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Reflection, Joy and Sunshine

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Reflection, Joy and Sunshine

Spirits ran high at May Commencement, while speakers called attention to the event's deeper meaning.

Stories by **TIM OBERMILLER**



In Illinois Wesleyan's 164-year history, it was likely a Commencement first.

"I've been at a lot of sporting events where fans did the wave, and I think our graduates each deserve that much," said award-winning playwright Deanna Jent '84, keynote speaker at the May 4 graduation ceremonies. She then led an audience of some 5,000 spectators seated on the Eckley Quadrangle to stand, cheer and raise their arms, creating a rippling salute to the Class of 2014.

It was one of many festive moments during a breezy, sunny commencement that prompted President Richard F. Wilson to exclaim: "This is truly a day to remember — there's no rain!"

Wilson led his own cheers in honor of 503 candidates for graduation during Commencement, which was held for the second time on the Glenn '22 and Rozanne Parker Kemp '27 Commencement Plaza at the entrance to State Farm Hall. Graduates from as close as Bloomington, Ill., and as far away as China, Vietnam, Nigeria and South Korea walked across the stage to receive their diplomas in a ritual that "connects Titans across the generations," Wilson said.

Throughout the ceremony, speakers evoked names that captured the spirit of the day, from the Greek god Dionysus to American folksinger Pete Seeger to Illinois Wesleyan's own Saga Dave.

In his greetings on behalf of the Board of Trustees, chair George Vinyard '71 reviewed the life of Pete Seeger — the American folk singer and activist who died last January — to "remind us of how important it is to find or develop the right tools and skills for understanding the world and making a positive difference in it."

Not only was Seeger a songwriter and singer, "he was a preserver of our folk culture, a teacher and an activist for peace; civil rights; poor, working people; democracy and the environment," said Vinyard. Reflecting on the values imparted in a liberal arts education, Seeger had not only high aspirations and ideals, "but possessed the right tools for the situation at hand and the skills to use them well," Vinyard said.

Class of 2014 President Hannah Eve Smith noted in her remarks that she and fellow graduates were “starting a chapter that doesn’t involve quad squirrels or Saga Dave” and entering a world “where you probably shouldn’t leave your laptop on the library desk ... and where it isn’t socially acceptable to wear sweat pants every day of the week. We’ll be leaving this place that we’ve called home for the past few years, and entering somewhere unknown.”

But there were many ways their IWU educations had prepared graduates for the “real world,” Smith said, through experiences that reached beyond campus and even national boundaries. “With Illinois Wesleyan’s strong commitment to students’ cultivating a comprehensive worldview, a phenomenal 50 percent of our class studied abroad,” she noted.



Speaker Deanna Jent '84 advised graduates to “continually ask, ‘What story am I telling myself?’ and examine how that story is making you feel and act.”

Deanna Jent began her address by explaining its title, “Story and Truth: the Dionysus Connection.”

“The spirit of Dionysus is embodied in storytelling and celebrating the moment,” said Jent, who was awarded an honorary doctor of humane letters degree and whose son Christopher is in the Class of 2014.

After graduating magna cum laude in theatre from IWU, Jent earned her Ph.D. in theatre at Northwestern University. She is now a professor at Fontbonne University in St. Louis and is artistic director of Mustard Seed Theatre, a professional company in residence at Fontbonne dedicated to producing plays about faith and social justice. Jent is also an educator on autism and its impact on families. Her play *Falling* — based on her experiences as the mother of a child with autism — has been performed around the world and was nominated for a Drama Desk Award as one of the Best New Plays of 2012.

Calling on her vocation as a director and playwright, Jent spoke about the power of story and its association with truth. “The truth is that you are graduating. The story today is about your transformation — how a college education has changed you and will carry you through the next chapter of the novel you could call ‘your life.’

“You’ve learned that much in the world is not black and white; there are shades of grays and colors throughout,” she added. “Truth and story intermingle.”

To illustrate the point, Jent recalled working as an administrative assistant both during and after she earned her Ph.D. in theatre from Northwestern University. “One weekend, my grandpa asked me how work was going. ‘Fine,’ I told him. ‘But I sure didn’t need a doctorate degree to be filing and typing. So much for all those years of school!’



A'Kya Adams, left, and Ini Essien '13 pose for a selfie.

“‘Hey,’ he said, with volume and passion I’d rarely seen in him. ‘Education is never wasted. You don’t have any idea when or where you’ll use what you’ve learned.’”

“‘What story had I been telling myself?’” Jent asked. “It was a kind of Cinderella story, where I was banished to the office of secretary instead of reigning as the Queen of Academia, as I should have been. My grandpa’s words helped me shape a different story, in which the job I was doing and the people that I worked with were not detours from my real life, but authentic parts of who I was becoming.”

“‘We think we’re in charge of writing our story,’” Jent added later. She advised graduates to “continually ask, ‘What story am I telling myself?’ and examine how that story is making you feel and act. ... Boldly write your own story, but when another story starts to write you, surrender to that new narrative.”

Part of that process, she said, was something “that has taken me a long time to learn: Tell the truth. Not to everybody, all the time, but find someone or some place where you can tell the truth. The messy truth, the way your life really is truth, the-stuff-I’m-ashamed-of truth.

“For me, telling the truth meant writing a play which explored the dynamics of caring for a child severely affected by autism. The story I wanted for my family, the one where all three of my children had friends, found meaningful relationships and vocations and lived independently — that story was rewritten, for all of us. We had to find new ways to define ‘normal’ and ‘success’ — and ultimately I had to surrender to the narrative that was claiming me.”

Jent introduced an anagram, “brutiful,” coined by author Glennon Doyle Melton, to describe how life can be both beautiful and brutal at the same time.

“Our lives, our stories, can be brutiful. The challenge is to live and love in those brutiful places.

“Never be ashamed,” she said, “to tell your brutiful truth.”

After James Schiffer Jr. '14 led singing of *Alma Wesleyan* at the ceremony's conclusion, his class celebrated one purely beautiful truth: They were now officially college graduates.

To read more about IWU's Commencement exercises, [click here.](#)