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A Journey of Firsts

As they experienced their first year at IWU, five students invited us along for the ride.

Story by RACHEL HATCH Portrait photos by B CORBIN

Afternoon light pours into the windows of the DugOut in the Memorial Center. Melissa Ramirez, a 17-year-old from Los Angeles, casts her eyes down, speaking quietly.

“I’m not sure I am going to survive emotionally,” she says.

It is the first week of classes of Illinois Wesleyan’s 2010-11 academic year, and homesickness has hit Melissa full force. “I’ve always been so close to my mom, and she to me. Helping her, sometimes I was like a second mom to my siblings. Now when I call home, they are working on homework and doing things without me.”

But there are also advantages, she adds with a slightly guilty smile. “My second night here it was midnight and my

Facing the freedoms and frustrations of their first year were (left to right) Arnold Asjes, Morgan Latiolais, Janette Abbasi, Melissa Ramirez and Matt LaLonde.

roommate and I were eating pizza and watching a movie online. We looked at each other as if to say, ‘Wait, it’s midnight and no one is telling us to go to bed already.’

“It’s a new kind of freedom.”

Melissa is one of five students who agreed to share their experiences throughout their first year of college. For each, the months ahead will be a journey — a time of change, punctuated by tribulations, surprises and self-discovery.

Janette Abbasi, a 17-year-old from Chicago with a ready smile and bright pink streaks in her hair, says that self-discovery began the moment she arrived on campus. “Coming here I felt kind of different, but in a good way. I stand out compared to everyone else, so I liked that.

“This is the first time I’ve been a minority,” she explains. “I’ve always gone to school with other Hispanics.” Though spending most of their lives more than 1,000 miles apart, Janette and Melissa bonded during New Student Orientation. As the outspoken Chicagoan and the shy girl from Los Angeles sit across from each other at the DugOut, they often nod in agreement at each other’s statements.

“You know what pulled me here?” asks Janette. “The green. This place is beautiful, and the people are so friendly. When you talk to them, they *listen*.” Melissa concurs, saying, “Coming from L.A., I just feel like I’ve never seen this much green. It is so alive, and so peaceful and quiet at the same time.”

“It was *so* quiet,” Janette adds with a laugh, recalling her first visit to campus as a prospective student. “I thought, ‘Chicago is loud. I’ll never stand the quiet!’”

Another first-year student had a similar reaction. Arnold Asjes, 18, sits down two weeks into the fall semester to recall the first time he arrived on campus. A native of Zwolle in the Netherlands, Arnold is one of 27 first-year international students who attended an orientation program designed to help ease the transition to college life in the United States. Because the program started a few days before the general first-year orientation, “it felt like the entire campus was empty,” Arnold recalls, his words swirled with a thick Dutch accent. “I was alone on my floor. My first night, I thought, ‘Why did I come here?’”



One of triplets, Arnold stayed in touch with his siblings back in Holland through "unlimited texting — the best thing ever!"

Arnold’s isolation was relieved when the rest of the Class of 2014 arrived a few days later. “Things are getting better,” he says, his tall, thin frame slumped casually in his chair as he brushes a hand through his blond hair. “But I admit, I’m still on the upswing with a way to go.” A member of the tennis team, he notes his worries ebbed a bit when practice started.

Though he’s slowly making friends, Arnold says there are still lonely times. As one of triplets, the separation has been hard, though he keeps in constant contact with his siblings via text messages. “Unlimited texting — the best thing ever!” he declares.

The transition to college life has been easier for Morgan Latiolais, 18, whose hometown is the village of Wauconda in northeast Illinois. Seated a few days later outside the Phoenix Theatre in

the Memorial Center's "Underground," Morgan declares, "Life is my oyster, and I'm ready for it!" She smiles, adding, "Okay, that's a bit much, but I'm a theatre major."

Although her year has barely started, Morgan says she "practically lives" in McPherson Theatre and loves her classes and professors. "I have Acting 101 with Tom Quinn. He's a fantastic acting coach," she says. "Tom just takes your heart out and squeezes it until you want to die and then puts it back in and says, 'Okay, now do your monologue.' It's fantastic. He breaks down your walls."

While passionate about her acting, Morgan says she doesn't want to be among those who "get sucked into the theatre world and don't really have a connection to the outside world."

One connection business administration major Matt LaLonde expected to maintain was to his hometown of Downers Grove, Ill. "I deliberately chose a school close to home, thinking I would be home and see people a lot more," he says. So far, his academics and soccer practice have prevented that from happening. "I had to break away from friends a lot sooner than I expected."

It was soccer that drew Matt, age 17, to IWU. "I wanted to play right away," he says. "Add that to the great academics here, and meeting Coach [Ryan] Lakin, and I felt being here was the right choice." Matt finds his classes "amazing." He talks about his Gateway course with Associate Professor of Business Administration Robert Kearney, his intro business classes and a history class with Professor Michael Young. "I never thought I'd enjoy history," he laughs. "I knew the academics here are great, but it's a different level of thinking."

While confidently discussing the challenges ahead, he sinks a bit into his chair at one point and holds back a cough.

"Sorry, I'm a little sick right now," Matt explains, foreshadowing an unexpected challenge he would soon face.

That 'squished' feeling



With plans to be an optometrist, Janette spent a lot of time in the lab her first year to complete work for "General Biology."

my time on it."

Melissa, en route to a meet her first-year advisor, stops by briefly to chat. "I'm working on getting through it all," she confides. "The routine of classes is helping, but it's still a challenge."

Morgan mentions another challenge. "I just wondered where my money went," she says, laughing. "I think I ate out too much."

"At home," says Arnold, "I never really thought that much about money. If I went shopping with my mom, I would just throw things I wanted into the cart. Now I know how much everything costs." To help cover his expenses, Arnold has taken a catering job with Sodexo, the campus food service.

"Yeah, I'm a bit famous for the day I accidentally grabbed jalapenos for a professor's sandwich instead of green peppers," he relates with a sheepish smile. "It was my first week." Despite the missteps, Arnold is clearly enjoying the chance to grow. "I learned how to do laundry," he tells the others, waiting for a reaction. "Laundry! *That* is a pretty big deal."

The conversation shifts to weekend plans. "My parents are coming from Holland. Any ideas where I should take them?" Arnold asked.

"You could check out what is going on at the BCPA [Bloomington Center for Performing Arts]," offers Morgan. "It's just right downtown."

Janette gives a wistful look. "I haven't even been to downtown Bloomington yet."

A crisp, fall breeze ripples through the Quad as the first-year students meet in late October — some being introduced to each other for the first time — to share feelings about their first months at Wesleyan. In Morgan's case, the feeling is "squished."

"I stayed up most of last night before writing a paper," she says. "Everything is just piling on top of everything else."

"I know what you mean," says Janette, whose hair is now an arresting shade of ruby red. "I'm taking biology —"

Arnold gives a sympathetic groan. "Oh, I hear biology is rough."

"It is!" Janette says. "I feel like I spend all

“Really?” Morgan asks incredulously.

“I’m *taking biology*, remember?” Janette rolls her eyes in mock exasperation.

Matt, uncharacteristically quiet today, speaks up when he notices Arnold’s Sigma Pi pledge pin. “Yeah, I decided to rush,” Arnold tells him. Morgan adds that she has pledged to the Sigma Kappa sorority.

A discussion ensues about the benefits of Greek vs. independent living. “I’m just not sure I’m the Greek type,” says Janette with a shrug. “I would like to still get involved [with extracurricular activities] and maybe try out for soccer next year.”

“That’s cool,” Matt says, nodding. His own hopes for playing soccer were dashed early in the semester when he was diagnosed with mononucleosis. “I went from having no time to suddenly having too much of it,” he says, looking down at a fallen leaf which he slowly pushes with his tennis shoe.

Getting in the groove

During the first three months of spring semester, the students make time to give updates on their goals, progress and setbacks.

Now in the second semester of “General Biology,” Janette continues to struggle with the course’s demands. “But I’m not giving up,” she says firmly. Her career goal remains the same: to become an optometrist. She’s also looking forward to pursuing more personal interests in her sophomore year. “I was so involved in high school,” says Janette, “and this year I didn’t have the chance to do that with all the time I spent in the lab. Next year, I’ll get back to being part of things.”



As a theatre-arts major, Morgan felt overwhelmed at times by the demands of her coursework and involvement in two productions as well as her sorority.

“Time for myself? What is that again?”

asks Morgan with a wistful grin as she reflects on her whirlwind year. She was one of seven first-year students who staged and acted in the comedy *Almost Maine*, which ran in March at the Phoenix Theatre. She was also selected to serve as assistant stage manager for the faculty-choreographed dance concert, *The Monkey Trail*, which ran for five exhausting but exhilarating days in April. Juggling these challenges with classes and sorority life “was a lot,” she says.

“But whenever I would feel overwhelmed, I would give myself little pep talks,” Morgan says. “Yeah, I’m the kind of person who gives myself pep talks. I would just say to myself, ‘You

know what? You are here. You are at one of the best theatre schools in the country. You have all your limbs and your senses. You have friends, and this is a *good* time of your life.’”

Though Arnold continues making friends through social outlets like Sigm Pi, homesickness lingers for him. “I miss all the Dutch stuff,” he says simply. “I do have a lot of friends here, but sometimes it’s tough to get past a person’s Facebook page when you are getting to know them.” College is keeping him busy, he admits. “I feel like I have an exam every week,” he laughs, “and there have been a lot of catering events. It’s good money, but I do feel like I spend my weekends catching up on sleep.”



Though illness forced Matt to sit out his first soccer season, the experience gave him a newfound strength.

For Melissa, the first weeks of her second semester were dominated with the struggle to deal with news of the death of her beloved grandmother, who lived in Mexico. “It was just so much to take,” she says. Friends from home and at IWU sent a deluge of encouraging texts and Facebook messages. “They really kept me going.”

Despite the loss, Melissa remains devoted to her studies, while taking time out to participate in the Spanish and Latino Student Association. “I think your first year, especially the first semester, is just about learning how to make it here; and I’m learning,” she says.

During his first semester, Matt reflects, he began “comparing myself to a lot of high school friends who were at different schools. They seemed to be liking it better than I was, and I kept wondering, ‘Why am I not happy?’” It was only after recovering from his bout with mono that he realized how much the illness had jaded his experience.

“You know, I knew what the mono did to me physically, but I never thought about what it was doing to me mentally. Now I feel like I have more energy and more optimism about where I am. It’s good to be back in the groove.” Continuing to work out with the soccer team, Matt also joined the Student Athletic Advising Committee (SAAC) and volunteers at the eco-friendly, student-run thrift shop PreShrunk.

Already looking forward to making a fresh start next fall as a sophomore, Matt confidently predicts, “It’s going to be a great year.”

No longer new kids on the Quad

It's a cool, sunny day in April. Budding trees appear ready to burst into bloom. Inside the Hansen Student Center, a mood of excitement is palpable among the first-year students who have reunited (except for Morgan, who has rehearsal) as their first year draws to a close.

Among them, Melissa shows the biggest transformation. Her long, dark tresses, once used as camouflage, are pulled back to fully reveal her warm smile and sparkling eyes. "I feel like me again," she says with conviction. "This feels like the real me."

In the process of this rediscovery, she's taken up a former passion: running. "Janette and I are signed up to do a marathon," Melissa says. "I used to run them when I was at home. This will be my fourth."

"Your fourth?" asks Arnold with amazement. "I could never run a marathon. Unless I was being chased." He pauses. "Nope. Not even then."

"What are you talking about?" chides Matt, holding a forkful of salad. "Arnold, you ran the chariot races at Homecoming."

"And almost threw up doing it," adds Arnold.

Matt shakes his head, laughing. He turns to Melissa and Janette. "I think that's great," he says, referring to the marathon, with a smile both genuine and encouraging.

"She's my coach," says Janette, smiling as she points to Melissa. "We're doing it for charity."

Thinking back on her first year of college, Janette says lightly, "My friends back home say I have not changed at all. I wonder if that is a good or bad thing?"

"One of my high school teachers says my accent has changed," says Melissa. "I'm not sure how that happens."

"That's what I hear!" says Arnold. "My fraternity brothers say I sound less Dutch. I cannot tell you how much that bugs me."

The students talk about classes, papers and spring activities. They converse about faculty and seek advice from one another about what courses to take next fall. There is a relaxed feel in their demeanors, even though they are



Melissa battled homesickness but also gained confidence in her academic skills.

heading into finals and the last weeks of their first year as IWU students. They are no longer the new kids on the Quad.

Before she leaves, Melissa offers a final observation. “This year has been such a game-changer. I had a bad time at first, but now everything just flows,” she says. “This is just the beginning. And it was a really big beginning.”