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IWU Chemistry Students to Work Magic at Harry Potter Release

July 15, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - With a flash of color and a puff of smoke, a group of local wizards helped usher in the latest Harry Potter installment at a late-night celebration in a local Borders bookstore on Friday, July 15.

Sighting the sorcerers was not difficult. Clad in dark robes, approximately ten students and faculty from Illinois Wesleyan University's chemistry department and one faculty member from Illinois State took turns demonstrating their special brand of "magic" to the delight of those onlookers who were waiting until they could purchase the latest book in the Harry Potter series just after the stroke of midnight.

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, the sixth novel in the popular fantasy series by British author J.K. Rowling, continues the story of the young wizard Harry Potter as he enters his sixth year at the Hogwarts Academy for Witchcraft and Wizardry.

In planning the release party, Karen Adelman, a corporate sale representative for Borders and a self-proclaimed science junkie, sought skilled assistance in the performance and explanation of a series of experiments throughout the evening. She called the Illinois Wesleyan chemistry department and was pleased to find Laura Moore, assistant professor of chemistry, in the office over the summer. Together, Moore and Adelman arranged the details of the demonstrations.

Although the book party was a first for the Illinois Wesleyan chemists, they have done their share of such demonstrations in the past. The University's student affiliate chapter of the American Chemical Society has performed comparable demonstrations for local grade schools and Girl Scout troops.

The scientists clearly enjoyed their part in the celebration, mixing up a variety of color potions and providing a few magical moments. Kelly Feder, a junior biology major who will be participating in the demonstrations, was impressed that "when Borders needed something magical, they called a chemistry professor."

Stephen Hoffmann, assistant professor of chemistry and environmental studies and a Harry Potter fan himself, performed one reaction ending in a sudden color change and another experiment featuring bubbles and plenty of dry ice. In a third demonstration, Moore and Roesner pierced a balloon with a long needle without popping it. Between the formal demonstrations, many of the younger readers gathered around hands-on activities.

According to Roesner, because the audience consisted of people from a range of ages and interest, the demonstrations were geared more towards entertainment than scientific enlightenment. However, the faculty and students took time to respond to questions from the audience between their performances.

After all, the magic of these particular potions and spells is that even muggles (as Rowling calls non-magical humans) can appreciate and understand the secrets behind them.