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### Keeping the Connection

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# Keeping the Connection

**New Alumni Association President Todd French '93 looks ahead to Illinois Wesleyan's next generation.**



As the new president of the Illinois Wesleyan Alumni Association, Todd French '93 knows that most IWU students don't perceive a connection with the alumni they see visiting campus for special events or Homecoming class reunions.

"I can recall my time back as a student, and how I never associated my current role as a student with my future role as an alum. After all," French says, "you're a student for just a few years, but for the rest of your life you're a graduate of Illinois Wesleyan."

Now, with the University gaining national recognition, he believes that this is the perfect time to help shape current students into becoming active future alumni.

"Now that we are classified as a national liberal arts university, we need to quickly establish a new tradition of alumni involvement, and the best way to do so is to start with our students," French says.

French helped to organize the Alumni Executive Board in 2001 and previously served as its vice president under Jean Sullivan Baird '80,

who completed her role as Alumni Association president this year and is now a member of the University's Board of Trustees.

"Admittedly, we were slow going in the beginning due to the tremendous task before us," says French. "But we soon established ourselves into a very efficient machine — emulating many of the better concepts we viewed our target schools as having been successful with, while creating our own unique mode and identity."

At those peer institutions, French noticed how current students were regarded as the next generation of alumni. In contrast, "even when the [Alumni Executive Board] was formed, we had our meetings largely in secret — scurrying in darkness from meeting room to meeting room so that we couldn't be seen by the student body," he says, laughing. "Of course, that's an exaggeration, but that's what it seems like we had as our status quo back at that time."

French is working to change that. He and the rest of the Executive Board are planning events for the express purpose of bringing alumni and students together — everything from hosting receptions to sitting in on classroom activities.

"I want our alumni to get in front of the students now as much as possible," he says. "Our students need to know that the university in which they are developing consists not only of students, faculty and staff, but of a much larger grouping of alumni."

French knows well the impact that alumni support can have on a student's life. He attended IWU thanks to full scholarships, with most of the funds donated by alumni. In 2001, he established the Todd M. French/StringWorks Talent Scholarship in order to provide other worthy music students with the same opportunity.

French graduated from IWU in 1993 with honors and a degree in cello performance. He went on to earn a master's degree from the University of Southern California.

In 1998 he started StringWorks, an e-commerce-based maker and retailer of stringed instruments. The company is based in French's hometown of Appleton, Wis., with workshops in China, Romania and Hungary. More recently, he helped launch an electronic billing and payment software company called Inovium. French still lives in Southern California, where he is a cellist with the Los Angeles Opera. He and his wife Heidi have a daughter, Ella.

French was honored with IWU's Robert M. Montgomery Young Alumnus Award in 2003. In addition to his participation in the Alumni Association and as a trustee, he has served as Reunion Chair for his class.

With two businesses and a family, this might seem like a surprising level of involvement for a younger alumnus. But French has observed that recent graduates are often more than willing to help their alma mater. "It's true that they are entering a very difficult and time-consuming era of their lives: establishing careers, finishing grad school and perhaps even starting a family. The trick is to keep them interested, focused and involved," he says.

French knows that alumni may perceive "involvement" as a euphemism for "giving money," but he hopes this, too, will change.

"Rather than just ask for money, we should first make them realize they are still family," he says. "Once they tie themselves back to the University, connect again with the students, bring back memories and recognize what IWU has done for them, I believe that giving will occur organically."

French notes that each graduates' Illinois Wesleyan experience should guide him or her to become more involved.

"I think that simply recognizing what Illinois Wesleyan meant to you is incredibly revealing," he says. "If an alum feels that IWU has helped them develop personally and professionally, the natural progression of becoming involved will be the next step. We just need to provide those opportunities."

Being on Illinois Wesleyan's Board of Trustees gives French added perspective about his new role as Alumni Association president. "I feel it helps my tasks serving on both boards," he says.

"Interestingly enough, a recent trustees' meeting revealed that several of my fellow trustees feel a great disconnect between themselves and the alumni network," French says. One of his goals is to open up communication between the alumni and trustees.

Despite the challenges, French is very optimistic about the Alumni Association's future. "I look at the current board membership and the ever-growing number of volunteers among our alumni. I see the excitement and drive of our young alumni. All the ingredients are there for our Alumni Association to achieve great success and continued rapid growth," he says. "That is my hope."