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‘There was a Time’: The Retirees Coffee Club Reminisces

January 7, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — On a snow-covered morning, a group gathered at Illinois Wesleyan University’s Hansen Student Center. They gravitated toward a large, round table in the middle of Center Court, with steaming cups of coffee in hand. Those seated around the table collectively represented nearly 260 years of dedication to Illinois Wesleyan. Known simply as the Retirees Coffee Club, they are individuals who have helped shape the University.



“We sit here and solve all the world’s problems,” joked Jim Routi ’63, who retired as dean of university admissions in 2003 after 40 years of working at IWU. “Really though, this gives us a chance to get together and talk.”

The Retirees Coffee Club meets every Wednesday at Hansen. The only requirement to sit at the table is to have retired from Illinois Wesleyan, though longtime friends are always welcome. The number of people who attend varies from week to week, however that day, eight braved the cold. Over the music humming on the sound system and the whirl of the espresso machine at Hattie’s, snippets of conversation were caught that ranged from travel plans to the new health-care legislation.

“Here’s that book on traveling to Turkey, George,” said Judy Brown, an adjunct professor for nine years and wife of Emeritus Professor of Theatre Jared Brown, who sat close by. She handed the tome to retired Professor of Education George Charukian, who taught for 17 years at IWU. He showed the book to his wife, Carol, who still teaches music at IWU.

The Club decided to forgo solving the world’s problems for a morning, and looked back on their days at Illinois Wesleyan. “You know what I miss the most?” asked Professor Emeritus of Biology Bruce Criley, who retired along with his wife and fellow biology instructor Norma in 2008. “The coffee lounge in Sheean.” It wasn’t simply the cozy feel of the room or the free beverages, he explained, but the camaraderie the lounge offered to faculty from every side of the Quad. “It was a constant stream of faculty from all across campus,” he said. “There was nothing like that. It was great. I got to know people in science, the humanities and theatre.”

Those connections resulted in collaborations that ranged from team-taught classes to the now-famous letters of recommendation from the Crileys for pre-med students applying to medical schools. “We wanted to give a real snapshot of the student, something more than their transcripts could show,” said Bruce. The Crileys enlisted help from professors who had biology students in their class, and included paragraphs from those professors in the letters. “There were notes from theater professors and art professors and sociology professors. The medical schools loved it.”

Barbara Bowman, a retired professor of English, nodded, noting that collaborations benefitted both the students and the professors. “I feel as though Bruce taught me how to write a letter of recommendation,” she said.

Myra Dey, wife of the current Miner Linnaeus Sherff Professor of Botany Jonathan Dey, sat quietly at the table. When asked a question, she waved her hand slowly in a shy protest. “Oh no,” she said. “I’m not a retiree. I’m an interloper.” Norma Criley turned to her. “Myra, you are not an interloper,” she chided. “You have done so much over the years. You belong here.”

To make her point, Norma brought up the IWU Women’s League, of which Norma, Judy, Carol and Myra all took part. Formed by Nell Eckley, wife of then-University President Robert S. Eckley, the League was comprised of female faculty members and the wives of the faculty and staff. The group helped the University with everything from registration forms to baking birthday cakes for first-year students. “There was a time when parents could order home-made cakes for their children through the League,” said Routi, who noted money raised from the sales went toward small projects on campus, such as erecting benches or buying new drapes. “The idea was that students could get a real cake and capture a bit of home,” he said and asked. “Say, how much were those cakes, anyway?”

"I just remember baking them – a lot of them," Norma said without inflection, invoking laughter from Myra and Carol.

The League evolved in the 1990s, according to Bowman, to become the IWU Women's Caucus. "Female faculty members would get together and discuss books and topics relevant to the time," she said.

Myra smiled when she recalled the League assisting with student registration. "There were about a million forms," she said. "And no computers," added Norma. "We would set up in the [Young] Main Lounge and go through all the forms with the students. There was a form for everything, and a lot of them needed signatures."

Sitting next to his wife, Bruce nodded. "That was a time when you needed to get your advisor's signature to drop a class you were taking," he said, pointing out that currently classes can be dropped online. Although the new system is more convenient for students, Bruce noted he missed the chance to try and talk students out of dropping. "Usually it was a case of freshman nerves, thinking 'This is all too much!'"

"I don't think I ever tried to talk them out of dropping," admitted Norma, "but I would point out what the consequences were, especially for biology students. I would tell them 'It's up to you,' but also ask them if they had done all they could to make the class work, including talking to the professor."

Other changes included the gradual increase in the number of students on campus. Over the course of several years in the 1990s, students attending rose from 1,600 to around 2,100. "It was a planned, gradual change," said Routi, whose office oversaw the admissions increases. "Admission requirements rose as well."

Jared Brown leaned back in his chair. "You know I come from a background of public universities, where the number of students jumped from 12,000 to 15,000 and back to 12,000 each semester. So this being able to estimate how many would attend, and be off only by one or two students? It's incredible to me."

Lew Detweiler, a retired professor of physics who still teaches May Term classes, looked at Routi. "I never understood how you could do that. Be within one or two students," he said. "I studied probability, and I never understood. You accept more students than come. I always understand statistically, but how do you factor in the students' choices?"

Bruce laughed. "Did you ever go with Jim to the high schools and watch him in action?" Detweiler nods as Bruce continued, "He could easily joke with the kids, but when it came time to talk about Wesleyan, *whoomp*. He was right there giving high school students a real vision of Wesleyan."

Routi laughed. "I should have checked my horoscope today. Didn't know I'd be honored." He turned to Detweiler. "It was never really a guess. It was all about the numbers and meeting the students. You knew who would feel at home here."

The group continued the conversation as coffees ran cold, giving the sense the company was enough to keep the morning warm. They talked of the new buildings and new faces. How much they love to come to campus to attend ballgames, use the pool at Shirk or see theater productions.

As the time reached past the hour, slowly people began to bundle up to face the bitter cold outside. Conversations continued to hold the group together for a few moments more, but finally people drifted off to their next destination – visiting departments, meeting up with old students, conducting research. Yet they knew they would return for another cup of coffee in a week's time, when the Retirees Coffee Club beckons again.

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