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Kim Hill

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Bianca Spratt '11: Be Open to Forging New Path

Oct. 2, 2015

Bianca Spratt '11 is Relationship Manager for the United Way of Metropolitan Chicago. She recently returned to campus to speak to students about making the most of the multitude of opportunities at Illinois Wesleyan — including being open to drastically changing their plans when new experiences forge a new path.



Bianca Spratt '11 is one of many alumni who come back to Illinois Wesleyan to help current students, offering their expertise or career opportunities.

As a high school student from the nation's third largest city, what was the appeal of a small liberal arts school in central Illinois?

The very things that were the opposite of growing up on Chicago's South Side. I felt at peace here [at Illinois Wesleyan], it was quiet and it felt very safe. Another part of my criteria was finding the **Black Student Union** [a registered student organization], so I knew there was support for black students at a majority white institution. I planned to be a doctor, so I was looking for a great biology program. During a visit [to Illinois Wesleyan] my freshman year of high school, I sat in on a biology class with six college students and the professor. I loved that it was small and the professor knew the students well — you could tell that just by being in the class a few minutes.

How did you go from pre-med student to sociology major?

From the age of five to 17 I wanted to be a pediatrician. I'd participated in University of Illinois Chicago summer institute programs, shadowed doctors, was involved in public health after school — I'm engaged in the field of medicine during high school. Until AP Chemistry my senior year, where I went quickly from an 'A' to an 'F.' I realized I really don't have a knack for biology or chemistry, and studying those fields was not my passion.

How did Illinois Wesleyan help you discover what that passion could be?

This campus became my playground. I had four years to dib and dab to figure it out. I was part of the **Summer Enrichment Program** and through that, I interned as a summer camp counselor with Catholic Charities and I loved it. With a friend, I also ran the **Life is a Blank Canvas program through the Action Research Center** to do workshops with youth to encourage them to go to college. We brought them to Illinois Wesleyan for a tour, so they were encouraged to go to college and see what it's all about. And I began to wonder how I could do this kind of work, what I called being a 'servant leader' and get paid for it. The Catholic Charities work really opened my eyes to the inner workings of social service agencies.

I had thought my passion was to be a doctor, but I realized my passion was for youth. So I began to think maybe there was another way to fuel that passion.



How did an alumna point you down a new path?

Some of the minority alumni came to Homecoming during my senior year and I started talking to **Samantha Robinson (now Sherrod) '01**, who had done **Public Allies** [a leadership program for diverse young adults]. This is a 10-month AmeriCorps service program. She thought I'd enjoy it, too, so I researched it, applied and was accepted. But at the same time, I had already applied to and been accepted for a master's in education program with a focus in youth development at University of Illinois Chicago. This was a new program at the time, very competitive to get into, and I was just torn — which one should I do? Should I continue with my education, even though I

was pretty burned out mentally, or do I give back to my community and continue to figure out how to help young people? I decided to go with Public Allies and defer graduate school for one year.

What happened next?

After a year with Public Allies, which was incredible, I decided I really did not want a master's in education. So I did a second year with Public Allies, which focused on nonprofit management, and that's how I landed with the United Way. I wanted to be part of a bigger organization that would have a greater impact.

I didn't know anything about fundraising in an organized way, about working with a team to meet those goals. But in my [United Way] interview, I said I wanted to be a voice for the voiceless. In my job now, I encourage people to give [money] to the United Way so that a person like me, who has been impacted by United Way dollars, can stand in front of them and ask them to give. That's why I do the work I do now, so we can make connections between those who may not be aware of what's going on day to day – people going hungry, women in domestic violence shelters, people needing legal assistance, people needing rent money just to get into an apartment. The United Way partners with the organizations doing that work.

How did your liberal arts education help prepare you for this work?

It allowed me to explore all my interests. I spend a lot of time talking to young people, and I always tell them I had one major (**sociology**) and multiple minors because I was so interested in everything, I could never decide on which track I wanted. You can take courses you're really interested in [at IWU] and still graduate on time. I like to create my own path, and Illinois Wesleyan gave me that opportunity.

Illinois Wesleyan provided me with new perspectives and a safe, close-knit environment to get to know myself better. Knowing your own identity is very important – where you came from, how you got to where you are, and recognizing where you want to go. When opportunities present themselves, if you know yourself, you know whether or not those opportunities are in line with what you want to do. Because of close relationships with faculty, deans, even the president, I was able to figure out the best path to achieve what would be best for me.