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Make a difference, have some FUN

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Make a difference, have some FUN

To IWU alumni considering volunteering for their alma mater, Alumni Association President Jean Baird offers assurance that how much they want to help is strictly up to them.

Two years ago, Jean Sullivan Baird '80 became president of the Illinois Wesleyan University Alumni Association. Since the inception of new bylines ratified by the association in 2002, the organization has grown in both its scope and in the number of alumni who have volunteered in a wide range of activities — from hosting regional events to helping mentor current students.

Baird, who is also a member of the University's Board of Trustees, is vice president of operations for State Farm Insurance Companies and holds an Executive M.B.A. from the University of Illinois. She and her husband Bill live in Columbia, Mo.

In April, Baird sat down to answer some general questions that alumni might have about the IWU Alumni Association and the many opportunities it offers.

In its most basic sense, what is the purpose of the Alumni Association?

I would say that the mission is to connect the alumni into the fabric of Illinois Wesleyan University. That means providing outlets to strengthen the relationship between alumni and the University, to build relationships among alumni, and to develop the culture of stewardship of alumni toward IWU.

How has that purpose evolved over the years that you've been involved in the association?

I can answer that from a more personal perspective. My early involvement, after graduation, was more focused on fundraising and helping to support the financial needs of the University. And that's extremely important. But I think over time we've been developing a much broader sense of how alumni can help the University fulfill its educational mission — and also how they can really enjoy and benefit from a lifelong relationship with IWU, both academically and socially.

Part of that broader perspective is geographic — shifting from a more regional outlook to one involving national outreach. More events are being planned and offered to a larger audience nationwide, and I think we've seen interest in the University grow sharply because of that. The growth in size and number of our regional clubs has meant that alumni in, say, Washington, D.C., or San Francisco, can meet in those cities with fellow



"The basic idea we're trying to convey to potential volunteers is that we're sensitive to their desires about what they can do and also what they can't do," says Baird, shown above in the Hansen Student Center. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

alums, many of whom they may have never met before. And what we're seeing is that a lot of vibrant connections are being made in those gatherings — business connections, personal connections. The common bond of an Illinois Wesleyan education is something that alumni can really relate to and build upon their whole lives.

If you were talking to an alumnus who expressed reluctance to get involved in volunteering, what would you say to persuade him or her?

The first thing I would do is listen. I would try to understand where the source of their reluctance comes from. What I find is that it's often based on a misunderstanding — maybe they assume that we're wanting an enormous amount of their time, or that every volunteer activity is tied to a financial commitment.

The basic idea we're trying to convey to potential volunteers is that we're sensitive to their desires about what they can do and also what they can't do. Maybe they live in Chicago and they just want to do work there, instead of on campus. Let's make that happen. Maybe they want to exclusively interact with students. Perhaps your time is extremely limited but you still want to help in some way. That's not a problem; we really have a lot of volunteer activities that can fit anybody's time budget.

What might IWU alumni not know about the current Alumni Association that would surprise them?

How much fun we have. I know our graduates appreciate the education they received from Illinois Wesleyan, and can see the rewards in helping the institution fulfill its educational mission — but what many of them may not realize is that we do have fun in what we're doing. That's my philosophy: If we're not going to have fun doing it, then we should go do something else.

What's the best way for alumni interested in volunteering to learn about the options?

One way is to go to the Alumni Association Web site (see link below) and click on the section for volunteers. You'll find a list and explanations of all the different kinds of activities that we offer, as well as who to get in touch with to learn more.

We are also holding our annual Alumni Leadership Volunteer Workshop this year at Homecoming, Friday, October 6, 2006. There will be several sessions in the afternoon in which current or potential volunteers will have a chance to meet with current students, administrators, and other alumni, and also attend a reception at the President's House. If you want to register or learn more you can call our toll free number, (888) 498-2586, by October 1. We'd love to meet you and have a chance to tell you more about us!