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Illinois Wesleyan Celebrates Class of 2015

May 3, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Illinois Wesleyan University celebrated the Class of 2015 during Commencement exercises May 3 on the Glenn '22 and Rozanne Parker Kemp '27 Commencement Plaza.

Board of Trustees President George Vinyard '71 congratulated the more than 420 graduates and thanked them for their contributions to the Illinois Wesleyan community. Using the life and works of the late Maya Angelou as example, Vinyard noted Angelou imparted great wisdom and provided a positive and forceful expression on the best in humanity.

“In your time here on campus we trust that you not only developed your intellects but also experienced many positive and memorable feelings and reached out to and were reached by many good hearts,” said Vinyard. “May this continue and may you warmly remember and honor your university and your fellow alumni in the years to come.”

In his welcoming remarks, President Richard F. Wilson recognized Brandon Landau as a member of the class. Landau lost his life in March 2012. A graduation gown was draped on a chair in the front row, and Wilson noted each graduate would walk by the chair as a way to pay tribute to Landau’s life and honor his memory.

Vinyard, Wilson and Provost and Dean of the Faculty Jonathan D. Green conferred an honorary doctor of humane letters degree upon Elizabeth A. Robb, a 1978 graduate. Robb, who recently retired as chief judge of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit in Illinois, delivered the Commencement address “The Power of Connection.”

Focusing on the “bridges” aspect of the University’s 2014-15 academic theme “Walls and Bridges,” Robb reminded the graduates that a bridge forms a connection between two things and spoke of the power of connections professionally, personally and to Illinois Wesleyan.

She said it is likely the graduates do not fully appreciate the value of their liberal arts education, noting that she did not until long after she graduated.



Graduates on the Eckley Quad, as seen from State Farm Hall.

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Triplets Don, Matt and Meagan DeSalvo were among the graduates on May 3.

The opportunity to interact with students and professors from a variety of disciplines is a hallmark of a liberal arts education, but that opportunity becomes much more difficult in graduate or professional school and in workplaces, Robb said. People need to consciously strive to move outside of their comfort zones to connect with others who are different or spend their lives in vastly different fields.

“I discovered this in my own professional life,” said Robb, who noted she realized early in her career that the law is limited in its ability to adequately address the needs of individuals who commit crimes or abuse their children.

She said three-quarters of all people incarcerated, both adult and juvenile, suffer from behavioral health

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disorders and substance abuse. "After their release from prison they re-enter their communities having received little or no treatment for these disorders, little assistance in developing pro-social behaviors, obtaining an education or proper vocational training," Robb said. Only when those in the legal profession began collaborating with mental health professionals and others, did they become more effective at changing the behaviors of these individuals and increasing the likelihood they would become successful, law-abiding citizens, she said.

In discussing personal connections, Robb acknowledged the value of college friendships, teammates, sorority sisters and lab partners. "Not all of these connections will remain as strong and as important to you as they are today," she said. "But many will. Some will sustain you the rest of your life."

She noted a recent study published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* focused on the necessity of maintaining a diverse set of social connections as key to managing stress, improving our immune systems and giving meaning to our lives. The study said technology such as texting and social media has made it easier to avoid forming substantive relationships in person.

Robb acknowledged she loves her cell phone and the ability to communicate immediately with friends and family. "I do worry that those of your generation will not form substantive relationships in the flesh and blood," she said. "As you move to a large city or a new campus or venture to a new country....nurture the friendships you have made here, and consciously work to form new ones wherever you go. Don't rely on Facebook, match.com, Instagram, Twitter...as your only social connection. Spend time in person relating to one another."

The recently retired judge spoke of the strong connection she has maintained with IWU and its people for more than 25 years, including her service on the Associates board, supervising IWU interns, and counting other alumni among her closest friends.

"When an IWU graduate sends me a resume, or calls to ask for help in finding a summer internship or a full-time job, I eagerly assist," she said. "This is the power of the IWU connection. Use this power."



Senior class president Sneha Subramanian '15 choked up as she expressed her gratitude.

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Whether you live three blocks or 3,000 miles from campus, know that IWU...will serve as a bridge, a connection for the rest of your life," she added.

Another invited speaker, R. Given Harper, the 2015 Student Senate Professor of the Year, also acknowledged our digital world where we can communicate, shop and work without leaving our homes. "It is imperative that you get out and collaborate with others to address the major challenges affecting society," said Harper, the George C. and Ella Beach Lewis Endowed Chair of Biology and an avian ecologist. "I urge you to get out and experience the natural world, which provides the conditions necessary to sustain life. By experiencing nature you will have a better understanding of the reasons that we need to protect it, and you will find that its beauty can also be a powerful source of inspiration."

Senior class president Sneha Subramanian '15 acknowledged she could not speak for the entire class; as each person viewed graduation through a different lens, but she spoke emotionally in gratitude for the metamorphosis that Illinois Wesleyan facilitated within her.

"I have attended international schools all my life and my friends were always moving around. This made it difficult for me to make connections with people," said Subramanian, an international student from Singapore. "Despite traveling halfway around the world, the largest journey was within me," she said of her experience at Illinois Wesleyan.

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During the ceremony three faculty were invested as ~~endowed professors~~endowed professors. Those honored were: Educational Studies Professor and Chair Irv Epstein to the new Ben and Susan Rhodes Endowed Professorship in Peace and Social Justice; Associate Professor of History Gordon Horwitz to the new Davis U. Merwin Endowed Professorship in History; and English Professor James Plath to the R. Forrest Colwell Endowed Chair of English.

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In closing the ceremony, the retiring President Wilson noted the Class of 2015 will always hold a special place for him, as this year’s Commencement is expected to be the last over which he will preside as president.

“I shall leave with wonderful memories of your spirit, your creativity and your passion and with deep appreciation for the many kind messages and thoughtful gestures you have extended my wife and me over the last few months,” Wilson said. “My fondest hope is that your life and career will be filled with as many exciting moments and rewarding opportunities as I have had as president of this wonderful university.”

Several graduates organized a bead-giving tribute to Wilson. As each graduate stepped forward to receive his or her diploma from Wilson, the student draped a strand of beads around his neck.



Students draped President Wilson with beads as they received their diplomas.

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He expressed his gratitude for the personal tribute provided by gifts from members of the Class of 2015, to purchase a new bench gracing the recently completed quadrangle north of State Farm Hall. Wilson closed the ceremony with the same admonition he has used at Commencement in recent years:

“Search for what is true. Stand for what is just. Strive to make a difference.” This message is engraved on the Class of 2015’s gift in honor of Wilson.