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Richard Koenig '89 Highlights Value of Affordable Housing

Jan. 23, 2023

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Affordable housing advocate Richard Koenig '89 explained how Illinois Wesleyan University allowed him to discover the power to create a place for others, during his address for 2023 Founders' Day Convocation on Jan. 18.

Illinois Wesleyan President S. Georgia Nugent opened the convocation with remarks about the founders of IWU and how the vision and values of the University have evolved since its inception in 1850.

“Our liberal arts education is not all about today,” said Nugent. “It’s about understanding and learning from yesterday, and from that understanding, creating tomorrow. The University evolves — that is a source of its strength.”

In his keynote address titled, “The Place of Affordable Housing in an Age of Affluence,” Koenig shared stories of his childhood, ways that Illinois Wesleyan helped shape his future and how those experiences inspired him to build a non-profit in Chicago’s affluent northern suburbs to develop affordable housing in the area.

“The power of place really matters. Does geography create destiny? Does where you’re from dictate where you’re going? Sometimes where you’re from influences who you become,” said Koenig.

While studying economics at IWU, Koenig and his peers volunteered at The Salvation Army of Peoria where he witnessed America’s homelessness crisis first-hand. This inspired him to study urban planning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for his graduate degree. He then connected with communities throughout the Midwest to advocate for more affordable housing projects.

“At Illinois Wesleyan, I learned my mission in life. I had no idea where that journey would take me, but I found my passion,” said Koenig. “Find your passion. Find your inspiration. Save your corner of the world.”

As executive director of Housing Opportunity Development Corporation, Koenig has created more than 500 affordable housing units for low-income families, seniors and people with disabilities in the Chicago area.

During his address, Koenig explained the many obstacles that can prevent communities from creating equitable access to housing, such as zoning delays and lack of funding. He said that members of the public are often unhappy with the prospect of affordable housing being built nearby — but Koenig said there should be a range of housing types and price points available in every community.

“There is value in mixed-income communities,” said Koenig. “There is power in giving people the ability (to have access to housing), even if they are different from you. They aren’t ‘them,’ they are ‘us.’”



Founders' Day Convocation 2023

By Julia Perez