo by Marc Featherly)**