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Alumni Encourage International Students Through Card-Writing Campaign

April 14, 2017

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.—From the outside, the envelopes fanned across the table, each with a single name carefully written on the front, look like they might contain a happy birthday wish, “congratulations on your new job” or any number of other generic greeting-card sentiments.

The contents of these cards, however, are anything but ordinary. Within each of the 161 envelopes — one for every international student currently enrolled at Illinois Wesleyan University — is a personal message of support, encouragement and caring from an IWU alum those students have never even met.

The card-writing campaign was conceived by Vera (Leopold) Miller '05 after the January executive order halting all refugee admissions and temporarily banning people from seven Muslim-majority countries. A *Chicago Tribune* story detailing how Illinois universities were responding prompted Miller to wonder if any students from the countries most affected were enrolled at IWU.

“One of my closest friends from freshman year to this day is Mariano Lizano (Class of 2005), who is from Costa Rica,” said Miller. “The thought that international and Muslim students at IWU might be feeling anxious, uncertain and even unwelcome in this country was terrible.”

After contacting alumni friends, former professors, IWU’s International Office, and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, Miller and several friends came up with the idea of one-to-one cards or letters as a way to support the University’s international students.

“It was so concrete and felt like a way to make a meaningful, personal connection,” she recalled. “We also remembered how exciting it was when we got mail as students!”

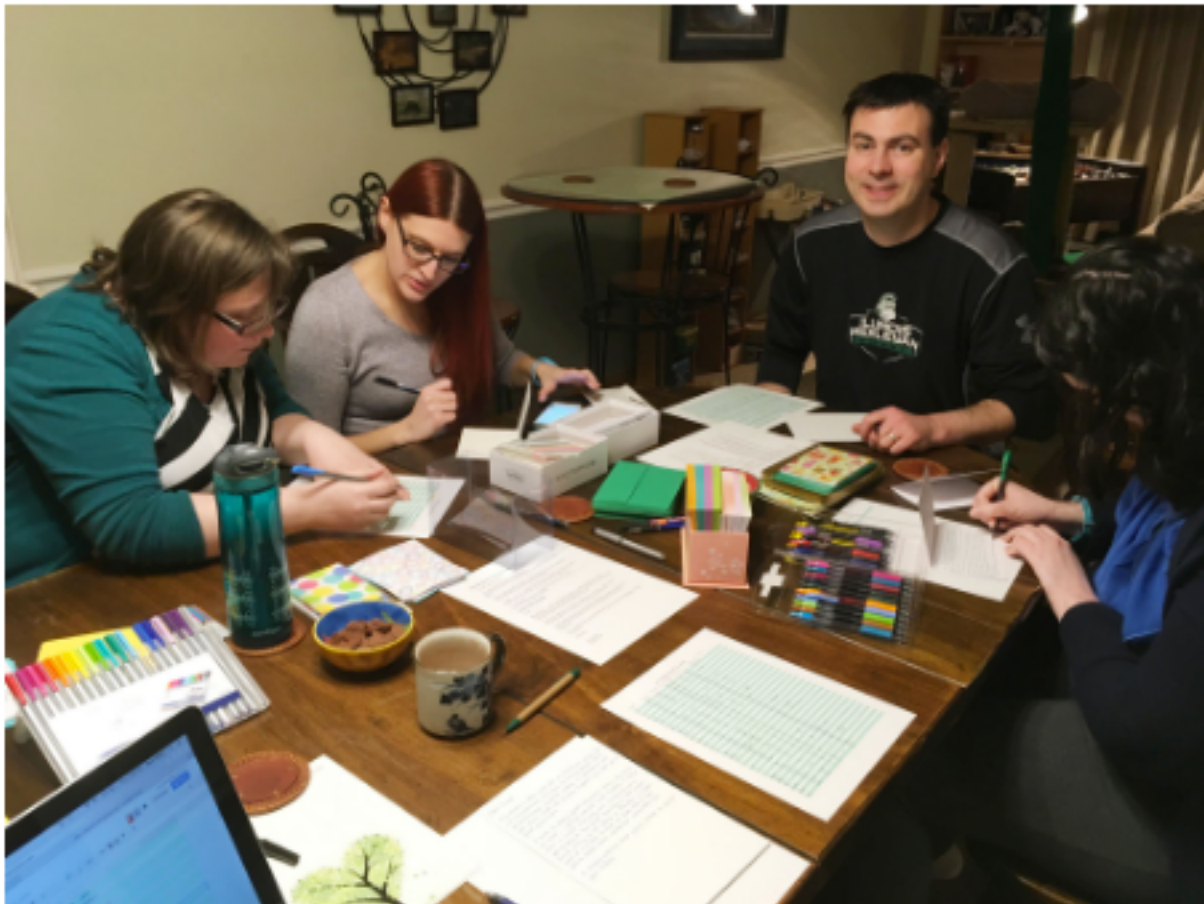
Miller contacted her alumni friends via Facebook, who in turn invited other Titan connections, until eventually 25 alums – several whom Miller had not known previously – wrote cards. Each alum chose students based on his or her major, country of origin, or some other commonality they might share.



Anaol Galle '20 from Ethiopia reads his card from an IWU alum. Titans staged a campaign to write notes of encouragement and support to all 161 international students enrolled at Illinois Wesleyan.

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“I and so many of my fellow alumni really value you and the contribution that you make to the Illinois Wesleyan family.”



Alumni gathering for a card-writing party included (clockwise from left) Kathryn Salo '06, Jessica (Jones) Rzepka '06, David Miller '05, and Kathleen Garibaldi '05. *Photo courtesy of Vera (Leopold) Miller '05*

Miller said the core alumni group determined early on not to make their messages political. “It was really about sharing encouraging messages with the students and letting them know they were supported and valued,” she said.

Four alumni gathered at the Downers Grove (Ill.) home Miller shares with her husband, David Miller '05, for a letter-writing party, complete with music by singer-songwriter Ari Hest, who performed several times at IWU while the six were students. They shared real-time photos of themselves on Facebook with other alums who were writing notes from their homes at the same time. “It gave us a chance to reconnect with each other and those great memories we made at IWU,” Miller said. “I felt so proud to be a Titan that night.”

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“I am a better person for meeting so many people of different backgrounds in school.”

Some alumni used their study abroad experiences to select students to write to. Others were influenced by a language they had studied at IWU. “I saw cards that included greetings in Spanish, Arabic, Chinese — and one drawing of the Chilean flag,” Miller noted. “Some expressed that we had met lifelong friends at IWU and hoped they had also made those great connections.” She said many alumni also described how the presence of international students on campus and in their classrooms had enriched their college experiences and broadened their view of the world.

Miller collected all the cards and FedExed them to Illinois Wesleyan, where International Student and Scholar Advisor Robyn Walter was expecting the package. Walter invited the students to drop by the International Office, where a special delivery was waiting.

“I wish you could see the students’ faces as they read the cards they’re receiving,” Walter wrote in an email to campus administrators. “As you can imagine, some are more animated, while others contain their emotions, but they all communicate their appreciation of such thoughtfulness by the alumni.”

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“The attention and support from this letter really reassured me that I am warmly welcomed and appreciated here at IWU.”

Linh Le '19 was among the first students to open a card. “I was surprised to see the letter and thankful that an alumna (Kat Garibaldi '05) took the time to get to know who I am before writing the letter,” said Le, a native of Hanoi, Vietnam, double majoring in educational studies and psychology. “I felt connected to her through her writing about her personal experiences with IWU and her aspirations, even though we have never met. The attention and support from this letter really assured me that I am warmly welcomed and appreciated here at IWU.”

Campus leader Ojaswee Shrestha '18 is an environmental studies major with a concentration in ecology. “I felt very humbled to receive the letter,” said the native of Nepal. “I teared up a little bit — happy tears! People taking their time to write nice things to us, tells me that they care about us and that our group of international students are strongly united together.”



A few of the 161 cards or notes written by 25 IWU alumni to each international student enrolled at Illinois Wesleyan.

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“I really admire that you have traveled to a different country to pursue your studies.”

Matthew Kim '20 noted that going to college in America has been truly a challenge, even though he had attended high school in Georgia for two years. “On the way to the finish line of my first year at IWU, an unexpected, sincere letter would be very meaningful and one more big support for me,” he said.

As she nears the end of her time on campus, Shaanxi, China, native Xiaoqian (Caroline) Wang '17 said that as a senior, “there are many ways to choose, which makes me feel kind of confusing these days. But this letter really gives me power to pursue my dream.” Wang is double majoring in accounting and mathematics.

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“Once a Titan, always a Titan!”



Several students gathered outside the International Office in CLA to read their cards from IWU alumni.

Miller and the bulk of the alumni letter writers graduated in the years ranging from 2005 to 2009. She recalled the late Minor Myers, jr. was IWU president at the beginning of the college experiences of most of the writers.

“A bunch of us wrote the famous Minor Myers quote about going into the world and doing well, but more importantly, going into the world and doing good. At the card-writing party at my house, we talked and thought a lot about President Myers’ message all these years later, and know it’s our mission to make a difference in the world, no matter what path we might take in life,” Miller continued. “He had such kindness and this powerful belief that every student’s dreams and ambitions were important, and that each of us could do great things. That’s the same feeling we wanted to share with the students by writing the cards.”

Miller has another theory as to why so many alumni from her era responded to the idea. “The events of 9/11 happened when I was a freshman,” she said. “The aftermath was challenging for all of us, but for some of my friends who were international students, it was uniquely difficult. I think going through that time as a young person and exploring the issues it raised as part of the supportive and inclusive Illinois Wesleyan community really changed me, and it taught us that we need to come together with compassion and understanding during difficult times rather than making divisions and letting fear and intolerance take over.”

Cards for International Students

