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November 6, 2008

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## Crileys Reflect on Years with Illinois Wesleyan

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Bruce and Norma Criley have been a part of the Illinois Wesleyan University family for 37 years. The couple arrived at Illinois Wesleyan in 1971 when he took over as chair of the Biology Department.

Known for taking an active interest in the lives of their students, the Crileys have dedicated countless hours to advising them and generated numerous recommendations for medical and professional schools. Through the years, the two have helped the biology department grow, not only in the number of choices for majors, but also in the number of faculty and graduates.

Norma retired in May of this year, and Bruce, who was awarded the University's top teaching prize in 1985, will join her at the end of this semester. The two have been together since they met at the University of Illinois while earning their doctorate degrees in biology. And together the Crileys sat down to talk about their years with the University.

### What drew you to Illinois Wesleyan?

*Bruce:* I was approached to come here and interview for the chair position in 1971. I was the associate chair at the University of Colorado. Oddly enough, both Norma and I had broken our backs – fractured vertebrae – me falling off a horse, she while falling down the stairs. It's a togetherness we have always shared (*laughs*). Not being able to sit in front of a microscope for hours at a time was going to hurt our research careers. So we were looking for a different opportunity.

*Norma:* I graduated from a small, liberal arts college [Northland College in Ashland, Wis.], so I knew what Illinois Wesleyan would be like, and that he would like it. He was always at big schools – the University of Illinois, the University of Colorado. So I pushed him to look into Illinois Wesleyan.

*Bruce:* I was used to classes of enormous sizes at Colorado. We lectured in the Flatiron Movie Theatre with 1,300-1,400 students in general biology, pulpit-style teaching. The first day I

fell off the stage. We had about six overheads lined up, and I was backing up while teaching. What bothered me is no one even seemed to notice I fell. They had no idea until my hand came up to climb back up. Then the auditorium erupted with laughter. The pedagogical opportunities in smaller class sizes at Illinois Wesleyan were very appealing to me.

**What made you decide to stay?**

*Bruce:* The reason really relates to what I found when I came for my interview. I was very impressed with the students, the faculty and the administration. I met with a number of biology majors. I still know who they are – in fact one of them is my dermatologist. These students cared so much about their education and were serious and mature. They wanted to know what I would bring to the school, and we really hit it off and had a great discussion. I also met with people from the English Department and the Philosophy Department, and I was really amazed that they would care and take an interest in science department hirings.

*Norma:* That's very different from the large university situation where it was only science and biology with whom you would interact and meet.

**(To Norma) Did it feel like a natural fit coming back to a liberal arts university?**

*Norma:* (laughs) I just tagged along. I stayed behind in Colorado, waiting for our daughter to be born.

*Bruce:* She was pregnant with our second child, Jennifer.

*Norma:* My mother came to Bloomington with Bruce and our son, Mark. When it was time for the baby to be born, Bruce drove 16 hours back to Colorado and made it to the delivery room. Then he had to take off for Bloomington the next day. Our new baby, Jennifer, and I flew out 10 days later. I gradually worked into teaching here at Illinois Wesleyan – covering a sabbatical leave here, a leave replacement there. And eventually began teaching a human biology class once the children were older.

**You often say the two of you are a team. In what way?**

*Bruce:* We never taught together, but we have worked together, even before she started teaching here.

*Norma:* I had a Ph.D. in biology, and it was very unusual for spouses to have similar Ph.D.s and careers. I put my career on hold while my children were young, but I was spending as many hours as he was typing and editing pre-med recommendation letters.

*Bruce:* Then we had the chance to work in the same department and in the academic community. It's been wonderful.

*Norma:* Some people used to ask me, “You have offices right next to each other. How can you stand to see each other all day and then go home at night together?” It was always nice when the children were home, because we could focus on them. We would not spend time talking about what our days at work were like, because we already knew.

*Bruce:* We even had a dog hidden under the desk. They never really had any idea we had the Whippet there.

*Norma:* Some people knew, but our dog Jack seemed to know not to come out or he would be banished.

**What has changed in the field of biology over your tenure at Illinois Wesleyan?**

*Bruce:* Well, the discovery of DNA to be sure, changed everything. And we were able to have one of the discoverers of DNA, James Watson, visit the campus. The students could see he was a real person and it was very exciting for them. He was such an historic and, well, colorful personality.

*Norma:* We started studying biology on the organism level – hormones, nervous system development, muscles. The field has gradually gone to a more molecular focus. I think the department would like to keep students aware of that overall, “organismal” level as we delve further into the molecular level, which is where much of the research is occurring. The department realizes you lose so much if you study the molecules without understanding the organism where it originated. You lose that big picture. That idea isn’t true everywhere; and it can be difficult to find people who are trained to teach the general, organismal biology.

*Bruce:* Everyone is interested in studying at the molecular level now, and they are very specialized. And to be a generalist, as you have to be here to teach your courses true, it’s critical to see the whole organism, particularly to a pre-medical student, to remember there is a person attached to all those molecules.

**(To Bruce) You are known for emphasizing how important the study of biology is to all majors. Why?**

*Bruce:* Biology is the study of life, of living things, and we are all alive. I think we should know all we can about life. The thing that is terribly exciting about being a biologist is there is so much growth and change in the field, that it is just wonderful, and you have to teach students to appreciate that. It can be a matter of, “You know what I told you last week in general biology? Guess what? Well, we found out today that is wrong!” You hear the groans, and the ripping of notes. But they really love that. Biology is so dynamic. You feel as though you are part of something dynamic and alive, because you are – with discoveries from DNA to genetic

research. Because we are studying life and the relationships between organisms, you have controversy.

*Norma:* There are so many legal issues, controversial issues going on now. You need to be able to make an informed and educated decision when you are voting. Along with that, everyone is going to have medical problems, and it would be best to understand what is happening, what will happen to your body. Biology will always be there. I just received a note from an English professor who took my anatomy and physiology course. She used information from the class to understand a term in Anglo-Saxon law codes of King Alfred the Great. So you never know when a need for biology will come up.

*Bruce:* It can be fun to challenge the student, and it can be frustrating at times. We were discussing today in my Gateway, when do people become a human being? Some say when the egg is fertilized. And I tell them, "Ah yes, but I can divide that cell in eight ways and make eight human beings. So when did it become a human being?" And I get the looks, "I don't know." They really start thinking about this, and it gets very personal to them. They want to know more about it, pushing it past the level of "Do we have to know this for the test?"

**You started travel courses very soon after your arrival. Why did you find them important for students?**

*Bruce:* It became obvious to me that students needed travel. I met students who, in the early 70s, had never flown in an airplane. In those days, the short term was in January and not May. So what are you going to do? Europe is freezing in January. I had heard that a colleague was going down to the Florida Keys and he connected me with a marine institute called New Found Harbor. I asked Dorothea [former University Professor Dorothea Franzen] what she thought, she was open to it. The trip was a hit right from the start. It was wonderful, a totally different experience, and the students loved it.

*Norma:* The first trip was in 1976. Our entire family went. It was a fantastic experience for our children as well. We would take them out of school when they were younger and stay for the month.

*Bruce:* It was as if our kids were adopted by the students. Sometimes I can't believe the trips continued past the first years. The weather was so bad.

*Norma:* That first summer, it got down to the 40s, and we were in a place with no heat.

*Bruce:* It was colder in Florida that week than it was in Alaska.

*Norma:* One of the people at the institute joked with us the next year that the weather could only be worse if it snowed. Well, it snowed.

*Bruce:* Eight inches of snow in Miami – a record that I think still stands.

**Under your chairmanship, the biology department developed a stellar record for students being accepted to medical programs. To what do you attribute this?**

*Bruce:* I think Norma and I pride ourselves on our honesty, and that is what got us in good with graduate and professional schools. We called it like it was. Not everyone was perfect. We knew not only the good points the students had, but points where they could improve. We felt that was the way to do it, and med school and grad school recruiters appreciated that. We would ask students what their strengths and weaknesses were, and see if they could see them as well. If anything, I am painfully honest.

*Norma: (nodding)* Um, hum.

*Bruce:* What was that?

*Norma: (nods with more vigor):* I said “Um, hum.”

*Bruce laughs.*

*Bruce:* Professional programs and graduate schools get so many of these flowery letters that were obviously not related to the person at all. I remember seeing one letter of a woman who applied and halfway through the letter, her name changed to Fred. Whoever wrote this letter used an old letter and just changed the names, but missed a few. That never happened here.

*Norma:* And you were able to hire really good people in the department, and once that starts, it just feeds on itself. Good faculty makes a great impression on prospective faculty. And there has always been such camaraderie in the department. Our faculty meetings were always filled with people arguing and bantering, but walking out of the meetings with nothing personal on either side. We would all go out for dinner, and your sides would hurt from laughing. So many of them gave – and still give – so much to the students.

*Bruce:* I think it went over with the faculty that we did things in a democratic way. I led the department, but never dictated. That was a newer approach at the time, giving faculty more say in the decisions, and [former University President Robert S.] Eckley supported us in that.

**What would you want your legacy to be?**

*Bruce:* I think we would like to be known as people with high standards, high integrity and a love of teaching. As chair, I really relish the idea of being able to build a department. I think it has been wonderful that Norma and I could work together. There really is a legacy, because my son, who went to Stanford, is a philosophy professor here, and my daughter, who went to Illinois Wesleyan, is now a veterinarian. I’m as proud as can be that she came here and

he decided to teach here. It's wonderful. It's so much a part of our family. If that isn't a legacy, I don't know what is.

*Norma:* I think he said it all.

*Bruce:* Thank you, dear. -30-