



Winter 2-28-2022

## Widicus Weaver '00 named IWU Chemistry Alumni of the Year

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### Recommended Citation

Flick, Tatum Lyles, "Widicus Weaver '00 named IWU Chemistry Alumni of the Year" (2022).  
*News and Events*. 4193.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/4193>

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# Widicus Weaver '00 named IWU Chemistry Alumni of the Year

February 28, 2022

Susanna Widicus Weaver '00 has been named Alumni of the Year for the Illinois Wesleyan University Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry and will speak at the department's Senior Night Awards Banquet on April 18.

"To me this is more important than any other award I could have received because it's really from the heart," she said. "It's such a huge honor. To know that they respect and care about me at this level is just incredible."

Widicus Weaver chose Illinois Wesleyan's undergraduate program after meeting her research advisor in a lunch line at the University's open house. That advisor showed her a meteorite collection and ignited her passion for astrochemistry.

"Other schools wouldn't even let me see the labs," she said. "She was telling me all about her research, so I ended up working with her for four years, and I graduated with honors."

The program contained a small number of students, who interacted regularly, and when Widicus Weaver's mentor left for another job, the rest of the department stepped up to make sure she could finish her honors research, attend meetings, give talks and continue learning chemistry.

"The department was phenomenal at helping me navigate all of that and at helping me keep my work going," she said. "Every bit of it prepared me to get through graduate school and taught me how to think about science in terms of how to come up with a hypothesis and test it. It taught me how to get a research proposal funded and keep a project running ... everything I needed to know to be a research professor."

As an undergraduate, Widicus Weaver worked hard, spending evenings and weekends in the lab and sharing her excitement for chemistry with others in the department. Her enthusiasm and dedication did not go unnoticed.

"I realized that we had a budding research chemist in the making," said Ram Mohan, IWU Wendell and Loretta Hess Professor of Chemistry. "I'm pleased that my observations were correct – Susanna has done wonderfully well and carved a name for herself in the field of astronomy. She has made significant contributions to the field and her research focuses on understanding the evolution of prebiotic molecules as stars and planets form. She was an independent thinker and came up with unique solutions at times to problems she ran into during the course of the lab experiment."

Widicus Weaver is now a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Departments of Chemistry and Astronomy. Her time at Illinois Wesleyan University taught her how to handle research challenges and helped her grow into a confident scientist, but it also left a lasting impression on her desire to mentor undergraduates.

"I am always aware of the power of an undergrad research experience and how that can influence someone's career trajectory," she explained. "It was such a strong influence on mine. I always have them in my group and I really love mentoring undergrads and teaching graduate students how to mentor them."



Susanna Widicus Weaver '00 was named Alumni of the Year for the IWU Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. (Photo by Colton Mansavage)

*By Tatum Lyles Flick*

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