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May 4, 2008

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## **Dunn Sees Hope for Graduates Facing Challenging Times**

BLOOMINGTON, ILL. – Cloaked in green robes that matched the beauty of the Eckley Quad on a spring afternoon, 472 students attended ceremonies for the 158th Commencement at Illinois Wesleyan University on Sunday, May 4.

Actor Kevin Dunn, a 1977 Illinois Wesleyan alumnus who has appeared in more than 80 movies and television roles, delivered the Commencement speech after being conferred an honorary doctor of humane letters degree. For the class of 2008, Dunn offered both his recollections of the past, and words of hope for the uncertain future today's graduates face in his speech titled "Into Your Waiting Hands."

"I have memories, vivid memories of freedom, of camaraderie, of invulnerability, and an endless stream of pranks, impromptu parties and cramming for exams," said Dunn, who was a theatre major at Illinois Wesleyan. "There were late nights at the theatre, building sets, rigging flies and focusing lights. Performing in plays on the McPherson stage, wildly cheering on [Illinois Wesleyan basketball player] Jack Sikma and the rest of Dennie Bridges' Titans as they barnstormed through the league."

Dunn revealed that he almost did not return to Illinois Wesleyan for his senior year after his father was laid off. Recalling a meeting with Professor Emeritus of Theatre John Ficca, Dunn said, "Dr. Ficca listened, intently, with an occasional nod, as I told my story, and after what seemed to be an eternity he told me, 'If you leave school now, sport, you won't come back. And years from now you'll look back on your decision and wonder if you could have succeeded in becoming an actor.'"

Inspired by Ficca's words, Dunn stayed, and took on a job Ficca lined up for him as a scene shop foreman. The advice, and the job, served Dunn well. As he was making his way as an actor, Dunn was able to work for a contractor refurbishing old houses. And later he fixed up his own house in southern Los Angeles with his wife, Katina, a journalist who then worked with the *Orange County Register*.

As Dunn looked out over the faces of graduating seniors, he expressed concern over the future they face, the same future facing Dunn's high-school-aged son. "I've been spending a lot

of time lately, worrying about what the world will be able to offer him when he, like all of you here today, leave college to join the ranks of working America,” said Dunn. “Our world is changing faster than any time in history.”

Noting the ecological peril of global warming, an obsession of corporate America with profits over a concern for people, and the ongoing human and monetary cost of the war in Iraq, Dunn said he still felt hope for the future because of the students seated before him. “Despite these seemingly insurmountable troubles which now face us, I see in your generation, great hope for the winds of change,” he said. “This generation has developed an unquenchable thirst for disparate points of view, and different sources of information, and this search to find the truth has created an audible rumble across this nation.”

Along with Dunn, also receiving honorary degrees were former Illinois Wesleyan Board of Trustees President Craig C. Hart and internationally known engineer Sidney Epstein. Epstein and his grandson, Michael Lawton, both received degrees at the ceremony. Lawton, who nominated his grandfather for an honorary degree, was allowed to drape the colors denoting his grandfather’s degree before embracing him.

For Assistant Professor of English Michael Theune an Illinois Wesleyan education is one of the keys to discovering how all challenges, and ideas are interconnected. “It seems to me as though this kind of connectivity is one part of the argument for a liberal arts education: *it all fits*—seemingly diverse discourses actually speak, and have a lot to say, to each other,” said Theune, who was named the Illinois Wesleyan 2008 Student Senate Professor of the Year.

Senior Class President Chris Burrichter encouraged the class of 2008 to take the reigns and steer their future. “Illinois Wesleyan awakened inside of us an awareness, a sense that both the problems and goals of the world are now our problems and goals, and today we leave better equipped to find solutions,” said Burrichter.

Burrichter and the class of 2008 will leave more than their good intentions at Illinois Wesleyan. The senior class gift to University President Richard F. Wilson came in the form of a pineapple, and a concrete one at that. Wilson explained the unusual gift by noting the University once had a pineapple that would adorn the President’s house. Usually stolen as a student prank, the pineapple — which was a symbol of friendship — would find its way back to the house until the 1950s, when it vanished for good. The 2008 class gift is a new pineapple, which Wilson declared as “a symbol of our promise that you are always welcome here at Illinois Wesleyan.” The President also established a new tradition, by asking all graduates to touch the pineapple as they walked across the outdoor stage to receive their diplomas.

During the ceremony, two professors were officially conferred endowed professorship titles they had been appointed earlier in the academic year. Professor Malina Balina, an internationally recognized scholar of Soviet and post-Soviet children's literature and a member of Illinois Wesleyan's Department of Modern and Classical Language and Literature, was recognized as the Isaac Funk Professor. Professor Brian Hatcher, a leading scholar of religion and a member of Illinois Wesleyan's Religion Department, was recognized as the McFee Professor of Religion. "These professors meet the highest aspirations for faculty members on our campus," said Wilson when conferring the endowed professorships.

Wilson, who began his tenure with Illinois Wesleyan four years ago, congratulated the class of 2008, saying he will always consider himself part of their class. He also directed the audience to offer a moment of silence during the ceremony, for the victims of the shooting at Northern Illinois University, which took place in February.

### **About Kevin Dunn**

With a career spanning more than 30 years, Kevin Dunn has played serious soldiers, caring fathers and scheming lawyers.

A member of Illinois Wesleyan University's class of 1977, Mr. Dunn is just as comfortable in the realm of comedy as he is tackling dramatic roles. He has been seen playing the affable father to Shia LeBeouf in *Transformers* (2007), the speech writer with a crisis of conscience in *Dave* (1993) with Kevin Klein, or a foil for Charlie Sheen in the spoof *Hot Shots!* (1991). He did battle in the blockbuster *Godzilla* (1998) as the straight-laced Colonel Hicks and has given dramatic turns in such movies as the *The Black Dahlia* (2006) and *Lions for Lambs* (2007) with Tom Cruise and Meryl Streep.

Making his big screen breakthrough with *Mississippi Burning* in 1988, Mr. Dunn has also lent his talent to dozens of other movies, including the Oliver Stone-directed *Nixon* (1995), *Small Soldiers* (1998), *Live Free or Die* (2006), and *All the King's Men* (2006). He will appear in the new Woody Allen movie, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* with Penélope Cruz and 2008 Oscar® winner Javier Bardem this fall.

### **About Illinois Wesleyan**

Founded in 1850, Illinois Wesleyan is a private, liberal arts institution in Bloomington, Illinois. The University offers 47 major areas of study and eight pre-professional programs. In addition to the liberal arts education, professional programs are offered in the fine arts and nursing. Illinois Wesleyan prides itself on producing graduates who are well-rounded, broadly

educated individuals with a spirit of inquiry that successfully adapts to the demands of a rapidly changing and complex world.

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