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Making History

Minor Myers' mission was both to transform Illinois Wesleyan and to fulfill its most cherished dreams.



By Tim Obermiller
Photos by Marc Featherly

While ably handling the task of leading Illinois Wesleyan for the past 14 years as its president, Minor Myers, jr., also grew to become one of the University's most ardent and knowledgeable historians.

He even penned a book on the subject for IWU's Sesquicentennial in 2000, cowritten with Carl Teichman '80, executive assistant to the president. The sprawling narrative of *Continuity and Change* documents the history of an institution that was launched in a church basement and nearly fell into bankruptcy a few years after its founding, but which never strayed from its dream to build a great university.

How Myers assessed his own role in the pursuit of that dream remains an open question. His name appears just twice in the text of *Continuity and Change*, indicating that he intended to let history be the judge of his presidency. Still, Myers clearly felt the initiatives he promoted during his tenure fit firmly within the framework of the University's strong traditions and bold aspirations.

As evidence of those historic aspirations, Myers' speeches often quoted the inscription on the University's Founders' Gates, which proclaims, in part, "From this center, mighty pulsations, for good or evil, must in the future flow..." Among the doers and dreamers who had followed and guided the flow of those "mighty pulsations," Myers had his own personal heroes. Primary among them was the famed scientific explorer John Wesley Powell. During and after the University's Sesquicentennial, Myers' speeches often included at least one reference to Powell, who made a sizeable impact in the short time he served as an Illinois Wesleyan professor after the Civil War, even creating the University's motto, "Scientia et Sapientia" — knowledge and wisdom. Those two words, Myers felt, summarized the University's primary purpose of encouraging students to learn how to sort through details and facts that comprise "knowledge" and from that mass of information glean wisdom, as defined by Myers in a recent interview as the ability to determine "what is best, what is right, and what is just."



Myers admired John Wesley Powell.

Another figure in the institution's history who held a special fascination for Myers was its eighth president, Theodore Kemp, who in a 1916 address to the Board of Trustees laid out his vision of the University as a selective college of high achievement. To fulfill that vision, Kemp plotted an ambitious construction scheme to rebuild Illinois Wesleyan that included a grand, freestanding library. In his office, Myers kept a breathtaking, bird's-eye rendering of this imagined campus that was drawn for Kemp by local architect Arthur Pillsbury. Although the plan faltered in the face of economic realities, Myers saw it as an important testament to a long-held desire to move Illinois Wesleyan to a higher level, as he revealed in a 2001 interview with *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*.

"We couldn't do it then, but the vision was there. If this had been done," Myers said with a sweep of his hand across Pillsbury's watercolor rendering, "this would not have just been an adequate local university, but a national treasure."

Myers often cited the successful efforts by former presidents such as Lloyd Bertholf and Robert Eckley toward realizing the dream first articulated by Kemp. But it was also clear, both to Myers and other campus leaders, that at least one major challenge remained: to fund and build a new library that would replace Sheean Library, which in recent years had fallen short in providing the space or technology needed to sustain Illinois Wesleyan's scholarly ambitions.

Myers encouraged those involved in planning the library to envision a building that was not merely functional, but which would stand as a symbolic gateway, and serve, in his words, as "a stimulus to aspiration and development for the whole community." At the groundbreaking for the \$25.7-million Ames Library in 1999, Myers described the project as "not just a library, but part of a whole move forward It is the key to our academic function; the key, also, to our public potential."

While other important buildings constructed during Myers' administration — including the Center for Natural Science and the Shirk Athletic Center — spectacularly fulfilled that same potential, The Ames Library "is the one that most passionately reflects my own inner feelings and enthusiasms," he affirmed in the 2001 IWU Magazine interview.

Myers was specifically referring to his passion for books, but the philosophy behind The Ames Library also spoke to the IWU president's deep commitment to the whole process of a liberal arts education. For Myers, a great library was a kind of playing field for discovery, where the true process of obtaining both knowledge and wisdom unfolded in exciting and unexpected ways.

“The question is,” Myers said in the 2001 interview, “are we stimulating the curiosity of our students? And does that curiosity, once stimulated, have the means of exalting itself? And that’s where intense library use of all forms really follows.

“If you tell the students, ‘Go use the library,’ that’s a vain and foolish thing,” he said. “If you get them interested in something, then library use follows.”

“Getting interested in something” was a natural state of mind for a man who seemed interested in almost everything.

While The Ames Library will surely be among the most lasting symbols of Myers’ legacy as Illinois Wesleyan president, it was his ceaseless curiosity and vibrant intellect that left an indelible impression on almost everyone he encountered.

“There are, of course, a thousand stories to be told,” said University Trustee Edward Rust ’72 at the Aug. 25 commemoration of Myers’ life held in the Shirk Center, “and so many of them involve Minor’s encyclopedic knowledge, his lust for learning, his unquenchable interest in each of us, in new ideas, in new things, in new opportunities.”

In an interview for a Chicago Tribune article reporting Myers’ death, his wife, Ellen, recalled the simple piece of advice that her husband gave to students seeking guidance in their future plans. “[He] would ask them, ‘What makes your heart sing? Forget the practical — that will come. Find something that will make your heart sing, and the rest will fall into place.’”

The Ames Library is one glorious example of Myers’ willingness to follow a passionate belief beyond the boundaries of what is merely practical. “That building represented a daunting challenge and an almost impossible vision when he started,” Board of Trustees President Craig Hart recalled at the Aug. 25 commemoration. Myers himself alluded to that challenge at the library’s groundbreaking ceremony as he praised the “visionary drive” of Charles Ames ’50, his wife, Joyce Eichhorn Ames ’49, and all the other University alumni and friends who contributed to the project.



“A lot of people give up on their dreams and say, ‘Well, we can’t do that, we could never do this,’ and that’s the end of it,” Myers said. “But the translation of dreams into reality is always difficult and always exciting.”

For Myers, the word “dream” encompassed ideals as well as aspirations, and he made no apologies for being an idealist in pragmatic times. In his last published interview, printed in the Spring/2003 IWU Magazine, he professed concern about the direction history was taking in the post 9/11 world, with its violent clashes of political and religious ideologies. As a potential solution to those tensions, Myers looked to the ideals of the Enlightenment. “The questions that were raised then could be fruitfully raised now: Are there certain rules that simply are logical to human behavior in all places, nations, and times? And can we develop a world civilization that is based not on this or that affirmed truth, but rather on mutually understood interests that can somehow be respected rather than imposed?”

When asked later if he himself was a believer in those universal principles, he responded, “I’m rather close to it,” and burst out laughing. But then he paused for a moment and his face grew serious. Such principles, he answered, “may be our only hope for the future.”



Myers and Jean Stamberger '99 converse following her graduation.

In Illinois Wesleyan, Myers saw a microcosm of the world as it could be — a place that encouraged freedom to discuss and debate important issues and yet which also lived by certain “universal” principles. In his daily interactions with students, faculty, staff, and alumni, Myers conveyed and embodied the essence of those principles: congeniality, cooperation, a curiosity to know more, and, above all, a passion for excellence.

Future historians will assess Myers’ role in following and guiding the flow of those “mighty pulsations” cited on the University’s Founders’ Gates. Perhaps such assessments will even appear in a book marking the University’s next significant anniversary, its bicentennial. But among those in the campus community who knew him personally, and who now mourn his

passing, it is clear that what was most cherished in Myers was his ability to inspire, and to channel that inspiration into a positive vision of the University: a vision that encompassed both its past and future.

Like a busy man waiting for a late train, he sometimes seemed impatient for that future to arrive. But he also seemed to understand that institutions, like children, grow at their own pace, and often in surprising ways. The most important factor, from Myers’ perspective, was to have a dream to grow towards. As long as students pass through its gates seeking both “Scientia et Sapientia,” Illinois Wesleyan University will continue to aspire to Minor Myers’ dreams for its future, whatever changes that future may hold.