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Connection Maker

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Story by AMELIA BENNER '09

After 26 years of service to Illinois Wesleyan, Ann Harding — who retired in June as director of Alumni Relations — has plenty of achievements to look back on. But when asked what she's most proud of, she has a simple answer.

“This filing cabinet,” she says, pointing to an unassuming tower of beige drawers in the corner of her office.

That cabinet contains hundreds of files accumulated in her previous job as internship coordinator in the University's Career Center. Each file is stuffed with resumes, letters, wedding invitations, birth announcements and even photos of students who served internships under Harding's direction.

As her days on campus wound to a close early this summer, she mailed over 250 of them back to their original owners — now successful alumni. “I'm telling them, ‘I thought you'd get a kick out of seeing these again,’” she says, smiling.

The response has been one of joyful nostalgia, with some recipients posting old photos from their files on Facebook as part of the website's “Throwback Thursday” tradition. “I'm really proud that I hung onto all of this,” Harding says, “and that it turned out to be important to these people.”

For many current and former students, Harding is such an integral part of their IWU experience that it's hard to imagine the place without her. Evangelia Analitis '16, who is a student worker for Alumni Relations, expressed that feeling in one of many Facebook tributes posted by admirers when Harding announced her retirement. Describing her as "the coolest and spunkiest woman I've ever met," Analitis thanked Harding "for taking me in under your wing and being the best role model I could ask for."

Harding was a stay-at-home mom in September 1988, when she took on her first role at IWU: the new position of internship coordinator in the University's Career Center. She laughs now recalling that when she applied she didn't even have a resume to show then-Acting President Wendell Hess. But, he was impressed all the same.

When told she'd landed the job, "I just sort of skipped across the quad," she says.

At first, Harding assumed her job finding internships for students would focus on local opportunities. But former President Minor Myers encouraged her to think bigger. "He told me I'd be selling Illinois Wesleyan students worldwide," she said, "and that was what we did."

At first, she had little to rely on but ingenuity and persistence.

"I was in the basement of Gulick Hall, in a little office, and all I had was the phone book," she recalls.

Soon, though, she was forging connections between professional employers and students in search of rewarding internship experiences. Harding found that past graduates, who already knew the quality of a Wesleyan education, were especially eager to help.

"Ann just has an ability to make things happen," says IWU Hart Career Center Director Warren Kistner '83, recalling the years he worked alongside Harding, who was later promoted to assistant director. "She could pick up the phone and create opportunities for our students that oftentimes launched their careers."

In appointing Harding director of Alumni Relations in 2006, University leaders cited the strong bonds she'd already made with students and alumni through the Career Center, as well as her service in community organizations such as the McLean County Board, Rotary, American Red Cross, Easter Seals and more.

Inspiring alumni to feel a continuing connection with their alma mater can be a challenge, Harding admits. "Your world changes after graduation, and college can be just a memory." But those memories can serve as a powerful bond, she says, reminding former students of everything

that IWU meant to them and all it continues to offer its students. Whether they graduated in 1950 or 2014, “they all walked across the same quad,” Harding says.

She has witnessed that legacy in her own family as well. Two of her and husband CP’s three sons are IWU grads: Nick ’98 and Luke ’03.



Harding and Marsha Guenzler-Stevens '78 presented travel bags to participants of this year's Council for IWU Women Summit.

Her many initiatives to keep alumni connected to their alma mater include creation of Pride Alumni Community, Greek Alumni Network and Young Alumni Network, affinity groups that unite alumni with common interests. Harding was also a part of the group that formed the Council for IWU Women, co-founded by Marsha Guenzler-Stevens '78, who also served as president of the Alumni Association Executive Board during part of Harding’s tenure.

Guenzler-Stevens sees a genuine spirit of warmth and hospitality in Harding’s approach to alumni relations. That approach is reflected in increased alumni involvement over the past eight years — a rise in both quality and quantity.

“They’re not just surface increases,” Guenzler-Stevens says, noting that Harding has successfully recruited enthusiastic volunteers.

Harding is also proud of changes that have been made to Homecoming weekend events under her tenure. With help from the Dean of Students’ office, her team of staff and volunteers put together a slate of family-friendly events that appeal to alumni and students alike, attracting a record number of alumni back to campus.

As a national search continues for her successor, Harding reports that she is enjoying retirement. “No more Mondays!” she proclaims, a reference to the fact that her job often required traveling to alumni events on weekends and then heading back to her IWU office Monday morning. Now Harding plans to travel for pleasure, get back into community service and spend time with CP and their sons, who now live in three different states. But though her official role at IWU has ended, she still plans to stay involved with the University and keep in touch with alumni across the country and around the world.

“We formed more than just a professional relationship,” she says. “We formed friendships.”

To visit the Illinois Wesleyan's "Titan Pride" website, [click here](#).