



Spring 2007

One senator's inspired idea led to a great moment in IWU history

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Recommended Citation

Zeller '07, Sarah (2007) "One senator's inspired idea led to a great moment in IWU history," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, 2002-2017*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol16/iss1/5>

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.

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One senator's inspired idea led to a great moment in IWU history



York (above left) stands backstage with King and Bertholf prior to the civil rights leader's appearance before a packed house at Illinois Wesleyan's Fred Young Fieldhouse.

Story by Sarah Zeller '07

In 1958, President Lloyd Bertholf encouraged student autonomy by giving IWU's Student Senate full authority over student activity fee funds. Those funds now total over \$300,000 annually, and promote student leadership in such endeavors as *The Argus*, Titan TV, and WESN, as well as over 100 special interest groups on campus.

Bertholf's decision paved the way for greater student impact on the campus culture, and led to one of the most memorable moments in the University's history — a moment that occurred largely thanks to the efforts of a lone student senator who had a big idea.

As the Student Senate's convocations chairman, Liz Lindblom York '67 decided Martin Luther King Jr. would be a perfect speaker to bring to campus. "He was very controversial and his message was very timely," says York.

York's vision was fulfilled on Feb. 10, 1966, when — during the height of the American civil rights movement — King spoke at Illinois Wesleyan, drawing a massive crowd, causing controversy, and raising students' interest in his cause. The visit came two years after King's acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize and two years before his assassination in Memphis, Tenn.

Growing up in a Scandinavian and Italian immigrant neighborhood in Chicago, York said she wasn't directly exposed to the civil rights movement. But during a vacation to the southern United States, she remembers seeing "a lot of injustices" which informed her decision to embrace King's message of nonviolent change.

After first deciding to invite King, York received help from a classmate, Eldridge Gilbert '67, whose father knew the civil rights activist's home phone number. When she called the number, York was "dumbfounded" when King answered his own phone.

"When I called him and asked him to come and speak, (King) jumped at the chance," she says. "He never hesitated. He knew that he had to reach everybody with his message, and he knew what the campus was like," with many of the students at the time living sheltered lives, distant from the civil rights movement. "He knew this was where he needed to bring his message."

Prior to making that call, York sought and received support to invite King to campus from Bertholf, who was IWU's president at the time. Although she remembers Bertholf saying he anticipated the visit might cause controversy, York wasn't prepared for the amount of negative phone calls and letters she received as the date of King's arrival approached.

"There were people at that time that did not want him to come on campus," she recalls. "This was a very controversial figure and a very heated time." Though she didn't feel threatened at the time, "looking back on it, I should have been," York says. "As you mature, you realize there are bad things that can happen." However, King — who was accompanied by his wife, Coretta — brought his own security guards and, in the end, York says, "there was plenty of police and protection."

What surprised York the most about King's visit was the amount of interest it created on campus. Around 3,500 people attended his speech, given at the Fred Young Fieldhouse, where major campus events were held from 1962 until the mid-1990s, when the building was replaced by the Shirk Center and later demolished.

"The Fieldhouse was literally packed with people," York says. The first rows of seats were filled with media representatives "from all over." York herself introduced King, and also had a chance to speak with him privately before his talk. "You can't imagine the thrill," she says.

But the evening's highlight was the speech itself. "Everyone was spellbound," York says. "He was almost mesmerizing in the way that he spoke." The heart of King's speech was his message of nonviolence, what he told the audience he considered "the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom and human dignity."

"He had a picture of what he wanted for the future," says York, whose own future would be affected by what she experienced in 1966. "What it taught me is: don't be afraid to ask a question," she says, recalling her phone call to ask King to speak. "The biggest thing he taught me is that someone can make a difference," York adds. "You can take a stand and not be afraid."

Throughout her life, York says she has tried to champion causes close to her heart and is ready to work for them. She is currently treasurer of the University South Foundation of the University of Arizona South, and serves on the board of directors of Cochise Victim Awareness and the Citizens Advisory Commission for the city of Sierra Vista, Ariz., where she resides.

She encourages today's student senators to strive to make a similar impact on the Illinois Wesleyan campus. "Try, ask, and maybe you can accomplish what you want to do," she advises.

"What Illinois Wesleyan taught me is that each person can make a difference. Maybe it's not going to happen, but don't be afraid to try," she says. "Don't be afraid to stand up and say something."