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Feeling the Warmth

Celeste Huttes

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Feeling the Warmth

In the 25 years since its founding, IWU's Phoenix Connection has grown into one of the most popular alumni events.

Story by CELESTE HUTTES

Photos by SANDY BAKER

The Southwest, it seems, has become a hot spot for Illinois Wesleyan spirit.

It all began when a small group of Arizona-based alumni began gathering in 1985. That first event, held at the Wrigley Mansion in Phoenix, drew 13 loyal alums. But on Jan. 31 of this year, 10 times that number came together to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Phoenix Connection, held at the McCormick Ranch Golf Club in Scottsdale.

Along with University President Richard F. Wilson, special guests at this year's event included Flora "Flo" (Harris) Armstrong '43, founder of the Phoenix Connection.

"It was a wonderful time," says Armstrong, who spoke at the event. "I told them how proud I was of them."

Flo and her husband, Vic — who passed away last year — brought the first group together not long after moving to Arizona.



Flo and Vic Armstrong

"I've always been involved," says Armstrong. "Wesleyan is unique in keeping its past students busy. If you want to be involved, you can get involved."

The active 88-year-old spent two treasured years at IWU as a music major before the war ended her college career. "For a farm girl coming to the big town of Bloomington back in 1939 to Illinois Wesleyan, that was a very exciting experience," she says. In the years since, her diverse contributions as a businesswoman and volunteer have earned Armstrong numerous distinctions, including past president of Illinois Wesleyan's Century Club and past member of its Board of Trustees.

Now back in Bloomington to be nearer to her children (sons Vic Jr. '64 and Brian '65) and their families, Flo continues to serve on IWU's Alumni Council and Board of Visitors and as a Phonathon volunteer.



“I don’t have any qualms about doing things, whether I know what I’m doing or not,” jokes Armstrong. With the Phoenix Connection, “things just seemed to fall into place, and it kept getting bigger and bigger. It worked out, and it’s still working.”

Tanie (Zubeck) Sherman ’80 couldn’t agree more. “It’s a fabulous event,” says the current president of the Phoenix Regional Alumni Association. “It’s a wonderful way to reinforce the common bond we have.”

Sherman finds special significance in this year’s Transforming Lives campaign theme. “Illinois Wesleyan really did transform our lives, and maybe we can help do that for someone else.”

In the early years of the Phoenix Connection,

(Clockwise from top row) President Wilson, John Ady ’62, John Horton ’82, Greg Gardner ’60, Coe Gardner ’60, Flo Armstrong ’43, Margo Brinsley and Sharon Ady.

Greg and Coe (Klafke) Gardner, both class of 1960, joined forces with the Armstrongs after relocating from Bloomington to Phoenix. Both couples hosted the reunion in their homes for several years, when attendance was still in the double digits. The Gardners even began a new tradition by hosting a dinner for Phi Gams and others, held the evening prior.

“It really took off,” says Coe Gardner. “People would come from all over.”

Greg Gardner’s 21-year career as an accounting professor at IWU created exceptionally close University ties, with former students often seeking him out.

“There are a lot of connections,” says Coe Gardner. “It’s like a second family.”

Now Illinois Wesleyan’s longest-standing alumni event, the Phoenix Connection has grown into one of the most highly attended alumni connections, drawing multi-generational alumni and guests from as far away as California, New Mexico, Illinois, Michigan and Nevada.



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“No matter what else we have going on in our lives, it’s one time of year we all look forward to,” says Sherman. “It’s a really loyal group — we all have Illinois Wesleyan in our minds and our hearts.”

That is certainly true of the Phoenix Connection's founder. Though several decades have passed since Flo Armstrong studied music at Illinois Wesleyan, her enthusiasm for the University has never waned.

"I really love being part of Wesleyan. It's been very fulfilling," she says. "It's another home for me. ... I know I'm always welcome at Wesleyan."