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A Labor of Love

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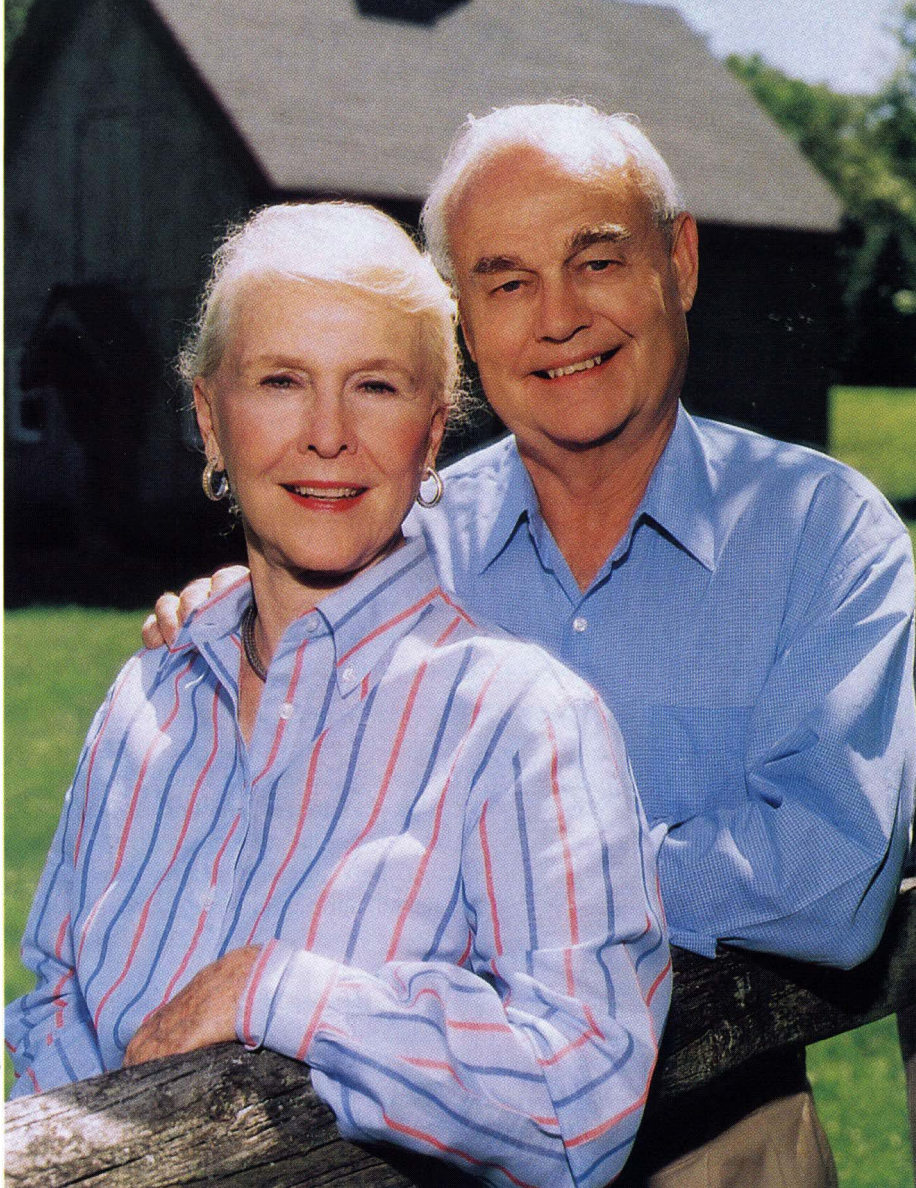
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The Ames Library's namesakes (above) at home, and at IWU (below right) for groundbreaking ceremonies.

A LABOR OF LOVE

Chuck and Jay Ames have transformed the campus where they first met on a blind date more than 50 years ago.

By Patricia Healy Locke '76

Joyce ("Jay") Eichhorn Ames '49 and B. Charles ("Chuck") Ames '50 arrived on Illinois Wesleyan's campus as World War II relaxed its grip, releasing young men back into the academic environment. Boys who fought in foreign lands or served on hot, dusty, out-of-the-way bases came home, young in spirit but wiser in heart.

After college, they married in the fall of 1950, when America seemed to want nothing more than the blessings of a comfortable life. They raised children, earned a good living, and became strong citizens in their community. And all the while, Jay and Chuck remembered the inspiration,

the bonds of friendship, and the joy of achievement learned at Illinois Wesleyan. Those memories—combined with a life-long habit of "dreaming big"—inspired the couple to make a big announcement four autumns past.

In what became known as the Ames Challenge, they declared that they would lead their fellow alumni in a campaign to raise funds to build a new library by committing to match all gifts earmarked for the library, up to \$9 million, and would also match all gifts to IWU's Alumni Annual Fund if alumni contributed a minimum of \$1 million annually for the next three years—which they did.

During groundbreaking for the future Ames Library in 1999, Chuck Ames described what motivated his family to pledge the biggest single donation—a total of \$12 million—in IWU's history. It boiled down to a heartfelt desire to help a good school become a great one. In his speech, he recalled an earlier conversation with IWU President Minor Myers jr.

"As we talked about it, I kept thinking, 'You know, we're trying to get into the top 40 [liberal arts institutions]—why don't we try to get into the top 10? Why don't we get into the top five?' I've always thought: if you don't aim high enough, you'll never get there," Chuck told the applauding crowd.

"Chuck and Jay like to put the stars up there, then ask you to reach for them," states IWU Director of Development Ben Rhodes '69. "They like to set goals, then go beyond them."



"I told Jay on our first date that I was from a suburb of Rockford, just to impress her, I think," Chuck recalls. "She said, 'Well, I'm from Rockford, but I've never heard of Polo!'"

According to Minor Myers, those goals have generated an unparalleled wave of alumni support and enthusiasm, boosting financial contributions and providing stimulus for the recent formation of the new national IWU Alumni Association. "The Ames family's support of the Library—as well as the School of Art Building and Annual Fund—has been one of those transforming gestures in the life of a university," he says.

Still, before the Ames Challenge, before the Art Building and annual art scholarships—both named for Jay Ames—it all came down to a blind date.

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"I grew up in Rockford, Illinois, and decided to go to Illinois Wesleyan and study art," Jay Ames says. She arrived as a freshman in 1945 at a time when the campus was in a state of post-war flux. "At first, all the boys were still in the service, and when they did come back, most were older students."

Jay recalls: "On weekends my friends and I would go to the Polar Lounge, or the Caboose. I could nurse one beer all evening, and listen to the boys tell their war stories. It was fascinating."

Chuck Ames was one of those boys. During the war, he had served as a cryptographic department section chief with the 8th Army in the South Pacific. A good athlete, Chuck took the advice of Clyde Peterson, his high-school coach and an IWU graduate, and enrolled at Illinois Wesleyan in 1946 with the idea of becoming a coach himself. After a year or so he changed his mind and switched to business-administration.

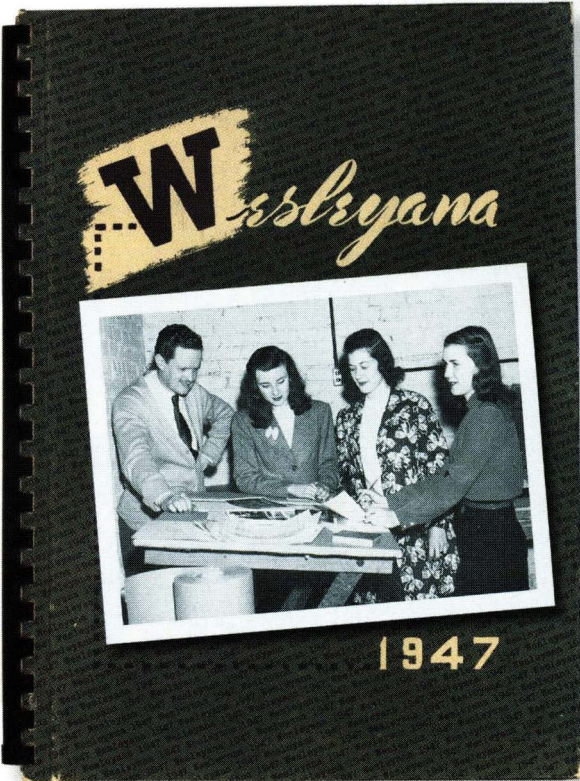
Settling into campus life, Chuck began to notice Jay and decided to ask her out. He had some classes with a Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority sister of Jay's, and managed to persuade the girl to help set him up on a blind date with the pretty and popular Miss Eichhorn.

Jay's response: "I said, 'I never go on blind dates!' I had plenty of dates, and besides, he drove this crazy car—a Model T Ford, painted all different colors!"

She finally relented, deciding to wear a red vest and tuck a \$10 bill in the pocket.



Above, Chuck and Jay in their college days. Upper right, Jay (on the far right) was art director of the 1947 Wesleyana, shown in the background. Lower right, Jay and Chuck sit front and center at a Theta Chi masquerade party.



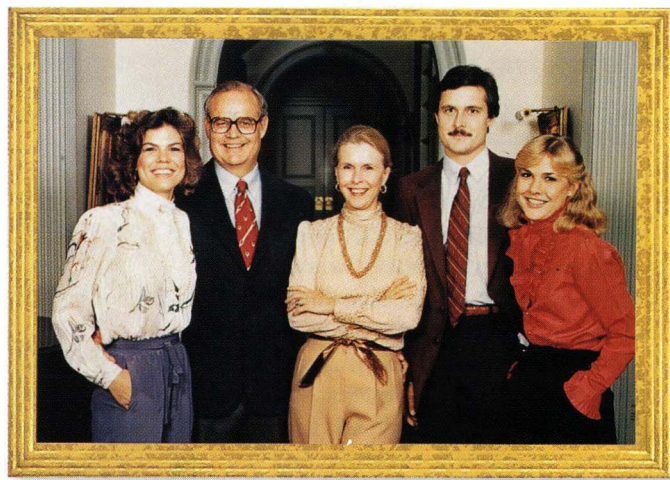
"I thought if I didn't like him, I would just take a cab home. Well, as it turned out, he was very cute. At least 10 years later I was cleaning out a drawer and found the red vest. The \$10 bill was still in the pocket."

Chuck Ames grew up in Polo, Ill., a tiny town near Rockford. "I told Jay on our first date that I was from a suburb of Rockford, just to impress her, I think," he recalls. "She said, 'Well, I'm from Rockford, but I've never heard of Polo!'" Despite the rocky start, romance bloomed for the couple, and they dated all through college. One summer, when Chuck returned to Polo, Jay decided that, rather than spend a boring summer in Bloomington, she would go to New York and work. "I thought that with my art background I could get a great job in New York." She and a friend, Alice Stanbury, went to New York that summer

where Jay took a modeling job because no art jobs were available. The experience helped her clarify her priorities, she says, and by the end of the summer she had decided that "I did not want a career in modeling and was more interested in marrying Chuck."

After their wedding, Chuck worked as a sales engineer for Illinois Bell Telephone in Joliet for two years, but says he soon became restless. "I wanted to be better prepared for management responsibilities, so I decided to apply for graduate school. I was accepted into four graduate programs, but I had no money. Harvard produced a brochure stating that if a student 'lacks financial wherewithal,' the university would provide assistance. So Harvard it was."

The young couple arrived in Boston late on a Friday, with a grand total of \$37 between them. Jay was three months preg-



Family Ties: Children and grandchildren are a big part of Chuck and Jay's lives. The pictures above and upper right, taken in 1963 and 1982, respectively, show them with their three children, Paula (the oldest), Dick, and Cindy. By the time the photo at right was taken in 1998, the family had grown to include six grandchildren (from left): Camille, Preston, Hunter, Pearce, Annie, and Charlie. A seventh grandchild joined the Ames family when Paula adopted her Korean daughter, Grace Lila, in 2000.



nant with their first child. "We discovered the bursar's office wouldn't open for two or three days," she recalls. "We had no bank account, no way of getting any money, and no place to stay. Chuck pulled the car to the curb and said, 'We have a problem.'"

As they discussed sleeping in their car, Jay looked up and saw a friend from her grade-school days crossing the street before them. "It was like a miracle. She invited us to stay. We knew that my friend and her husband were young and struggling, just as we were. When I protested, she laughed and said, 'Oh, I'll just add another cup of water to the soup!'"

Chuck and Jay Ames would never forget the blessing of financial assistance, nor the kindness of a helping hand. "I still use my friend's phrase," Jay says. "Over the years, when anyone stopped by at dinner-time, I'd laugh and say, 'I'll just add another cup of water to the soup!'"

Often, it is much more than mere soup. Every Thanksgiving dozens of turkeys find their way to the needy thanks to the Ameses' generosity to the Salvation Army. Annually, they sponsor up to 150 underprivileged children for summer camps in

the Cleveland area, while Jay supports the Hospice of Cleveland, which provides hospice home care to area residents with life-limiting illnesses.

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Chuck Ames admits that, at first, he wasn't the most serious student on campus in the late 1940s, putting more effort into sports and his social life than into his academics. A member and future president of Theta Chi fraternity, he made lots of friends and had his share of fun. He started to get serious about his schoolwork around the same time he was getting serious about Jay, and by his junior year Chuck was focused on the idea of learning everything he could to become a successful businessman.

After earning an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School in 1954, he worked in management positions for the General Telephone system before joining the consulting firm McKinsey & Co., where he headed up its Cleveland office. In 1972, he became president of Reliance Electric Company in Cleveland, guiding the firm through its greatest period of growth. When Reliance was sold at a premium price to Exxon in 1979, Chuck became

CEO of Acme-Cleveland, a metal-working equipment company. His reputation as an expert on strategic planning and marketing for industrial and technical firms advanced when he published several articles in the *Harvard Business Journal* and cowrote two books.

Since 1987, Chuck has been a partner in New York-based Clayton, Dubilier and Rice (CD&R), a private equity investment firm that buys out businesses in cooperation with existing management to improve a company's performance. His first task was to help work out a merger agreement between tire giants B.F. Goodrich and Uniroyal and then serve as CEO of the new company, leading efforts to build a coherent marketing strategy to make the manufacturer more competitive.

On behalf of CD&R, Chuck has served as board chairman of several underperforming companies to help turn them around. "Usually the firm is in a real mess," he says. "The important thing is to listen—really listen—to the people who have been working there the longest. They know what's going on and where the problems are. I find it very personally satisfying to use good business practices

and good old-fashioned common sense to straighten these companies out.”

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Just as Chuck Ames applied the education he began at Illinois Wesleyan to succeed in business, Jay Ames has used her experiences as an art major as a catalyst to explore what has become a lifelong passion for the visual arts.

Jay spoke about that early inspiration in a speech she gave in February 1998 to commemorate the announcement of a gift made by Chuck in her name to endow the School of Art Building—now renamed the Joyce Eichhorn Ames School of Art—and to fund scholarships for IWU students majoring in art.

“I have always been interested in art; it has been a part of me since I can remember. That is why I am so pleased that we can help others with the same interest,” she said. She recalled her favorite professor, Art Department Chairman Kenneth Loomis, who showed by example how to transform one’s personal space into an artistic statement.

Loomis would invite all his students to his home for tea on Friday afternoons and Jay recalls how “everything about his little cottage was an art form. Every picture, chair, or pillow was in the right place, and every color blended. It was a pure pleasure to be there, and a feast for my eyes. I wanted to study it so that I could try to have a house like that some day. Now that I think of it, that is what I have spent a good part of my life doing: trying to make beautiful surroundings for my family and friends.”

Inspired by Loomis’s example, Jay became absorbed in mastering the art of interior decorating. Even the humble abodes where she and Chuck lived during their salad days were graced with a notable charm, thanks to Jay’s maturing talent. She later launched her own interior-decorating business while tending to the needs of their family that grew to include three children: Paula, Dick, and Cindy. The Ames family now have three homes—in Ohio, New Mexico, and Florida. For each, Jay created the architectural, interior, and landscape designs. Their homes are also filled with antiques and art that Jay has collected on trips abroad she makes with Chuck for business and pleasure.

Chuck and Jay (right) posed with a 1931 Ford for their patriotically themed 2002 holiday card.

During a trip to Russia with her daughter Paula several years ago, Jay developed a keen interest in that country’s artwork, and has since accumulated a large collection that includes works that were once part of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s private collection. She has also acquired several rare pieces of Chinese art, including a collection of funeral art from the T’ang dynasty (618-906 A.D.), considered one of the most vigorous cultural periods in Chinese history. Jay is also a supporter of several organizations devoted to supporting and preserving the visual arts.

It was his wife’s enduring allegiance to the arts that inspired Chuck to surprise her with an unusual gift on their wedding anniversary. “I was having trouble thinking of something to get her,” he told *The Argus* last fall. “So I decided to donate the money to the school in order to have a nice art center and name it after her.”

In the speech she made when the endowment was officially announced, Jay recalled that “as our family was sharing a toast to our 47 years together, my husband handed me a large envelope and said, ‘Here is a gift for you; it is something that will last forever.’ The last time he gave a surprise gift on our anniversary, it was a new car that I drove for 17 years until it rusted out and finally fell apart!

“So you can imagine my surprise and delight when I saw that the gift was an endowment fund for the Art School...It was such a beautiful idea and the perfect place for us to make a lasting contribution since it is where we met and started our life together 50 years ago.”

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Coming back to IWU in 1998 was something of a revelation for Jay, who hadn’t seen the campus in almost 40 years (Chuck returned in 1990 to receive the university’s Distinguished Alumnus Award.) “It was quite a surprise to see how much everything had changed, with so many

new buildings,” she recalls. “We were very pleased. We both had so many memorable times and they all came back to us walking around campus.”

Those warm feelings led to the family’s decision to make their historic fundraising challenge that same year, and in early 2000 construction for The Ames Library began. Dedicated last fall and opened for business in January, the five-level, \$26-million library received a special grand-opening celebration on Feb. 12, attended by the Ames family and other distinguished guests (see page 4 for more on the ceremony).

For the dedication last October, Chuck and Jay, their three adult children, and six grandchildren drove via motor coach from Cleveland to Bloomington. “It seemed like the only way to get five adults, six kids, and one very large dog where we needed to go,” Jay says. “I know the coach driver was not a drinking man, but by the time we traveled nine hours through the cornfields, I swear I saw him head for the bar across the street. Must have been the dog licking him on the back of the neck!”

When asked about future goals, the Ames immediately begin speaking about adding books for the new library. “We’re asking friends and colleagues to consider it,” Jay says, “And I hope other alumni think about it, too.”

And what about a message to Illinois Wesleyan students? “Don’t be afraid to dream big. Set your sights high. Seriously consider graduate school. But most of all: never give up!”

If those students need an example of this philosophy to consider, they need look no further than the south end of campus, where a building named in honor of two of Illinois Wesleyan’s biggest and brightest dreamers now stands. ✕

