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### Breisch '12 Speaks at Commencement

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# Commencement Remarks 2012\*

*\*The Annotated Version*

**Speaking to fellow 2012 graduates, Class President <sup>1</sup> Kathryn Breisch spoke of the liberal arts, lasting friendships and preparing for a Zombie Apocalypse.**

Four years ago, we stepped onto the Illinois Wesleyan campus as fledgling first-years<sup>2</sup>. Although we had no idea what to do, we knew what to do: Set alarm, don't hit snooze a third time, attend classes, pass classes, make friends, realize that biology isn't our forte, drop biology and change majors<sup>3</sup>, pass different classes, get involved and take advantage of every opportunity .

Throughout our college careers, we learned about forming our own social groups — remaining wary of friending<sup>4</sup> mysterious people like Amber Brown<sup>5</sup>. We played sports and excelled enough to win a handful of championships<sup>6</sup>. It turns out that this athletic training came in handy when we had to learn how to juggle four plates at a time when the cafeteria went trayless<sup>7</sup>. We learned about love and equality from Zach Wahls, about the power of the sympathetic imagination from Jorie Graham, about social justice from Sister Helen Prejean<sup>8</sup>. And, of course, we learned how to bust a move from President Richard Wilson<sup>9</sup>.



**2012 Class President Kathryn Breisch speaks during IWU's Commencement ceremony.**



President Wilson and Breisch dance during Wilson's speech at the annual Senior Dinner.

During our time here, we have been challenged — challenged to discover greener chemical compounds, to run competitive businesses using simulations, to compose the perfect piece of literature, to analyze Alexis de Tocqueville's political theory ... and even to learn how to spell Alexis de Tocqueville<sup>10</sup>. We have even created challenges for ourselves, pursuing research honors, presenting at the John Wesley Powell Student Research Conference<sup>11</sup>. We became tutors and lab assistants, mentors and team captains, leaders in Greek life and student senators.

And it's a good thing we did all of this. As a result, we are better for it: we are smarter, wiser, more fit. In short, we are now exceedingly well-prepared for ... the Zombie Apocalypse. Why the Zombie Apocalypse? Because Professor Michael Weis promised me five dollars if I mentioned the Zombie Apocalypse during my remarks. Professor Weis, just so you know: I'll accept cash or check<sup>12</sup>.

For the record, I'm pretty sure a Zombie Apocalypse will not happen any time soon, but this is not to say that the past four years have been easy. In many ways, they've been quite difficult. Globally, natural disasters<sup>13</sup> have shaken whole countries. Nationally, we have monitored the economy with bated breath. And closer to home, we have faced the loss of colleagues and friends<sup>14</sup>.

But during our time at Illinois Wesleyan, we have been equipped to engage such circumstances. Of course, we have been prepared intellectually by being exposed to new ideas. From music theory to game theory to political theory, general education has introduced us to multiple disciplines of learning. Our liberal arts education has expanded our knowledge repertoires in numerous and surprising ways. But our education didn't stop there. Inside and outside the classroom, Illinois Wesleyan emphasized social justice, sustainability, diversity<sup>15</sup>. As a result, we are enabled to navigate the future with aptitude, awareness and compassion.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a  
19th-century French  
political scientist and  
historian.



Breisch poses for a photo with President Richard F. Wilson and Stefan McKenzie Riley '12, who sang "America the Beautiful" during the ceremony.



From this foundation, we have been encouraged to make our own way. Our education became what we chose to make of it. We were encouraged to own our learning by conducting independent research, participating in student groups and engaging the community. By hearing such a diverse array of speakers with bold, new voices, we began to find our own voices. We have been granted a holistic education, one that has deeply informed us and also empowered us to, in the words of Minor Myers, do both well, and good<sup>16</sup>.

Such an education is a rare gift, so a simple and earnest thank you is deserved. After all, most of the members of the Class of 2012, myself included, could not have gotten this far without our families, professors and support networks. The education that you have helped us obtain has shaped, and will continue to shape, who we are.

To my fellow classmates: Enjoy this well-deserved celebration and in the future, take your personal transformation out into the world to contribute — with both knowledge and wisdom<sup>17</sup> — to its transformation<sup>18</sup>. Congratulations and best wishes to the Class of 2012!

**Kathryn Breisch is from Batavia, Ill. Graduating magna cum laude, she was elected president of both her class and Student Senate and also served as Senate communications commissioner. She began a two-year commitment to Teach For America, teaching secondary-level math in Baltimore. "I couldn't be more excited," she says.**

For coverage of IWU's 2012 commencement ceremony, visit <http://www.iwu.edu/commencement/>.

#### Notes:

**1. class president.** Kathryn Breisch says: "Class presidents are elected for two-year terms, so each class holds elections at the start of their first year and the start of their junior year." Elected as a junior, her duties included serving on the Student Life Committee, assembling and running the Class Gift Committee, coordinating activities for Senior Week and speaking at the Senior Dinner, Honors Convocation and Commencement.

**2. first-years.** Says Kathryn: "Working for the Office of Residential Life and volunteering as an admissions ambassador, the phrases 'first year' in place of 'freshman' and 'residence hall' in place of 'dorm' were drilled into my head!"

**3. *drop biology and change majors.*** Says Kathryn: “I never majored in biology, but several of my friends did, so I’m familiar with how rigorous the biology curriculum is. I did switch majors many times.” As a sophomore, she declared an international studies major, which she switched to political science by year’s end. “I also completed a French minor after studying abroad, and fell two credits short of a psychology minor. Needless to say, I took full advantage of the liberal arts aspect of IWU.”

**4. *friending.*** Sending an invitation to someone to become a “friend” on Facebook or another social networking site.

**5. *Amber Brown.*** Kathryn says: “During our sophomore year, Amber Brown was a Facebook persona who tried to friend our whole class in a matter of days. No one had heard of her before, and with scarce information and no picture on her profile page, we all became wary. Rumors circulated that it was a first-year or an old classmate who had transferred. The mystery remains unsolved.”

**6. *championships.*** Since the senior class’s first year, Titan athletic teams have won five national NCAA titles.

**7. *trayless.*** In 2010, the University’s main dining facility, Bertholf Commons, went trayless, meaning students visit serving stations plate-in-hand, rather than “piling up” on a tray. By encouraging more careful food selections, the practice reduces waste by hundreds of pounds per day.

**8. *Zach Wahls ... Jorie Graham ... Sister Helen Prejean.*** Wahls, the author of *My Two Moms: Lessons of Love, Strength and What Makes a Family*, was invited to speak on campus in April by College Democrats, College Republicans and Pi Sigma Alpha. Graham, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, and Prejean, a leading opponent of the death penalty, spoke at the annual Founders’ Day convocations in 2011 and 2012, respectively.

**9. *bust a move from President Wilson.*** Says Kathryn: “At the annual Senior Dinner, President [Richard] Wilson speaks a few words to the graduating class. He recaps the four years and usually tries to do something unexpected. This year, he incorporated lines of popular music into his speech and danced along to them!”

**10. *Alexis de Tocqueville.*** 19th-century French political scientist and historian best known for his work *Democracy in America*. Says Kathryn: “I had just taken a semester of ‘American Political Thought’ with Professor Jim Simeone, so de Tocqueville was on my mind.”

**11. *John Wesley Powell Student Research Conference.*** Held annually in April since 1990, the conference allows students to present individual research projects in a public forum.

**12. *I’ll accept cash or check.*** History Professor Weis would occasionally give helpful advice on topics for her upcoming Commencement address, says Kathryn. One time, he jokingly suggested that the speech didn’t matter “because, as the Mayans predicted, the world was going to end this

year. We kept the joke rolling, and that's when the offer came about. In truth, the bet went something like this: If I started panicking about the Zombie Apocalypse and ran offstage, I would win the five dollars. I couldn't go that far, but I thought, hey, here's material I can work with! It gave everyone a good laugh. Afterwards, he emailed me and cordially offered to buy me a cup of coffee. All in all, I'd say it was worth it."

**13. *natural disasters.*** Those disasters included the tsunami in Japan and tornado in Joplin, Mo., last year and a 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti. The class's four years also coincided with the Great Recession, America's worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

**14. *loss of colleagues and friends.*** Those losses include Psychology Professor James Dougan, who died in 2010; Music Professor C. Lawrence Campbell, who died in 2011; and first-year student Brandon Landau, who perished in an accident in March.

**15. *social justice, sustainability, diversity.*** Commitments specified as part of in the University's revised mission statement, adopted by the Board of Trustees in 2003.

**16. *do both well, and good.*** At each Commencement's conclusion , the former IWU president told graduates, "Go forth and do well, but even more, go forth and do good."

**17. *knowledge and wisdom.*** A translation from the Latin phrase , *Scientia et Sapientia*, that is part of the University seal created by John Wesley Powell, famed 19th-century explorer and a member of Wesleyan's faculty.

**18. *to its transformation.*** "Transforming Lives" is the name of Illinois Wesleyan's capital campaign to raise \$125 million toward strengthening the University's program, endowment and facilities.