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All in for Wesleyan

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All in for Wesleyan

With careful planning and bold vision, Richard F. Wilson proved himself to be the right president for the right time.

Story by NANCY (STEELE) BROKAW '72

Crossing the Kemp Commencement Plaza to receive their diplomas last May, members of the Class of 2015 draped colorful strings of beads around Richard F. Wilson's neck as tribute to IWU's 18th president. In a more enduring expression of their esteem, the class also purchased a bench for the new Egbers Quadrangle on the north side of campus, affixed with an exhortation Wilson has given at the close of past Commencements:

Search for what is true.

Stand for what is just.

Strive to make a difference.



Wilson leads the Titan Band.

Wilson spoke those words for one last time as president, then lifted his cap with a flourish and bid IWU's newest crop of graduates congratulations and good luck. As he departed the stage, a rising chorus chimed: "Wilson! Wilson! Wilson!" He turned to give a hearty parting wave.

Five months earlier, Wilson had announced that he was ending his 11-year tenure and would retire once his successor was chosen. That happened in September, when incoming President Eric R. Jensen was introduced to the campus community (see page 4). Right up to his Oct. 31 departure from office, Wilson was maintaining a full daily schedule that included Homecoming weekend as well as an emotional campus reception held his honor.

At the annual faculty–staff breakfast at the start of this fall semester, Wilson gave his customary review of past achievements and future challenges. He urged ongoing efforts to find new, creative ways to affirm the lasting power of a liberal arts education. In closing, Wilson said he would forgo analysis of the impact of his presidency, leaving that to historians. Instead, he spoke about the many, sometimes humorous, ways "in which the University has had an impact on me."



Pat Wilson (above right) shared many responsibilities with her husband.

Wilson shared how, shortly after being named president, he and his wife, Pat, stayed at IWU's Wilder guest house while the President's House was being readied. After a morning visit to the bathroom down the hall, they realized that the door to their room had locked automatically when it closed behind them.

It was "a lesson in humility," Wilson said, as he found himself, barefoot and in pajama shorts, walking outside in search of someone who could help. He found that help in the form of an early-to-rise maintenance worker.

Wilson said he learned another valuable lesson — "always know your competition" — at a chicken-wing-eating challenge that was part of the annual "All in for Wesleyan" fundraiser. With 25 wings consumed, and feeling every one, he found out Provost Jonathan Green had best his mark by a dozen wings.

While sharing these stories, Wilson joined in the warm laughter of faculty and staff who knew this president had been “all in for Wesleyan” at every opportunity. In his concluding thanks from both himself and Pat, Wilson said: “Your continuing support and fairness during both good and challenging times have made this a very rewarding experience for us. I am enormously grateful to have had the opportunity to serve as your president.”

Asked in an interview why he was retiring, Wilson said, “There have been several initiatives underway over the last few years. And we were able to bring them to closure. I feel like I’m leaving with no unfinished business in terms of major projects.”

Those projects included renewal of IWU’s accreditation by the Higher Learning Commission; the adoption of *IWU 2020*, the University’s new strategic plan, and conclusion of the successful *Transforming Lives* campaign. “Given all of this, it felt to us as though this was a good time for a transition, providing my successor with an opportunity to be on the ground floor of conversations about the direction of the University for the next decade.”

“I feel tremendously blessed not only that I was asked to serve as president of Illinois Wesleyan but that I’m able to finish out my career here,” Wilson added. “Pat and I leave with a great sense of satisfaction and fulfillment over the opportunity we’ve been provided.”

A mission to connect

Board of Trustees President George Vinyard ’71 describes traits that Wilson brought to campus on day one: “transparency, patience, wisdom, balance, integrity, openness, good listening skills, positivity and creativity.”

Wilson also brought experience that included a Ph.D. in higher education and a 26-year career in leadership positions at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, most recently as associate chancellor for development and vice president of the University of Illinois Foundation.

When he assumed office on July 1, 2004, the campus was still reeling in the absence of Minor Myers jr., the beloved Illinois Wesleyan president who had served for 14 years before his untimely death in 2003. The University was also facing a large deficit created by the earlier dot-com crash that had decimated college and university endowments across the country.

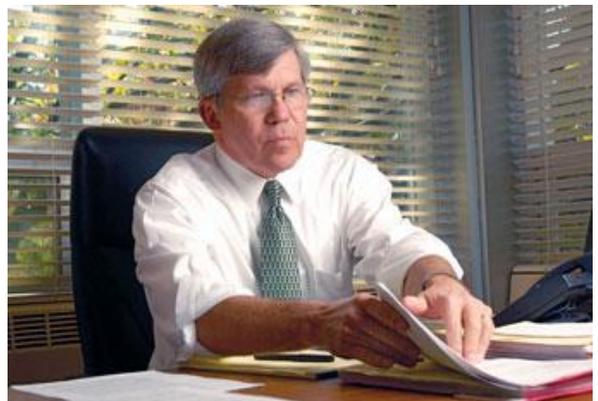
“After I was hired,” Wilson recalls, “it took us roughly three years to get back in shape financially.” To get to that place, he guided the search for new ways to address needs and maintain quality with fewer resources.

“My natural inclination is to look for ways to make people happy,” Wilson reflects. “It’s just part of my personality, but I couldn’t always do that. Sometimes university presidents are forced to choose between equally unattractive alternatives to solve a problem.”

Former Admissions Dean Tony Bankston ’91, who became assistant athletic director this year, says Wilson’s “commitment to and passion for IWU made it easy for the campus community to quickly form a close bond. And the calm resoluteness he exhibited in dealing with a variety of difficult challenges provided an example of how we could all focus on working together.

“Dick has the ability to make people feel as though they and their opinions, positive or negative, are important,” Bankston adds. “He always made time to listen before starting to speak.”

“I tend to consult widely on important issues and get the best advice I can from everyone affected,” Wilson says. “I’m not afraid of debate on issues, concerns and problems before coming to a decision.”



Wilson busy at his office desk in Shaw Hall.

Wilson consulted widely in his leadership of the strategic-planning steering committee that convened soon after his arrival and set new goals for teaching and learning, student development, human resources, identity and financial resources. Approved by the Board of Trustees in 2006, the plan spawned initiatives like the Academic Advising Center, a cross-curriculum Writing Program that puts effective communication at the heart of student learning, Alternative Spring Break, a childcare facility operated in conjunction with Illinois State University and Advocate BroMenn Hospital and the growth and development of the interdisciplinary Action Research Center.

Building on that first plan, *IWU 2020* was approved in the spring of 2014 as the product of months of study and dialogue among work groups of faculty, students, staff, trustees and alumni. “*IWU 2020* specifically maps out ways that the University can continue to fulfill its liberal arts mission,” Wilson said last year. At the same time, the plan allowed for “new areas of growth and experimentation” that stimulate academic success, offer career preparation and ready students to take on leadership roles.

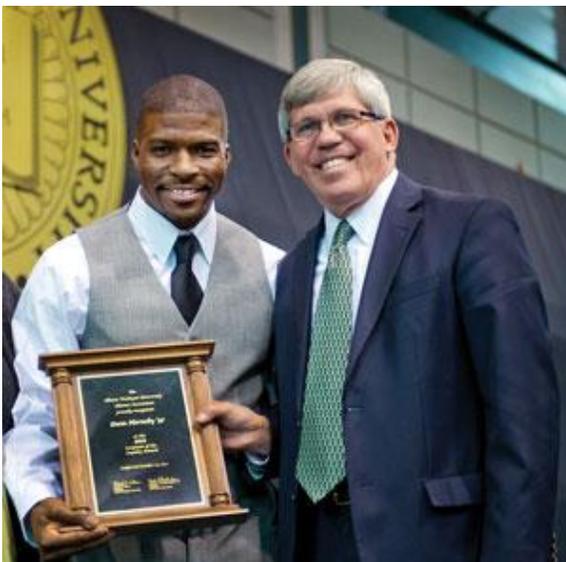
IWU 2020 also champions the need to develop and sustain a “dynamic, inclusive” campus community — one that actively educates for social justice, diversity and human rights, and prepares students to work and communicate with people of many different backgrounds in their post-college lives.

Karla Carney-Hall, vice president of Student Affairs and Dean of Students, led the diversity section of *IWU 2020*. She credits the way Wilson has been “ever present in all that he does” to lead efforts “shaping a stronger, more diverse, more just campus.”

That emphasis is reflected in such innovations as the Center for Human Rights and Social Justice and the 3D series (Diversity, Dignity and Dialogue) that promotes campus equality through weekly discussions among students, faculty and staff on human rights, race issues, gender roles and other topics.

Through active recruitment, enrollment of MALANA ((Multiracial, African-American, Latino-Hispanic, Asian-American and Native American) and international students has risen dramatically in recent years. Those students comprised a record 35 percent of last year’s entering class, which also included 67 students who were first in their families to go to college.

Wilson is proud of these changes, adding, “It’s not just racial diversity we’re after — 150 of our students are on Pell grants. Most students enrolling here do not come from privileged backgrounds; they come with great eagerness to take advantage of the opportunities. And we deliver. Lives truly are transformed at Illinois Wesleyan.”



Wilson presents the Loyalty Award to Deon Hornsby '97.

Wilson’s ability to relate to all of IWU’s diverse constituents is among his greatest strengths, according to Deon Hornsby ’97, who headed the Minority Alumni Network when Wilson took office and now serves as Alumni Association representative on the Board of Trustees.

“President Wilson made it his mission to make connections with people,” says Hornsby. “That was evident whenever you saw him. Students adored him because he didn’t carry himself as someone above the students — or above anyone, for that matter. Whenever we greeted each other, for the first several years, he’d shake my hand, give me a hug and punch me in the arm.

“I would tell that story often, whenever I was asked why I’m so active with IWU,” says Hornsby. “This is why. No one lived what Illinois Wesleyan was all about more than President Wilson.”

Kim Stewart, mother of Nicole Bialeschki '15, remembers how “Dick sat down with us at the Shirk Center and visited” during Nicole’s first-year orientation. “That goes a long way.”

As a student–athlete, Bobby Castillo '13 recalls how Wilson would come to his track meets. “It was so empowering, and it was the same for my friends. Dick and Pat were always coming to their events, no matter what they were.”

Castillo, now an IWU admissions counselor, shares how Wilson also loved a good joke. As a student, Castillo took prospective high schoolers and their families on campus tours. He would tell his groups “how I’d gone to the President’s House many times. And I’d say, ‘Think how impressive it would be to have a letter of recommendation from the president?’ Then President Wilson would come up to my group and say, ‘Oh you’re so unlucky to be stuck with Bobby.’ And I’d say to him, ‘How’s my letter of recommendation coming?’ And we’d all have a good laugh.”

Historic ambition

When the global financial crisis hit Illinois Wesleyan and other higher-education institutions across the country, Wilson decided to proceed with the launch of the \$125 million *Transforming Lives* fundraising campaign. Begun in its quiet phase in 2007 and publicly announced in 2009, this campaign set goals to strengthen the endowment, provide more financial support for students and faculty and fund new facilities and programs needed to fulfill IWU’s evolving educational mission.

Some questioned launching such an ambitious campaign in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. At campaign kickoff galas, Wilson harkened back to a previous crisis. “The 1929 stock market crash caused problems so profound that the University accepted, on occasion, bushels of corn in lieu of tuition money. And yet, in that very next year, the newly constructed Presser Hall was dedicated — and what a glorious home it has been to generations of Wesleyan music students and faculty.

“That is typical of Wesleyan’s brave and proud history,” Wilson said. “Young minds don’t wait, and neither will we. Our time is now.”

That 19,231 alumni and friends — including 9,628 first-time donors — eventually answered the call “serves as testimony to the trust our donors placed in his leadership and his vision for our future,” says School of Nursing Director Victoria Folse '86, who is the Caroline F. Rupert Endowed Chair.

“Dick’s a people person,” observes his wife, Pat. “A lot of his success came from that. Fundraising is about relationships and trust. People are only going to give if they want to, and they need to know they can trust you with their gift.”

Longtime IWU supporter Jim Shirk agrees. “He was perfect for the job with his background in development. Dick is good at getting people excited about giving.” The Shirk Family Foundation recently provided a major gift to expand fitness and athletic-team space in the Shirk Center for Athletics and Recreation.

Transforming Lives got the first of many boosts with an endowment gift valued at \$25 million — the largest such gift ever made to the University — provided by Honorary Campaign Chairs B. Charles (Chuck) Ames '50 and Joyce (Jay) Eichhorn Ames '49.

When it concluded last fall, the campaign surpassed its original \$125 million goal, with \$141 million tallied in gifts and pledges.

For those visiting campus, *Transforming Lives*' impact is most visible in bricks-and-mortar additions: the new classroom building, State Farm Hall; the Joslin Atrium, a 2,500-square-foot glass addition to the Memorial Center; the Joyce Eichhorn Ames School of Art's stunning new rotunda and an endowment for the Gates at Wesleyan student apartments. Campaign gifts also led to the major renovations for Tucci Stadium and both the art and music schools — as well as completion of the Minor Myers jr. Welcome Center, home to Admissions and the Hart Career Center.

While those projects “have greatly advanced the quality of our infrastructure,” says Wilson, “they were also a relatively small percentage of the overall campaign effort.” For example, Chuck and Jay Ames gave a matching gift for new endowed chairs and professorships — raising the total number from 11 to 31, with more to come. Mike Young, the Robert W. Harrington Professor of History, calls this emphasis an important achievement in Wilson's tenure, enabling faculty “to enhance both their teaching and their scholarship.”



Front of the University's new classroom building, State Farm Hall.

For students, campaign funds enabled new study-abroad and research opportunities, including a new summer scholars programs for undergraduates. In addition, \$27 million was donated in annual and endowed scholarship gifts. Many were Promise Scholarships, which fill the gap (\$5,000 a year for four years) between what the University can provide and the financial needs of talented prospective students with limited means. This kind of support, says Wilson, “sustains a very important value embraced by previous generations of our alumni and friends.”

A recent graduate and scholarship recipient told him, “It's a miracle I'm standing here. The person I was would be so proud of the person I have become.” “Think about that,” he says with a wide smile. “Students say that to me over and over: *I'll never be the same.*” He constantly hears the same comment from alumni. “When I hear their stories, about the impact IWU had on their lives, I love that!”

Future challenges

Among the president's goals has been to put the University on firmer financial footing and make it less vulnerable to the vagaries of a shifting global economy. That meant building up both the endowment and alumni-giving rates that were significantly lower than many of IWU's peer institutions. One reason Wilson green-lighted *Transforming Lives* in the midst of the recession was that he saw it as an opportunity that could not be missed: to change IWU's culture of giving and bring home the idea that, no matter what the size, alumni gifts mattered.

The University's fiscal vulnerability was brought home when the Great Recession took another big bite out of the endowment. Combined with that loss was a startling increase in the needs of students whose families were also struggling. From 2006 to 2012, the number of students applying for need-based financial aid grew from 69 to 80 percent, and IWU was allocating more than \$31 million annually to meet those needs.

With projections for a major operating deficit, Wilson again made tough choices that included a two-year salary freeze, a reduction in the retiree health benefit, creation of a review process for all replacement hiring and selected reductions in expense budgets for nonessential items.

Wilson resisted the temptation to add revenue through major tuition hikes or by laying off staff, as many other universities and colleges were doing. Still, changes were hard on a community already fatigued from the previous dot-com crisis.

"I picture Dick, time and time again, standing in our faculty meetings painstakingly explaining his decisions and inviting feedback," says Mike Young. "That must be a very uncomfortable position to be in, but he never flinched from exposing himself to the caustic questioning. He always gave an earnest and honest answer and carried himself with dignity. It was just another way he soldiered on in the face of adversity."

"Pat had to talk me back from the ledge more than once on hard days," Wilson says, "or at least pour an extra glass of wine when I got home."

Despite those tough days, Pat says it helped enormously that the IWU community continued to be loyal and supportive, pitching in with ideas and making the needed sacrifices to help deal with the crisis.

Meanwhile, the campaign brought \$67 million new dollars to the endowment and created a big turnaround in annual giving. A volunteer task force of alumni convened by Wilson and led by the Advancement Office suggested ways to boost the Wesleyan Fund — which, at 19 percent alumni participation, put IWU in the bottom half of all private universities and last among 13 liberal arts colleges regarded as peers. In its plan, the task force focused on ways to create a stronger culture of stewardship and engagement, partly by sparking more connections between alumni and current students through career mentoring and internships as well as donations.



The 2014 "All in for Wesleyan" challenge began with a midnight student pep rally led by a balloon-hatted Wilson.

Young alumni became a focus of the annual "All in for Wesleyan" daylong challenge. By means of social media and grassroots enthusiasm, the challenge in its first year alone attracted 302 first-time donors and raised \$480,000.

Through all these efforts, the annual giving rate among alumni rose to 25 percent in three years and moved IWU up five places among its peers.

As much as there is to feel good about regarding this progress, Wilson believes the challenge to preserve academic excellence and meet students' financial needs while keeping a balanced budget "will continue to be on the desk of the president — not just for private higher education but for all of us who are involved in college and university work."

That's partly based on the fact that "the absolute number of high school graduates in the United States started declining in 2012 and will remain in a trough for a decade," says Wilson.

Another challenge going forward is philosophical. As a result of what Wilson calls the "long tail of the economic meltdown," he is constantly asked to explain the "value proposition" regarding the cost of a liberal arts education.

Wilson believes that IWU's job continues to be preparing students for change, the pace of which is faster than ever. A liberal arts education produces the most flexible and globally minded thinkers. CEOs know that, and look for new employees who are broadly educated, Wilson says. IWU's curriculum helps students secure their first jobs and prepares them for what's next. A student can graduate prepared to be an accountant, but thanks to a liberal arts background, that student is also prepared to lead the firm, says Wilson.

At the same time, "there's tremendous pressure coming from parents and from students that is driven by worries about the opportunities for jobs in the market immediately following graduation," says Wilson. "And so we have to live with that

tension, and I think as a University we simply have to continue to deliver our message that, over the long term, students who are prepared with the kind of experiences that we provide will be well served over the arc of their careers.”

Looking back, Wilson says, “It was enormously satisfying, at the end of my career, to immerse myself in a place and a mission I so thoroughly believed in.” He gives a lot of credit to his staff and the board, as well as faculty and students.

Dick (who turned 69 in September) and Pat count on spending much of the next year either in Chicago or traveling. “We want to get out of the way and give the new president plenty of room to establish his own plans and priorities,” he says. At some point, they hope to find a home in Bloomington-Normal, with plenty of visits to see their children and grandchildren, who live in Illinois and on the West Coast. Wilson also expects he will stay involved in higher education in some limited capacity.

As to his legacy, Board of Trustees member Jean (Sullivan) Baird ’80 sums it up this way: “He was the right leader at the right time.”

“I will remember Dick most of all for his humanity,” Young says. “He’s an honorable human being with a solid core of decency and honesty. People cannot help but see these qualities in him.”



They also can’t help but see that, for 11 years, Richard F. Wilson was the steady hand on the tiller ensuring Illinois Wesleyan University has been moving in one direction: forward.

- [Read more about Pat Wilson and her contributions to Illinois Wesleyan.](#)
- [Read a farewell message from President Wilson to the University's alumni and friends.](#)
- [Read about the University's new president, Eric R. Jensen.](#)
- [Watch a video tribute to Wilson shown at Homecoming 2015.](#)