



Spring 2009

## The Perfect Match

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### **Recommended Citation**

Hatch, Rachel (2009) "The Perfect Match," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, 2002-2017: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol18/iss1/4>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [iwumag@iwu.edu](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu).

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# The Perfect Match

The combined talents of Professors Bruce and Norma Criley breathed new life into biology studies at Illinois Wesleyan.

Story by Rachel Hatch

Portrait photo by Marie-Susanne Langille



For 37 years, Bruce and Norma Criley have watched Illinois Wesleyan and their field of biology grow and change.

That mutability is what appeals most to Bruce Criley as a biology professor. “No matter how long you teach it,” he says, “you feel as though you are part of something dynamic and alive, because you are —

with discoveries from DNA to genetic research.”

Now the Crileys will witness developments in biology from a new perspective: retirement.

Norma retired in May 2008. Bruce, a past winner of the University’s top teaching prize, joined her at the end of the fall semester. The two have been inseparable since meeting as doctoral students at the University of Illinois. Bruce arrived at Illinois Wesleyan in 1971 as the chair of the Biology Department and was named the George C. and Ella Beach Lewis Professor of Biology in 1979. Norma joined him on the faculty in 1973. Even their children have strong Wesleyan connections: daughter Jennifer is a graduate of the class of ’93 and son Mark is an assistant professor in the Philosophy Department.

Upon announcement of Bruce and Norma Criley’s retirement, former students paid tribute to the pair’s inspiring legacy of teaching, research and much more.

“What I remember most is the care and concern Bruce and Norma had for each of us as aspiring scholars and developing human beings,” says Marsha Guenzler-Stevens ’78, who teaches biology and is director of activities at the University of Maryland, College Park. “Their rare commitment to nourishing the next generation of leaders inspired me to be the scholar, teacher and leader I am today.”

For years, their campus offices were side-by-side. Appropriately, then, it was side-by-side that the Crileys sat down to reflect on their years at the university that became their second home.

### What drew you to Illinois Wesleyan?

**Bruce:** I was approached to come here and interview for the chair position in 1971. I was the associate chair at the University of Colorado. Oddly enough, both Norma and I had broken our backs — fractured vertebrae — me falling off a horse, she while falling down the stairs. It's a togetherness we have always shared (laughs). Not being able to sit in front of a microscope for hours at a time was going to hurt our research careers. So we were looking for a different opportunity.

**Norma:** I graduated from a small liberal arts college [Northland College in Ashland, Wis.], so I knew what Illinois Wesleyan would be like, and that he would like it. He was always at big schools — the University of Illinois, the University of Colorado. So I pushed him to look into Illinois Wesleyan.

**Bruce:** I was used to classes of enormous sizes at Colorado. We lectured in the Flatiron Theater with 1,300 to 1,400 students in general biology, pulpit-style teaching. The first day I fell off the stage. We had about six overheads lined up, and I was backing up while teaching. What bothered me is no one even seemed to notice I fell. They had no idea until my hand came up to climb back up. Then the auditorium erupted with laughter. The pedagogical opportunities in smaller class sizes at Illinois Wesleyan were very appealing to me.

### What made you decide to stay?

**Bruce:** The reason really relates to what I found when I came for my interview. I was very impressed with the students, the faculty and the administration. I met with a number of biology majors. I still know who they are — in fact one of them is my dermatologist. These students cared so much about their education and were serious and mature. They wanted to know what I would bring to the school, and we really hit it off and had a great discussion. I also met with people from the English and Philosophy departments, and I was really amazed that they would care and take an interest in science-department hirings.

**Norma:** That's very different from the large university situation where it was only science and biology faculty with whom you would interact and meet.

You often say the two of you are a team. In what way?

**Bruce:** We never taught together, but we have worked together, even before she started teaching here.

**Norma:** I had a Ph.D. in biology, and it was very unusual for spouses to have similar Ph.D.s and careers. I put my career on hold while my children were young, but I was spending as many hours as he was typing and editing pre-med recommendation letters.

**Bruce:** Then we had the chance to work in the same department and in the academic community. It's been wonderful.

**Norma:** Some people used to ask me, "You have offices right next to each other? How can you stand to see each other all day and then go home at night together?" It was always nice when the children were home because we could focus on them. We would not spend time talking about what our days at work were like because we already knew.

**Bruce:** We even had a dog hidden under the desk. They never really had any idea we had the Whippet there.

**Norma:** Some people knew, but our dog Jack seemed to know not to come out or he would be banished.

During your tenure here, what has most changed in the field of biology ?

**Norma:** We started studying biology on the organism level — hormones, nervous system development, muscles. The field has gradually gone to a more molecular focus. I think the department would like to keep students aware of that overall "organismal" level as we delve further into the molecular level, which is where much of the research is occurring. The department realizes you lose so much if you study the molecules without understanding the organism where it originated. You lose that big picture. That idea isn't true everywhere; and it can be difficult to find people who are trained to teach general organismal biology.

**Bruce:** Everyone is interested in studying at the molecular level now, and they are very specialized. And to be a generalist, as you have to be here to teach your courses true, it's



Before coming to Illinois Wesleyan, Bruce Criley (seen above in a photo taken in 1982) lectured to as many as 1,400 students at the University of Colorado. Wesleyan's smaller class sizes "were very appealing," he says.

critical to see the whole organism — particularly to a pre-medical student, to remember there is a person attached to all those molecules.

You are known for emphasizing the importance of biology study to all majors. Why?

**Bruce:** Biology is the study of life, of living things, and we are all alive. I think we should know all we can about life. The thing that is terribly exciting about being a biologist is there is so much growth and change in the field, and you have to teach students to appreciate that. It can be a matter of, “You know what I told you last week in general biology? Guess what? Well, we found out today that is wrong!” You hear the groans and the ripping of notes. But they really love that. You feel as though you are part of something dynamic and alive, because you are — with discoveries from DNA to genetic research.

**Norma:** There are so many legal issues, controversial issues going on now. You need to be able to make an informed and educated decision when you are voting. Along with that, everyone is going to have medical problems, and it would be best to understand what is happening, what will happen to your body. Biology will always be there. I just received a note from an English professor who took my anatomy and physiology course. She used information from the class to understand a term in Anglo-Saxon law codes of King Alfred the Great. So you never know when a need for biology will come up.



The Crileys' daughter Jennifer, seen here with her parents and brother Mark, graduated from Wesleyan in 1993.

Under your leadership, the Biology Department became known for the high numbers of students accepted into medical school and also for attracting great faculty. To what do you attribute this?

**Bruce:** As far as the number of students being accepted into medical schools, I think Norma and I pride ourselves on our honesty, and that is what got us in good with graduate and professional schools. We called it like it was. Not everyone was perfect. We knew not only the good points the students had, but points where they could improve. We felt that was the way to do it, and med school and grad school recruiters appreciated that. We would ask students what their strengths and weaknesses were, and see if they could see them as well.

If anything, I am painfully honest.

**Norma:** (nodding) Um, hum.

**Bruce:** What was that?

**Norma:** (nods with more vigor): I said, “Um, hum.” (Bruce laughs.)

**Bruce:** Professional programs and graduate schools get so many of these flowery letters that were obviously not related to the person at all. I remember seeing one letter of a woman who applied and halfway through the letter, her name changed to Fred. Whoever wrote this letter used an old letter and just changed the names, but missed a few. That never happened here.

**Norma:** And you were able to hire really good people in the department, and once that starts, it just feeds on itself. Good faculty makes a great impression on prospective faculty. And there has always been such camaraderie in the department. Our faculty meetings were always filled with people arguing and bantering, but walking out of the meetings with nothing personal on either side. We would all go out for dinner, and your sides would hurt from laughing. So many of them gave — and still give — so much to the students.

**Bruce:** I think it went over with the faculty that we did things in a democratic way. I led the department, but never dictated. That was a newer approach at the time, giving faculty more say in the decisions, and [former University President Robert S.] Eckley supported us in that.

**What would you want your legacy to be?**

**Bruce:** I think we would like to be known as people with high standards, high integrity and a love of teaching. As chair, I really relished the idea of being able to build a department. I think it has been wonderful that Norma and I could work together. There really is a legacy, because my son, who went to Stanford, is a philosophy professor here, and my daughter, who went to Illinois Wesleyan, is now a veterinarian. I'm as proud as can be that she came here and he decided to teach here. It's wonderful. It's so much a part of our family. If that isn't a legacy, I don't know what is.

**Norma:** I think he said it all.

**Bruce:** Thank you, dear.