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Supporting Players

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Supporting Players

In ways large and small, IWU staff members use their skills and experience to keep the University working.

Profiles by RACHEL HATCH
Photos by MARC FEATHERLY

The work they do may not always be obvious, but look around Illinois Wesleyan's campus and you will see the evidence of their labor all around you. Keeping classrooms cozy-warm on a cold winter day. Fixing a faulty computer. Making sure the campus is safe from unwelcome intruders. Those are just a few of the thousands of ways that Illinois Wesleyan's staff fulfill their designated roles. Behind those employees' work is a feeling of pride in knowing that they are part of a special place: a university with a mission to educate, and a community where people matter to each other.

Perhaps less common, but no less true, is an acknowledgement among these employees that what they do is vital to the Illinois Wesleyan community — even if their efforts aren't always as visible as those of the professors and high-ranking administrators who find themselves more often in the public eye.

As University Engineer Ron Roth puts it: "People only really know we're here if something goes wrong." Maybe that's not really fair, but Roth and the other three employees profiled in this article aren't complaining. They like what they do, and who they do it for. — *Tim Obermiller*



Kelly Ullom poses with a scenery piece from a 1995 School of Theatre Arts' staging of *The Mikado*. Behind her is the backdrop for *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, a 1993 production. Both pieces were designed by Professor of Theatre Arts Curtis Trout, whose work was being prepared for display at the McLean County Arts Center.

The show must go on ... but not without her

Name: Kelly J. Ullom

Position: Theatre Operations Coordinator – School of Theatre Arts

Years with IWU: 17



Ullom oversees the McPherson Theatre box office, which she regards as one of her most important tasks. "At the moment, we're the face, or the voice, of Illinois Wesleyan," she says of public contact shared by her and student workers.

Kelly Ullom does not have a job at Illinois Wesleyan. In fact, she has many.

Settling into her narrow office near the entrance of McPherson Theatre, she turns on the radio and flips on a desktop fountain that resembles a miniature watermill. She smiles when asked to describe exactly what she does at the School of Theatre Arts. "Hmmm," she says, while looking at the waiting pen. "Are you ready?"

In essence, Ullom is the point person for not only the academic side of the School of Theatre Arts, but also for the production side. She's the box-office manager for McPherson Theatre, producer of the May Term show, and overseer of the house managers for all shows. She schedules classes, administers the school's budget, and advises Masquers, the student drama club. "I really enjoy the variety, as immense and intense as it is," says Ullom. "I've yet to be bored."

For Ullom, the best thing about her job is the daily interaction it provides with the 100-plus theatre arts students who attend Illinois Wesleyan, and who often come to her for academic assistance or more personal advice. "Sometimes they are having trouble with a fellow worker on a play, or sometimes they just need to come in and talk because they are homesick and miss their moms," she says.

Smiling, she adds, “I think working with the students has kept me young. They are delightful to be around.”

As producer of the student-directed May Term shows, Ullom faces some of her biggest challenges. “Producers are really the problem solvers. I have the power to say no,” she says with exaggerated bravado. She laughs, pushing her blond curls away from her face. “I’m the one to solve issues without flinging blame at anyone.”

The comment prompts a memory of the 2004 May Term production of *Polaroid Stories* and involves, of all things, a Dumpster. “After we learned we could not rent one, I physically grabbed everyone together at once — the technical director, the scene designer, the scenic artist, and the master carpenter — and we were able to figure out in five minutes that we could build one,” Ullom recalls. “Sometimes it takes the producer to get everyone together and make it happen without abusing anyone too much.” Ullom remembers her delight in learning a show the following year also required a Dumpster. “Guess what? We have it in stock!” she happily declares.

Among her duties, Ullom regards her job as manager of the McPherson box office as most critical for the University. “My kids and I have contact with the public through the box office. At that moment, we’re the face, or the voice, of Illinois Wesleyan.” Her “kids,” she clarifies, are Ullom’s student workers. Grinning, she says, “I always call them ‘my kids.’”

In fact, Ullom and her husband, Stephen, will become real-life parents to a college student this fall when their 18-year-old son, Josh, starts at Bradley University in Peoria. Ullom herself attended Bradley, where she was active in several theatre productions before transferring to Illinois State University, where she graduated as an English major. Personally, she says, she would have loved it if Josh had attended Illinois Wesleyan University and thinks their 16-year-old son, B.J., would also be a great match for the school. “It would be lovely if he did attend,” she says with motherly pride.

Ullom’s respect for and devotion to the University is also evident in the time she volunteers as a staff representative on Illinois Wesleyan’s Health Care Advocacy Committee, which is responsible for making health-care recommendations for employees to the Board of Trustees. “It’s really vital that *all* members of the campus be represented on health-care issues,” says Ullom, who has served on the committee since 1999 and recently worked on the complex issue of retiree benefits. “The needs of the staff can sometimes be different than those of the faculty,” she adds. “Our economic status is different; our social standing is sometimes different. So it’s important to have the faculty and staff work together to make sure all of the parts are constructed with everyone in mind.”

As for her future plans, Ullom said she will stay as long as Illinois Wesleyan will have her. “There is always so much to learn here.” She leans in as if to convey a secret. “I want to master *all* of the power tools. Right now I can work a table saw.” She leans back and laughs. “There’s one!”

One more item to add to Ullom’s ever-growing job description.