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IWU Legacy: A Family Affair

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – This year, Illinois Wesleyan University welcomed 587 first-year students to campus. Of those students, 32 have siblings, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and generations farther back who call Illinois Wesleyan their alma mater. Often referred to as legacy students, this year represents the largest class of such distinction in the University's history.

Craig Rapp, class of 2014, called attending Illinois Wesleyan "a family extravaganza." With his two older brothers having already attended IWU, and his father Randall Rapp being a member of the class of 1973, he had spent a fair amount of time visiting the University prior to becoming a student. Choosing IWU was an easy decision and a gut instinct, he said. Although his father was happy he had selected IWU, he still encouraged his son to look elsewhere.

"My dad pushed me to look at other schools to make sure this was the right fit for me," said Rapp. "He was delighted that I was looking at IWU, but he was also very firm that he would be fine with whatever school I chose."

Wanting a small university with a good accounting program, Rapp was drawn to IWU. "He researched and concluded that Illinois Wesleyan's accounting program was outstanding," said his father, noting that his niece Morgan Wetzel is a senior accounting major at IWU as well.

Although the accounting program was a big draw for Rapp, there was something else about the University that caught his attention. "Some of my dad's best friends are from IWU. For me, it formed the connection between Wesleyan and lifetime friendships," he said.

Randall Rapp also noted that his sons John, class of 2003, and Garrett, class of 2010, have both held on to friendships made at IWU. "There is a certain consistency in the experience," he said. Garrett Rapp noted Illinois Wesleyan makes the bonds of his family stronger. "We have had the entire family on Illinois Wesleyan's campus more than once," he said. "In this way, IWU has not only been a home for my brothers or myself, but literally the whole family."

Samantha Olson, class of 2014, is more than aware of her family legacy. On her father's side, she is the fifth generation to attend Illinois Wesleyan. Her mother's side of the family extends as far back as 1902, when Olson's great-great-grandmother Mattie Elizabeth Wilcox Stoddard graduated from IWU.

Although she and her great-great-grandmother share an alma mater, Illinois Wesleyan was a different university at the turn of the 19th century. The College of Law was in its 28th year when Wilcox Stoddard graduated from IWU. The Behr Observatory housed one of the largest telescopes in the country at the time. *The Argus* was a newly developed publication on campus that displayed poetry and ornamentation on the front page. The Illinois Wesleyan Olson knows today is a variation of her great-great grandmother's University, but the pride students and alumni show for IWU has not changed.

“My parents did not pressure me to attend Illinois Wesleyan,” said Olson, who is currently a double major in biology and art. “However, my grandmother couldn’t help talking about how wonderful her time was at IWU. When we would attend Homecoming or other events, my grandpa would be so excited to show us around.” Over the years, IWU and the idea of college became synonymous to her.

“Our main concern was making sure she selected a school that lined up with her needs, aspirations and ambitions,” said Samantha’s mother, Carla (Livingston) Olson ’83. “We would like to think she would have found IWU on this basis alone, but given that her parents, grandparents and several other extended family members have attended the University with good success, it would have been impossible for her not to consider IWU.”

When Katy Seibring began looking at colleges her junior year of high school, she knew she wanted to attend a school like Illinois Wesleyan, but not IWU. “She liked the University but thought that the combination of her mother and father being graduates, the University’s locale being near her hometown of Towanda and having her father work at the school may have been too much,” said her father, director of Financial Aid Scott Seibring, class of ’85.

However, after visiting 11 schools in five different states, she found that Illinois Wesleyan was the best fit for her. “I knew I felt more comfortable at IWU. Growing up, I took piano lessons at Presser Hall and had basketball practices at the Shirk Center,” she said.

Although her parents met while at Illinois Wesleyan, and her aunt and uncle attended as well, Seibring, much like her fellow legacy classmates, felt no pressure to attend her family’s alma mater. So far, she says she is enjoying her time here and is excited to start playing on the women’s basketball team.

Whether being a first generation legacy student or part of a five-generation extravaganza, there is a shared sense of pride and tradition at Illinois Wesleyan among these families. Todd Szerlong, whose father Tim Szerlong graduated from IWU in 1974, is glad he chose Illinois Wesleyan. “I love it here. It’s a great place to go to school,” he said. Like his father, he is pledging the social fraternity Tau Kappa Epsilon. Growing up, he heard a lot of stories about fellowship and brotherhood from his father and hopes to have a similar experience, promising “there will be more stories to come.”

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