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Katrina Evacuee Thrived at IWU

Sept. 2, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— You could forgive Minh Nguyen '09 if the American Labor Day holiday brings back some anxious memories.

For it was Labor Day 10 years ago when Nguyen found himself on a plane bound for Bloomington and Illinois Wesleyan University, part of the mass evacuation of people displaced from New Orleans as Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath brought the city to its knees. A citizen of Vietnam, Nguyen had arrived at Tulane University for freshman orientation on Sat., Aug. 27, just hours before Katrina made landfall. For Nguyen, his Tulane experience lasted exactly half a day.

That Saturday, Tulane officials advised Nguyen and the rest of the incoming students to leave their belongings in dorm rooms they'd been assigned and evacuate the campus. Nguyen had spent his senior year of high school as an exchange student in Texas, so he returned to Fort Worth with his host family. As New Orleans reeled from Katrina, Tulane officials announced the university would close indefinitely. Pondering what to do next, Nguyen sought counsel from his sister, who lived in Washington, D.C.

“Minh and his sister decided he should leave Tulane, as the future there seemed so uncertain,” recalled Reenie Bradley, now-retired international student and scholar advisor at IWU. As a high school senior, Nguyen had also been accepted to Illinois Wesleyan. Nguyen and his sister were anxious that he not lose a semester of college, so they asked if he could enroll late at IWU.

Illinois Wesleyan mobilized quickly to make that happen. Nguyen flew to Bloomington with a laptop and the only suitcase he'd taken from Tulane, leaving the three remaining bags in his Tulane dorm room as advised. His sister met him at IWU, helped him settle in, and left shortly after. It was up to Bradley and the rest of the campus to help Nguyen acclimate to classes, which had started the week prior.

“Because it was Labor Day weekend, the campus was pretty empty, except for the international students,” said Bradley. “I summoned the other first-year men and asked them for help to support a student coming from the hurricane.”

As first-year students helped with Nguyen's immediate needs, IWU staffers made contributions as well. Sports Information Director Stew Salowitz '76 even lent Nguyen his vintage L.L. Bean Big Ben timepiece after Nguyen mentioned he needed an alarm clock during an [interview](#).

“I think the other first-year students were pleased to have the opportunity to help someone else,” Bradley said. “Things were happening so quickly and we had so many things to manage – from immigration matters to reimbursing Tulane for tuition – but I wanted Minh to have a normal college experience. We tried not to keep calling him ‘the hurricane kid.’”

A strong student, Nguyen caught up in his classes in no time, Bradley said. He made friends, and although he returned to New Orleans in November 2005 to claim the rest of his suitcases, he decided to stay at IWU rather than transfer to Tulane when the campus reopened in March 2006.



Minh Nguyen '09 in 2005, newly arrived at IWU with few possessions.



Minh Nguyen '09 (far left) with Tuhin Abner '09 and another friend during Abner's visit to Vietnam earlier this year.

“The wonderful experiences, faculty and friends I had at IWU convinced me that I was in the right place,” Nguyen said in an email. “The students and faculty all created a friendly atmosphere.”

As she recalls those first days with Nguyen a decade ago, Bradley is amazed at how well he handled the adjustment. “I didn’t realize it at the time, but I think his year as a high school exchange student (in Texas) lessened the culture shock. In some ways, he was better prepared when he got to IWU than the other first-years.”

Graduating a semester early with majors in both **economics** and **business administration**, Nguyen went on to earn a master’s degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Those years in the United States meant many more opportunities to celebrate Labor Day — perhaps relaxing with friends, or playing his beloved soccer, or just

hanging out — rather than hurling toward a future which once seemed so uncertain.

After receiving his master’s degree, Nguyen returned to Vietnam and today works as an international cooperation official for the State Bank of Vietnam. He’s married and stays in touch with a number of friends from IWU, including Tuhin Abner '09, a citizen of India who now lives and works in Tokyo.

“Minh really embodies what international education is supposed to be about – having a good educational experience abroad and returning home to share your fresh, global perspective,” said Bradley. “I am proud of him and happy he was able to build lasting friendships here.”