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## Distinguished Alumnus a Leader in Neurosurgery

Rachel Hatch  
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

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Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960

## **Distinguished Alumnus a Leader in Neurosurgery**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Stephen L. Ondra is known as one of the most renowned neurosurgeons in the nation and is director of spine surgery in neurosurgery at Northwestern University in Chicago. He is a decorated veteran of the Gulf War, earning a Bronze Star while serving as commander of a medical unit. He has been asked to advise the Department of Defense, members of Congress and Medicare leaders on policy for health and veterans' issues. He has helped establish a school in China for neurosurgery, and is an advisor on health-care and veterans' issues to Presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama [D-Illinois].

What does a man who has achieved so much say about his life? "I'm sorry this doesn't sound more exciting," said Ondra.

His alma mater disagrees. Ondra has been awarded Illinois Wesleyan University's highest honor, the Distinguished Alumnus Award. He will be honored during Homecoming activities October 3-5 on campus. Ondra will present a talk entitled "Health Care Reform and the 2008 Presidential Election" at 2 p.m. Friday, Oct. 3 in Beckman Auditorium of The Ames Library (1 Ames Plaza East, Bloomington).

Ondra's humble nature is balanced by a determination to do what he can to help. "I really believe you can make a difference as an individual if you put forth the effort," he said.

### **A painful beginning**

Ondra came to Illinois Wesleyan University by way of an accident. After graduating from high school, he had been recruited to play football and hockey by the United States Military Academy at West Point. During a training exercise, Ondra was injured with a bayonet lacerating his kidney. "That was a slow and painful recovery," he said. "Although I would like to think being injured gave me a perspective as a patient that I still hold onto today."

Because of the injury Ondra was not fit for active duty and therefore ineligible to graduate from West Point. Knowing he wanted to be a doctor, he decided on Illinois Wesleyan, where he earned a degree in biology. "The University had an excellent reputation, and I needed a

small school because it was physically difficult for me to get around,” he said. Ondra still struggled with his health, and was frustrated when he missed classes. Too ill to leave his room for a chemistry final, he was in danger of losing credit for an entire class. “It was then that Professor Forrest Frank came to my room and sat with me while I took the final,” said Ondra. “How many professors would do that? But it was all part of what makes Illinois Wesleyan an incredible place.”

By the time he graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in 1980, Ondra had recovered enough to be fit for active duty. He resumed his military service while attending Rush Medical College in Chicago, graduating in 1984. Ondra then completed his internship and residency in neurological surgery at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. “Neurosurgery is one of the last, great frontiers of medicine,” he said. “There was exciting work being done in spinal surgery when I was training. It was a combination of biology and engineering that was rapidly expanding.”

### **Honor at war**

As soon as he finished his residency, Ondra was assigned to Fort Bliss, Texas, in 1990. “I found out my wife Cynthia was pregnant, and the next day Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait,” he said. Ondra was assigned as a commander of a surgical detachment. “The next thing I knew, I was off to the Gulf.”

During his time in the war, Ondra received commendations for his leadership, and earned a Bronze Star after he helped save several people from a fire on his base in Saudi Arabia. “One of the canisters of gas exploded inside a mess tent. A friend and I ran in to make sure everyone was all right,” he said. After helping rescue several people, Ondra and his friend returned to the burning tent to remove a second gas canister before it exploded.

Returning home in 1991, Ondra spent a month at Fort Bliss before being asked to return to Walter Reed, where he eventually became the director of spine surgery. In 1994, he left the service and joined the faculty of the University of Michigan. In 1996, Ondra was asked to come to Northwestern University, where his titles include residency program director, director of spine surgery in neurosurgery and medical director of the Neuro-Spine Intensive Care Unit.

### **Successful medicine**

Throughout the years, Ondra’s reputation has put him in demand, with national and international leaders seeking his advice. In the late 1990s, he was asked to chair the Department of Defense’s Spinal Cord and Column Injury Program, examining research with the goal of

distributing federal funds. He also was asked to consult with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, speaks regularly to groups about funding in the surgical field, and the Department of Health and Human Services appointed him to the Medical Coverage Advisory Committee.

It was during this time that a request came from thousands of miles away for Ondra's expertise in neurosurgery. The daughter of the Minister of interior for the Peoples Republic of China needed surgery, and her mother wanted only the best – she wanted Ondra. He and a colleague agreed to do the surgery, if they would also be allowed by the government to do pro-bono work there as well. While in China, Ondra recognized a need for a more permanent solution to the lack of neurosurgical expertise in the country. "It's one thing to go over there, do an operation and then leave," he said. "It's something completely different if you can go there and affect change for the better." Ondra decided to help establish a school for spinal surgeons in China. "I felt I had an obligation to help in an emerging country," he said. His access to government officials gave him the opportunity to talk about health policy in China. "To my shock, they were actually listening to me," he said. "I think my efforts in China and with Medicare were the sparks that led to my interest in public policy."

The Department of Defense appointed Ondra to a Chair a new committee studying blast injury, and he has continued to advise members of Congress on health issues. This has included former Sen. Robert Dole [R-Kansas] on integrating new technologies into Medicare and Sen. Barack Obama on legislation for veterans' affairs and health-care issues in the military. Ondra said he was so impressed with Sen. Obama, that he decided to assist with his presidential campaign, and has reduced his hours at Northwestern to make him more available to the campaign.

Ondra said he is awed to be the recipient of the Distinguished Alumnus Award. "It is such a tremendous honor," he said. "I may have arrived by accident to Illinois Wesleyan, but I left with an unequalled affection and appreciation for my school. If I could do it all over again, I would do it all over again, without the bayonet part, that is."