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School of Music to Honor Scifres at Homecoming

President Richard F. Wilson (left) congratulated Professor of Music Sammy Scifres on being named Professor Emeritus at the Honors Convocation in the spring.

October 11, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – It has been more than 40 years since Associate Professor Emeritus Sammy Scifres first stepped onto the IWU campus and started giving voice lessons to hundreds of students in the School of Music.

“I wonder why time has gone by so rapidly, at least in my mind,” said Scifres, who retired this spring. “I look around and think, ‘Didn’t I just get started?’”

At **Homecoming** this fall, the School of Music will honor Scifres with a concert of alumni vocal performers at 9 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 21 at Westbrook Auditorium in Presser Hall (1210 N. Park St., Bloomington). The event is free and open to the public.

Sitting on campus with his wife, Maxie, who has been an accompanist in the School of Music for 15 years, Scifres remembered how easy it was to fall in love with Illinois Wesleyan, and how that love affair has endured.

“In 1967, as soon as I had my interview, I called Maxie and told her, this is the place we should be,” said Scifres. “It just felt like home.”

Growing up in a small farming community just out side of Abilene, Texas, Scifres was a vocal performer in high school, and contemplated becoming a choral director. “Music was always part of my life, but I was always very shy. I had a superintendent tell me, ‘You are good with people, but you’ll have to push yourself if you want to work with them,’” he said. “I always remembered that.”

Scifres teaching an Illinois Wesleyan student.

Although he was often a soloist in high school, and continued to perform in college at Hardin-Simmons University in Texas, Scifres said he had no intention of becoming a full-time performer. “That never interested me,” he said with a slight shake of the head. “I couldn’t have done that.” At that comment, Maxie rolled her eyes. “I totally disagree,” she said in an exaggerated whisper. “He is a wonderful singer. And his choir director agreed with me.”

After finishing his master’s in voice at Colorado State University, Scifres joined Illinois Wesleyan as a voice teacher in 1967. Scifres said he originally considered teaching voice a stepping stone toward choral direction, but quickly became enamored with vocal instruction. “As I began to get involved in the pedagogy, I realized that I needed to know more,” he said.

Scifres was accepted into the doctoral program at the University of Iowa, where he studied during the summers. “One of the many things I love about Illinois Wesleyan is that there was no pressure to get my doctorate, but I was supported and encouraged to continue,” said Scifres, who added he loved the chance to challenge himself. “There is that love of learning at IWU – for every person here – that is fostered and nurtured. The people here allowed me to grow gracefully and naturally, and I’m not even sure they realized they were doing that.”

In addition to his teaching and choral directing, Scifres served as head of the Voice and Choral Department. “In that capacity, he carried out his many responsibilities in highly skillful and congenial ways, for which I was particularly grateful,” said Director of the School of Music Mario Pelusi.

Throughout the years, Scifres said the students gave him the greatest joy. “Working one-on-one with them and watching them grow gave me the greatest satisfaction,” he said. “It is a wonderful feeling to see them develop, doing what they love.” Maxie also followed a love of teaching into the local Unit 5 school district for 25 years before coming to Illinois Wesleyan as an accompanist. “We didn’t just get to know the students, we got to know the families at IWU,” said Maxie.

It is that connection to students for which Scifres will be remembered, said Pelusi. “From among all of Sam’s many accomplishments, most of us know him to be primarily the consummate professor of voice, who, over the years, has taught and mentored countless numbers of outstanding students, many of whom have stayed in touch with him ever since their graduations,” he said.

Professor Emeritus of Music
Sammy Scifres

Though vocal teaching became his passion, Scifres continued with choral work and directing, leading the Titan Chorus of male singers, and later the Women’s Chorus on campus. He and Maxie also performed with the local Passion Play Bloomington-Normal Chamber Choir for more than two decades. “They were always looking for new blood, and Maxie and I fit the bill,” he said. Scifres also worked extensively with choral festivals and clinics in the area. “There have always been a lot of opportunities here in the Midwest.” Scifres has also been active with the National Association of Teachers of Singing, Phi Kappa Phi, and of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia.

Throughout his 44 years, Scifres said the nurturing environment remained the same, even though the University has been anything but static. “We’ve seen the curriculum grow and flourish, offering students a more diverse education. When I arrived in the 1960s, we offered a good, solid education, but also with set paths, geared toward performance and teaching only,” he said. “Now I see students looking

to different opportunities. They want to train not only to be better performers, but better teachers and directors. And the University has responded to that desire."

Scifres said both he and Maxie will continue to work with Illinois Wesleyan. He plans to stay on as an adjunct faculty member of voice. "I may stay for a few more years," he said with a shy smile. "It's always a joy to see my kids graduate."

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