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Alumnus' Loyalty to be Honored

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. –Raymond Berger's life has been founded on seeing potential.

The 1970 Illinois Wesleyan University graduate is known professionally for his ability to rejuvenate a business, which he has done repeatedly over his 40 years in retail. He has done the same with Illinois Wesleyan alumni, founding both the Chicago and San Francisco alumni chapters, and connecting countless alumni. "It's incredible to attend alumni events and planning meetings," said Berger. "You meet people from ages 28 to 78 and we all have something in common. I love the people. They are the reason I attended Illinois Wesleyan and they are amazing," The University is returning that admiration by honoring Berger with the 2008 Loyalty Award during Homecoming activities on campus Oct. 3-5.

Berger's involvement has come at all levels, from attending and hosting alumni events, to serving on committees, such as the Capital Campaign Committees in both Chicago and San Francisco, the Class of 1970 Reunion Committee and the IWU Golf Outing Committee. Since its revival nine years ago, he has served on the Executive Board of the Alumni Association for Illinois Wesleyan, and is the first co-chair of the new Pride Alumni Community.

Behind his every effort is Berger's uncanny ability to see the way to make something right – a talent he fostered while growing up in Manhattan. He combined an amazing eye for detail with a fearless nature – even sending letters to Brooks Brothers as a young man when he did not like the layout of their store. "I'm not sure if it was because of my letters, but they soon changed the layout just as I had suggested," he said.

Berger brought his distinctive style to Illinois Wesleyan. "I think I was the only one sporting a jacket and tie who wasn't required to wear them," said Berger. That style opened doors for Berger, literally, when he volunteered for Sen. Robert F. Kennedy [D-New York] in 1968. "A group of us from IWU went to Indiana to campaign for Bobby," said Berger. "It was an important primary for him. If he would have lost, it might have been all over." Berger said he and his friends differed greatly from the other college-age volunteers who journeyed to Indiana.

“Here we were, a bunch of clean-shaven, short-haired kids from Illinois Wesleyan, standing alongside kids who looked like, well, hippies.” While the other young volunteers stayed in university residence halls, Berger and his friends were placed in the homes of supporters. “We really got to know people,” he said.

It was his interest in politics that drew him toward his degree in history, even though Berger knew he wanted to pursue retail as a career. “I always enjoyed history, said Berger, who had volunteered in high school for New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller’s campaigns. “You would think I would major in business or economics, but in reality, fashion has little to do with economics. It takes a passion to understand it, and I have always had a passion for men’s wear.”

Berger said his education proved beneficial when he became a buyer for Bloomingdale’s soon after graduation. “For 10 years I would meet with vendors from all over the world,” he said. “When I traveled to London, Florence and even small towns in France, it was wonderful to know the history of the people and places and be able relate to them.”

After a decade with Bloomingdale’s, Berger was recruited by Marshall Field’s in Chicago, where he worked to revamp their home furnishings areas. It was there he began to get involved with Illinois Wesleyan alumni activities. While Berger was applying his strategic thinking to revitalizing Marshall-Fields, he was struck by how he could do the same for University. “It’s all about building an organization,” said Berger. “It’s all about being a part of something in which you believe and for which you have a passion.” He helped found the Chicago alumni chapter in the mid-1980s. “We planned events big and small, from 60 to 600 people,” he said. “I loved meeting the IWU presidents and working with them to plan the next step for the University.”

It was one of those presidents, Robert S. Eckley, who called on Berger shortly before he retired, asking him to chair the University’s capital campaign efforts in Chicago. “That was amazing to know you were helping to guide the future,” Berger said.

Berger worked as a vice president of Merchandising for Williams-Sonoma in San Francisco from 1990-1992. Returning to Chicago in 1992, Berger became chair of the Chicago Alumni Association. Serving as chair until 1996, he continued his efforts with the University. In 1998, his work drew him to California again, taking a job with Beverages and More that transferred him to San Francisco again. “I was part of a team brought in to turn the company around. My job was to refocus the merchandise, to find things people would want and present it in a more exciting way,” said Berger. The company, now called BevMo, is a household name on the West Coast. During this time, Berger began to throw parties for Illinois Wesleyan alumni. “It

was only 20 or 30 people at first,” he said. The parties grew, as did Berger’s unofficial duties. The group soon blossomed into the San Francisco Regional Alumni Association that reaches across northern California.

Berger now lives in Santa Fe, N.M. with partner Alex Shapiro, and has come full circle. The young man who dressed in Brooks Brothers now is managing a Brooks Brothers store. “They have done much to reinvigorate their line,” said Berger. He remains active with Illinois Wesleyan; and teases that he has not had the chance to start another alumni chapter because there are only three fellow alumni who live in the Santa Fe now, so. “It is a beautiful place to retire,” he said thoughtfully. “Perhaps now is the time to begin to lure some alumni this way.” Another project in the works for Raymond Berger.

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