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Myers' life commemorated by campus community



Minor Myers III (shown above right with brother Joffre), speaking at the Aug. 25 commemoration of the life of Minor Myers, jr., Illinois Wesleyan's 17th president, who died on July 22. (Photo by Steve Smedley for *The Pantagraph*)

Minor Myers, jr., the late president of Illinois Wesleyan University, was remembered Aug. 25 as a builder, a dreamer, a teacher, a father, a leader, a friend, and as the "genius" of the University.

On what was to have been the first day of classes in a new academic year, Illinois Wesleyan paused to pay tribute to Myers, the University's 17th president, who died on July 22 from lung cancer at the age of 60.

A capacity crowd of about 2,500 gathered together at the Shirk Center, one of several major buildings completed during his presidency, for the commemoration. The audience was drawn from all factions of the University — trustees, faculty, staff, students, and alumni — and also included many from the Bloomington/Normal community as well

as education leaders from around the state of Illinois and beyond.

Through spoken remembrances, a short video, and a series of musical performances by members of the University's faculty, the event permitted the community to reflect together on the late president whose death came while many were away from campus for the summer break.

"In this commemoration of President Myers, we seek to call him to our minds in hopes that this communal act of remembrance will assuage our loss and begin the process of bringing him back to us, in many different forms," said Janet McNew, Illinois Wesleyan's provost and dean of faculty, who was named acting president of the University in April.

In recalling Myers and his lasting impact on the University, McNew said that much of that impact came from the sheer force of the late president's personality. "While he adored learning minutia about coins or writers or campuses or, really, just about anything, he never dwelt on little thoughts," she said. "There was a grandeur about him, and his large ideas always swept away small impediments like so much dust."

Myers' sons, Minor III and Joffre, spoke on behalf of the family. Joffre, a 2003 graduate of Connecticut College, recalled how his father was such a constant source of compassion and love that you always wanted to be around him. "In many ways," he said, "Dad provided for us the same thing he did for the University: encouragement, energy, inspiration, and gentle guidance."

Added Minor Myers III, a recent Yale Law School graduate, "Our father taught us two boys, as he taught Illinois Wesleyan, to harness our passions and realize our potential, which he always saw far before anyone else."



Professor Michael Young (above) said, "We have lost a luminous and congenial presence among us ... We have lost a friend."

Michael B. Young, professor of history and a member of the search committee that hired Myers in 1989, noted that “no one could speak with [President Myers] without learning something, but his influence on students was most remarkable for a college president. In phrases that are now well known, he urged students to follow their passions, to cultivate multiple interests, and, ultimately, to do well, but more importantly to do good. In all these ways, Minor never stopped being a professor.”



Alumnus Harold Gauthier (above) described how Myers energized and united IWU.

Harold Gauthier — a 2000 IWU graduate who, as president of the Student Senate, had worked closely with Myers — said that Myers “tied us all together: from leading the charge to build a library and a student center, bringing this community closer together, to simply encouraging students to follow their hearts when making some of their life’s most important decisions.” Ed Rust, Jr., a 1972 IWU graduate and chairman and chief executive officer of State Farm Insurance Companies, addressed Myers’ efforts to reach out from the campus to the greater community. “His focus was on IWU, but he also understood well the University’s role ... its obligations and commitments to the community,” said Rust. “More than anything, he challenged us, and inspired us to reach our own potential That clearly was Minor’s gift to Illinois Wesleyan and to this community. And it will be an enduring gift ... his lasting legacy.”

Board of Trustees President Craig Hart also described Myers’ legacy, observing that his enthusiasm “created an atmosphere of happy and excited views of daily life. He saw goodness in things. He saw the potential in students and what the University could mean in their lives.” While the University benefited in tangible ways from Myers’ leadership, Hart noted

that the confidence that Myers had in the institution might be his most lasting contribution.

“We must embrace the confidence that he gave us,” Hart told the Shirk Center crowd, “the confidence to set lofty goals, to accept the challenge those goals create — with the same passion, the same enthusiasm that Minor showed us day by day.”



Acting President Janet McNew (above) displays a brochure Myers produced documenting the various trees on campus. It was just one example, she said, of his constant drive to learn more about everything around

At the conclusion of her remarks, McNew quoted from Milton's "Lycidas," the elegy in which the poet wrote: "Now, him. Lycidas, the shepherds weep no more;/Henceforth, thou art the genius of the shore." Milton's use of "genius," McNew said, referred to the controlling spirit connected with a place or an institution.

"I propose now," she said, "that we honor President Minor Myers by acknowledging him as the spirit, or genius, of Illinois Wesleyan University."

Editor's Note: All of the Commemoration speeches can be read in their entirety at www.iwu.edu/~iwunews/Myers. The site includes photos, speeches, and audio clips from Myers' administration, a bulletin board to share memories of the late President, and a collection of postings from that board.