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Alumni Achievers

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Alumni Achievers

Pioneering judge Elizabeth Robb was among the alumni honored at Homecoming 2012.

Story by SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07



Distinguished Alumna and McLean County Chief Justice Elizabeth Robb taught a "Back to College" session at Homecoming on "Therapeutic Justice: A 'Liberal Arts' Approach to the Law."

During Illinois Wesleyan's Homecoming 2012 celebration in October, four IWU alumni were recognized for their achievements and support of the University.

Elizabeth Robb '78, recipient of the Distinguished Alumna Award, is a McLean County chief judge. The Loyalty Award was presented to Coyner Smith '54, an active alumnus from Omaha. Karl Pierburg '98, director of football systems/special projects for the Atlanta Falcons, received the Outstanding Young Alumnus Award. The winners were recognized at the annual Alumni Awards Lunch held in the Shirk Center.

In addition Shannon N. Zenk, associate professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago, was presented the 2012 School of Nursing Distinguished Alumna Award during in a separate ceremony at the Center for Natural Science.

Recently, she has pioneered efforts to obtain a \$1.2 million federal grant to enhance the services provided by the drug and mental health courts in McLean County. For more than 20 years, she has provided internship and mock trial opportunities to Illinois Wesleyan students.

During her first semester at IWU, Robb enrolled in a Sociology of Women class where "women's rights issues moved to the forefront of my awareness," she recalled in her acceptance speech. In her service on Student Senate committees, she helped bring a male feminist to campus "to shake things up a bit."

Robb also recalled the guidance she received as a student from Professor of History Paul Bushnell. "Paul was so supportive of my desire to attend law school, at a time when not many women were doing so," she said. "For the past 30 years, I've maintained contact with Paul. He has always expressed interest in my career and expresses pride in my accomplishments and that of many of his students. He displays an obvious love of history, and that was always conveyed to the classes he taught. He opened my eyes to the implication of historic events and their impact on policy, culture and societal changes, and how significant class and cultural movements can affect history."

Robb continued her involvement with the University in order to give back, she said. "My gratitude to Illinois Wesleyan is deep. It is here where I learned to think critically, write well and use my education to promote innovation in our local justice system. This institution is a gem, a critical asset not only to the many students who pass through it but also to the community in which it is located."

Winning this year's Loyalty Award was Coyner Smith, who was honored for his longtime support of the University. "If you walk in Presser Hall, you see his influence," said the luncheon's emcee, Marsha Guenzler-Stevens '78. "Over the last three years, Coyner and his wife have provided the funding for much-needed renovation to that beloved old space. And faculty and students and prospective students will feel his influence, not just in the notes emanating from the practice rooms, but in the ambiance and ethos of the place."

Smith served in the Navy for 12 years as an aircraft commander and flight instructor. In 1968, he and his wife Donna founded Better Business Equipment in Omaha, Neb. The business has won several awards for service and quality.

Smith recalled enrolling at Wesleyan, when his father took out a loan at a local bank to fund his education. "Times at Wesleyan in those days were happy days for me. I remember especially the camaraderie in the School of Music, the collegiate choir and the tours," he said. But as his time at IWU came to an end, he was faced with two major concerns: being drafted into the Army during the Korean War and paying back the debt he owed his father. He decided to enlist in the Navy to solve them both.

"In those days, a naval aviation cadet earned \$100 a month, and I was sending \$50 a month home to my father to repay this debt," Smith said, comparing his experiences to those students who take out loans today. "In 62 years, things did not change that much. ... That's the reason we support the Transforming Lives campaign at Illinois Wesleyan and, within it, the endowments for scholarships for students in need and merit."



At the Awards Lunch, Coyner Smith explained why he supports his alma mater



Shannon N. Zenk received the 2012 School of Nursing Distinguished Alumna Award. She is an associate professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Shannon N. Zenk, associate professor at the University of Illinois, Chicago, was presented the 2012 School of Nursing Distinguished Alumna Award during Homecoming 2012.

Zenk has dedicated her life's work to researching obesity and the environmental and socio-economic factors that contribute to this medical condition, publishing more than 40 articles and conducting multiple research projects. After graduating from IWU in 1995, she earned a master of science and master of public health degree from the University of Illinois, Chicago. She earned her doctorate in health behavior and health education at the University of Michigan.

In 2010, Zenk was elected to the Executive Board of the International Society for Urban Health, and in the following year, she was awarded the Midwest Nursing Research Society Harriett Werley New Investigator Award. In 2012, she received a three-year, \$350,000 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Nurse Faculty Scholar award. The grant will allow her to continue research on the contributions of neighborhood physical and social environments to racial and socio-economic inequalities in health.

Karl Pierburg — named the 2012 Robert M. Montgomery Distinguished Alumnus — is in his eighth season with the Atlanta Falcons, where he applies his IWU double major in math and computer science as well as his Titan experience as a four-year football letterman. To find out more about his accomplishments, read the article [linked here](#).