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Student, young alumna tell of Illinois Wesleyan's transforming power

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Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Student, young alumna tell of Illinois Wesleyan's transforming power



If introduced to Kenneth Woodard, you might presume you're meeting a "typical" Wesleyan student. The political science major will start his senior year carrying a grade-point-average above 3.0. This summer he's working as an intern for State Farm Insurance Companies.

It's difficult to imagine but, not long ago, Woodard was living in a homeless shelter.

As Woodard told participants in the May campaign galas, he moved from Chicago to Bloomington five years ago to attend another college. "Not having the support that others had, lacking understanding of the importance of a college education, and always worrying about how to buy food, books and clothes quickly led me to academic probation and then having to leave that college," he said. "Very serious family issues meant that it was better for me to stay in Bloomington with no job, or money, or a secure place to live than to go back home."

Woodard found work at a fast-food restaurant near the Wesleyan campus and took classes at Heartland Community College. "But my life and my attitude were not nearly stable enough to work full-time and focus on school full-time. I dropped out again."

Then, about three years ago, "miraculous changes occurred," he said. "All at once, I found Jesus Christ and I found support through church members and an organization called Project Rise." He started at Heartland again, while working two jobs. "Every day meant walking miles to and from school, and to and from work, but I didn't mind because I felt that I was headed in the right direction again." He even began to discuss the possibility of attending Illinois Wesleyan with his advisors and friends. At the same time, he was losing his apartment, forcing him to move into a Bloomington homeless shelter.

"I believe I had most of my dreams of coming to Wesleyan the summer I lived in the shelter. I would say to myself, 'I bet Wesleyan's beds aren't this stiff and hard, and I bet they have air-conditioning, too.'" Learning of Woodard's interest in the University, Nicole Brown-Davis '99, IWU director of Multicultural Affairs, invited him to campus to attend Multicultural Weekend.

“That weekend was the biggest blessing of my life to date,” Woodard said. It gave him the courage to apply to Wesleyan “with literally no money. By the grace of God, I was accepted — and because of the liberality of donors like you, money has not been very much of a problem.”

While his story may be unusual, Woodard said, “I know that many other students aren’t so typical either. Some have one, two, or a multiple of the struggles that I have had to overcome.

“It is on behalf of these students that I want to encourage you to get behind them and support them. Because, while we may seem to have everything we need, many of us have deeper struggles than you may know.”

IWU triple-major pursues dreams

When it came time to choose a college, Katie Brokaw had to weigh family history in her decision. “I would be the fourth generation on both sides of my family to attend IWU, but my parents said, ‘Katie, don’t let that influence you.’”

In fact, it was then President Minor Myers, jr. who most influenced her in deciding to attend Wesleyan. “I wanted to double major in art and theatre. The big research universities told me they’d be happy to have me in either program but not both — it just wasn’t possible. That spring, Minor Myers said: ‘Katie, if you come here you can do anything you want.’”

Brokaw told the story as a featured speaker at the campaign gala celebrations in May.

Attending IWU on a merit scholarship, Brokaw added English as a third major in her first year. In 2002, she became the University’s first graduating triple major. She went on to earn her master’s degree at Cambridge University, and this year completed her fourth year of doctoral studies at the University of Michigan, where she specializes in medieval and Renaissance drama. “My postgraduate work has built upon all three of my majors at Wesleyan. As I write my dissertation, I am doing research in theatre, literature, history, music and religion.”

“Illinois Wesleyan transformed my life,” Brokaw told the gala attendees. “In the classrooms, studios and performance spaces of Illinois Wesleyan, my horizons were metaphorically expanded, as I learned about everything from ancient Greek pottery to how to use a power saw. My horizons were literally expanded on two May Term trips to Europe where I fell in love with the medieval and Renaissance periods.”



Brokaw now teaches undergraduates at Michigan. She tries to design classes “that invite the curiosity that led me to, through, and beyond Illinois Wesleyan. I tell my students to write about their passions, but also to read and think deeply about things they have never before considered, be it Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* or the implications of Super Bowl ads. I want them to be equipped, as Illinois Wesleyan students are, with the knowledge and wisdom gained from many types of classes, and to apply that complex thinking to the greatest problems of our wider world.”