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# At crossroads of midlife, alumni pause to reflect

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## At crossroads of midlife, alumni pause to reflect

Editor's Note: In developing themes for her story on midlife career changes, Patricia Locke '76 interviewed several Illinois Wesleyan alumni in the summer and early fall of 2004. Her interview notes with those alumni follow.

### **Pam Fitzgerald Jensen '73**

Pam studied sociology at IWU and spent two years as a Young Life volunteer while she was in college. She first entered the business world — starting in word-processing and then into marketing and research as a product manager. When Pam's oldest child was four, she made the decision to be an at-home parent. While at home, she was part of a small group of women who met regularly for a Bible study, and found themselves able to support and encourage each other during times of transition. After 11 years at home, she entered a Master's of Divinity program at Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minn.

After graduation from seminary, Pam obtained her current part time position as pastor for a small, 60-member Congregational church. Her church is located in a rural area about one-and-a-half-hours away from her home. She spends Sunday and Monday serving the church, then drives home to be with her family for the rest of the week. (Her part-time position is all the small, mostly elderly congregation can afford. Pam says she is gratified at how well the church members minister to each other when she can't be there.)

Pam sees her vocational transition as part of the “seasons of my life with different opportunities in different seasons. Being home with our children was important, and then, so was going back to school. I would not have been mature enough to be ready to be a pastor at age 20 or even 30. At age 40, I was ready, and not willing to go back to marketing. Earlier in my life I wouldn't have been able to imagine preaching a sermon every Sunday, but I've since developed some skills and learned some things I never thought I'd use the way I've been using them.”

Pam hopes to find a full time pastorate a little closer to home, but is happy for now with her current situation.

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### **Dennis Stark '59**

Dennis studied economics while at IWU. He was one of the three founding members of the Acacia fraternity. He feels “very, very blessed” to have attended Illinois Wesleyan and feels that it “prepared him well, not only academically, but taught him the value of service.”

After IWU he did post-graduate studies at Princeton and Harvard. Dennis spent 21 years in banking and retired in the late 1990s. He was restless in retirement and became the vice president and CEO of the University of Rhode Island Land Grant School. After five years there, Dennis again retired. He currently spends three days a week as director of a new small bank in Rhode Island, and two days a week consulting. His consulting work in outplacement gives him the public-service piece he so enjoys. He also volunteers with Financial Executives International. Dennis also is the treasurer for his local (Episcopal) church, and serves as the budget and finance treasurer for the National Episcopal Church.

Dennis and his partner recently celebrated their 35th anniversary, and he is proud of his leadership role in the gay community. His advice to current IWU students is to “work and play

hard. There is a difference between being passive, and enthusiastically making the best of things you can't change. Be an exception to the rule."

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### **Laura Harding Koppenhoefer '83**

Laura graduated from IWU with a BA in Nursing. Her brother also attended IWU four years after Laura. She started her nursing career in the OB unit at Brokaw Hospital in Bloomington. Laura married in 1985, and began graduate courses at Illinois State University, intending to teach nursing. She obtained her M.S. in Health Sciences from the University of Portland in 1990. Laura and her husband had a daughter during the time they lived in Oregon. They moved back to Bloomington where Laura taught at Mennonite Hospital and was adjunct clinical faculty at IWU in nursing recruitment.

Laura had been interested in ministry in high school, but at that time, women were just starting to become ordained, and she wasn't sure it was a possibility for her. She was very involved in church work as she grew up. In the late '90s, Laura began seriously listening for the call to ministry in her life. She "asked herself the hard questions, spent a lot of time in prayer, and eventually found I was listening and saying, 'yes.'" Still, Laura waited a couple of years before entering seminary. She began her studies at Wartburg Lutheran (ELCA) Seminary in 1999. After graduating in 2003, Laura received a call as an associate pastor for Educational Ministries from Trinity Lutheran Church in Moline, Ill.

Laura says her time "caring for and with folks" as a nurse and teacher, recruiting skills, the organizational skills she learned at Illinois Wesleyan as an officer in her sorority all came together in her call to ministry. "When that happens, you find yourself called to be who you are."

She advises current students to "pray and consider," stating that "we're not going to know what we're going to be our whole lives as teenagers. Take time to grow your gifts."

Laura also fondly remembers how "Minor Myers spoke repeatedly about not being afraid to try things. ... Illinois Wesleyan is a wonderful place."

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### **Randy Dewar '68**

Randy Dewar was an education major at IWU, but felt he learned a second education while playing football for the Titans. Randy feels his experience on the football team "set a pace for life. It was a springboard for a career in leadership." He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Missouri at Columbia. Randy spent 28 years in school administration, leaving his career there as superintendent of schools in Missouri to become a full-time faculty member at Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg, Mo. Randy teaches at the graduate level, teaching students from his experience in school administration, and also doing research and advising. He finds his "students are teachers."

Randy finds that sometimes he misses, "being in the hot seat, where all the action is going on, but I don't miss the pressure. My 'pressure' today is self-imposed." He loves feeling like he is part of a "school family." His career change allows him to spend time with his own family, as well, because of a more flexible schedule. He looks back on the years in administration work and

raising a young family as “intense,” but finds now he can pause and reflect. Randy advises those who feel trapped at mid-life not to give up. “There’s always a second chance.” He also has advice for current students: “I worked my way through IWU, and it was a lot of juggling. To work hard and enjoy the experience takes a real effort, but it’s worth it — that’s how a work ethic develops. I always told my own kids when they complained about how hard they worked, ‘Look, after graduation, those who didn’t work so hard in college will have a word for those who did: Boss.’”

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### **Melanie Etheridge Ginavan '92**

Melanie grew up in a small town and wanted a small college. She loved the campus at Illinois Wesleyan and felt it was a good fit. She studied art and wanted to become a graphic designer, but “knew only about half of what that meant.” The idea of making money as an artist was a new concept for her. She spent her senior year January short term as an intern at State Farm doing graphic art and found it “amazing fun. I applied for an opening while I was still in school and spent three-and-a-half years at State Farm. It was fabulous training for a first job.”

An IWU classmate told her about a job opening with a small, independent advertising agency in Bloomington and she applied. Melanie worked there for 8 years and “cried when I left.” She always loved contemporary design, and decided she wanted to learn to weld. “I found a guy to teach me — poor fool!” When she traveled on business, Melanie spent time looking at shops and local festivals and soon decided Bloomington had an “unmet need” for a contemporary store offering local and other artist’s work. “It takes a degree of faith, but I thought, ‘I have to create this environment!’”

With no experience, Melanie spent a year and a half creating a business plan. Her store, Artezan, opened in April 2003 in downtown Bloomington. Melanie has always seen herself as an artist, but was willing to follow her heart to see what form her artistic sensibilities would take. Before making her career change, she did much research, and also spent half days at the store and half days at her old job for the first few months the store was open. She hopes to expand to more stores some day — “My biggest design project yet!”

Her advice is to keep expanding one’s ideas, “nothing is out of the question. Keep engaged and excited — my brains have gotten more wrinkles than ever doing this!”

Melanie values Minor Myers’ legacy as a supporter of the arts. She treasures the memories of Dr. Myers selecting one of her pieces for the President’s Award. “Do your research and don’t be afraid of the answers,” Melanie says. “Modify if you must, but don’t be afraid to take a deep breath and jump in.”