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## Sorority blessed with the gifts of Mother Brown

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## Sorority blessed with the gifts of Mother Brown

**Sigma Kappa housemother Norma Brown '37 guided her "girls" through the tumultuous 1970's.**

**By Rachel Hatch**



**Norma Brown (center) and Sigma Kappa students, circa 1974.**

Beach, Fla, at the age of 90. Alumnae who were students during Brown's tenure as housemother assembled at the Sigma Kappa house on Oct. 8 to dedicate a new baby grand piano in memory of Brown and the enduring values she taught them.

The feminist movement was in full bloom in the early '70s, inspiring Illinois Wesleyan women to begin questioning, among other things, rules requiring them to be in their residence halls by 10:30 p.m. on weeknights and 12:30 a.m. on weekends. As those rules gradually began to ease in residence halls, many IWU sororities wanted to follow suit — including the Eta chapter of Sigma Kappa.

"There was tension between those in the house and the alumnae, who were shocked at our impropriety," recalls Kathy Larey Lewton '70, a Sigma Kappa member and current IWU trustee. "Little did they know how tame we were," she adds with a laugh. As the students prepared to take on the alumnae, into the picture walked Norma Sue Householder Brown '37, who became Sigma Kappa's housemother in 1969.

"She had the skill of a diplomat," says Lewton. "She became this amazing bridge between a group of women in their 20s and the alumnae group. And she managed to maintain the confidence of both groups."

Brown negotiated a compromise where the seniors were given keys to the house. More than that, however, she offered Sigma Kappa women the gift of responsibility. "There were rules to follow, and you knew you were expected to follow them," Lewton says of Brown's expectations. "But it felt like a collaborative effort. She listened to us and knew how to make things work."

During Homecoming 2005, the women of Sigma Kappa remembered the legacy of the woman they knew as "Mother Brown," who died Sept. 4, 2005, in Juno Beach, Fla, at the age of 90. Alumnae who were students during Brown's tenure as housemother assembled at the Sigma Kappa house on Oct. 8 to dedicate a new baby grand piano in memory of Brown and the enduring values she taught them.



**A photo of Brown taken during her college days at Illinois**

Brown was, by birth, a product of Illinois Wesleyan: her parents, John and Flora Householder, met as IWU students in the early 1900s before they returned to their families' tradition of farming near Fairbury, Ill. Brown's early education included a one-room schoolhouse and a small, local high school. She was well-prepared when she entered Illinois Wesleyan on a math scholarship, joining Sigma Kappa her freshman year.

Wesleyan.

Brown left IWU and continued her education at the University of Arizona in Tucson and Tower Business College in San Antonio, Texas, where she met her future husband, Robert Brown, an Air Force officer. The couple lived the typical military lifestyle, moving to bases in both the U.S. and Germany.

While raising their two children, Robert Jr. and Susan, Brown resumed her education at Drew University in New Jersey and Guttenburg University in Germany. After Robert retired from the Air Force and began a new career in the ministry, the couple returned to Central Illinois in 1963, when the family moved to Quincy. Brown then came to Bloomington in the late 1960s and began her tenure as Sigma Kappa's housemother. She wrote in an update for her Illinois Wesleyan classmates that she "felt like Mrs. Rip Van Winkle, awakening to a new generation with a renewed appreciation of IWU's quality and the many fun and learning experiences we had."

As part of her duties overseeing Sigma Kappa, Brown worked with the cooks and cleaning staff of the sorority house.

"She was the definition of a lady to a group of young women in a time when women's roles were changing constantly," says Deb Newberg Wannemacher '74. "She had a grace and style that made her a role model. Yet she had such a calm and quiet manner, you really had no idea how much of an impact she had on you until much later."

Brown maintained an apartment in the sorority house that was guaranteed to be open to anyone who needed her.



**Among the Sigma Kappas who regularly visited Norma Brown at her Florida apartment was Cathi Weglewski Swint '75 (shown at right with Brown). "She was so full of grace, but she was so much fun, too," Swint said.**

Sigma Kappa Cathi ("Weggi") Weglewski Swint '75 laughs at her memories of some of their outings with Brown. "We always went to Ponderosa (Steakhouse) to eat — don't ask me why," she says. "On the wall was a mural of two cowboys shooting it out. Mother Brown posed in between them as if she'd been shot, allowing the girls to take photos. She was so full of grace, but she was so much fun, too."

Swint says that Brown made the sorority feel like home. "Let me put it this way," she explains, "We had two TVs in the house. The alumnae bought us this big, beautiful television for the rec room, and Mother Brown had one in her apartment. The other one was huge, but there we were, crammed into her apartment watching *Brian's Song* and passing around the toilet paper for Kleenex. We were sitting on tables and on every available spot on the floor. We'd rather be there with her."

In the early '70s, it wasn't just Mother Brown's apartment that was overflowing. As the number of Sigma Kappas grew, the house at 1101 N. East Street was becoming less livable. "The kitchen was small, the rooms were small and there was no air conditioning, no storage," recalls Wannemacher. The women credit Brown with working diligently with the sorority corporation board to purchase the house across the street as an annex, where the seniors went to live. Says Wannemacher, "After she helped us acquire the annex, Mother Brown was really the person who worked for a new house." The annex was torn down in 1978 and ground broken for a new house in 1979 at 1011 N. East Street, where it stands today. "She was instrumental in getting that house," agrees Jan Devore '73, who lived in the

house under Brown and served as Sigma Kappa president .

Brown left the sorority in 1977 and moved to Oklahoma in 1981 to be nearer her son Robert — an IWU graduate, Class of 1962, and now a retired Air Force officer. She later settled in the Miami area, where daughter Susan lives, and remained

busy with her hobbies such as reading, sewing, and bridge, and volunteer work. When Swint moved to Florida almost three years ago, she decided to reconnect with Brown. “I started my letter with ‘I don’t know if you remember me?’ Her response was just gushing with delight. Not only did she remember me, but she remembered stories about me even I’d forgotten!”

Swint and fellow Floridian and Eta Sigma Kappa, Terie Tritch Ogle ’76, would visit Brown once a month. “She remembered everyone,” says Swint. “Her body gave out before her mind ever would.”

Many Sigma Kappas from the 1970s were unaware of Brown’s extended illness, including Lewton, who explains that it was Ellen Chapman Wilken ’74 “who suggested we ask for the donations in the name of Mother Brown” — not as a memorial, but as a tribute to her lasting influence. When Sigma Kappa alumnae chair Nancy Brown Bicket ’67 called Lewton to help raise money for the new piano, Lewton and others sounded the call among their fellow Sigma Kappas by phone, mail, and the Internet. “We raised more than \$13,000 in three weeks,” says Lewton, “and had the piano in place, tuned, and ready for rush.”

Swint was glad she was able to tell Mother Brown about the new piano. Smiling, Brown recalled the lyrics to a Sigma Kappa song. “Oh, my — we’ll all be singing in the sunshine,” she said. The gift was all the more special to Brown, says Swint, because Brown’s mother had been a music major at IWU and studied the piano.

As word of Brown’s death spread, Sigma Kappas called one another and sent out messages of loss, respect, and fond memories. Wrote Dawn Nelson ’73, “I see [Mother Brown] as a guru to my generation of IWU Sigma Kappas. She taught us what it means to really be friends, to be courageous, and to be honest in communicating our hearts and souls. She showed us by example how to do the right thing. Her legacy is a group of remarkable women whom I am honored and blessed to count as lifelong friends. I am thankful for the great gift of Mother Brown.”

“She liked to call us ‘her girls,’” says Lewton. “You know, she had a way of looking at you and her eyes would twinkle as if she might just be laughing at something silly you did. But she would never say it. Heaven is a better place with Mom Brown’s kind spirit, her impish sense of humor, and never-ending wisdom.”



**Sigma Kappas enjoy their house’s new piano, donated in honor of Norma Brown. From left: Ginni Hestrom Pedersen ’72, Kira Gengler ’07, Nancy Brown Bicket ’67, Tina Spears ’06, and Andrea Blank ’08.**