



2012

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Sarah Zeller Julian

Recommended Citation

Zeller Julian, Sarah (2012) "Camp Connections," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*: Vol. 20: Iss. 4, Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol20/iss4/9>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Camp Connections

Through Summer Music Camp, Maurice Willis brought the joy of music to thousands.

Story by SARAH (ZELLER) JULIAN '07



Willis (above, second from right) talked with students after a rehearsal at the IWU Summer Music Camp.

first year as an assistant before taking the reins as camp director in 1957. The camp — which included band, orchestra and choir activities — attracted students in sixth grade through high school seniors and employed many IWU alumni as counselors. The group of staff got together every year, even after Willis retired from leading the camps in 1983, and considered themselves family.

“We really are a closely knit group,” Willis recalled in a 1981 interview after his retirement. “We all enjoy each other’s company and enjoy the camp and look forward to coming each summer.”

Many of the alumni he influenced went on to dedicate their lives to music education, including Dick Casper '59, who retired from teaching after 32 years as the Peoria Public School orchestra director. “Maury depended heavily on his loyal staff for the smooth operation of the music camp. The members of his staff were extremely dedicated and returned year after year to be a part of this event,” he recalled.

“In the early years, Maury could only pay us with aftershave, perfumes, key chains and the like, but we kept returning because we loved camp and highly respected him,” Casper said. “We always said that we had more fun at camp than the kids, and I think we actually did. We would have done it for free.”

When Professor Maurice Willis died Oct. 12, 2011, he left behind an impression on those who knew him and shared his love of music.

A faculty member of the Illinois Wesleyan School of Music for 33 years, the man affectionately known as “Uncle Maury” captured the hearts and minds of students as well as counselors in the music camp he led for more than three decades.

The IWU Summer Music Camp was founded in 1952 by the late Carl Neumeyer, then director of the School of Music. Willis started at the camp during its

In its earlier years, the camp was held at East Bay Camp at Lake Bloomington. In 1977, however, a fire destroyed the building used for rehearsals and performances, and the camp was moved to Wesleyan's campus.

Despite their hard work, the staff members had plenty of free time for humor. "One day when the staff members were gathered outside the staff house at East Bay Camp, we were all very surprised to see Uncle Maury riding around on a bicycle wearing a large straw hat," recalled Sara "Sally" Simpson '70. "No one even knew he could ride a bike! What a laugh we all had that day!"

Casper remembered a string of pranks that counselors played on the camp leader. "Maury would take naps in his room at the staff office building. On numerous occasions, we would stack pop cans in front of his door so that when he opened the door, the cans would crash to the floor. We would also put masking tape in a spider-web effect across his door. We Vaseline'd his toilet seat."

The alumni grew with the camp, returning even as they advanced in their careers, often during summers between graduate studies or full-time teaching jobs. "His staff was mostly made up of active music teachers who had responsible positions in schools throughout the country," said Lloyd "Yates" Brackney '59. "As crazy as we were, he knew that we always were serious about giving the young people a great musical experience."

Wayne Groess '63 remembers his work as the camp's recreation director. "Being a liberal arts major, I was not directly involved in the music portion of camp," he said. Instead, Groess spent his time organizing volleyball tournaments and skit nights. In 2002, he donated the money to build a new steel bridge at East Bay Camp, replacing a 70-year-old wooden bridge.

Participating in the camp led the way for the career of Carleen Graff '68, now a music professor at Plymouth State University in Plymouth, N.H. She first met Willis when she was a 16-year-old student at his camp and later spent 15 years working as a counselor. "The IWU music camp has influenced much of what I do today," she said. "In 1993, I began the summer Piano Monster Festivals here at Plymouth State, which are modeled after Maury's schedule and overall concepts of camp."

As her own camp has grown, her memories of the time she spent at the IWU camp persist. "I remember fondly, almost every day, my days at the IWU camps and their inspiration to me and our camps, which will celebrate 20 years this summer."



"Uncle Maury" showed his fun side, donning a top hat at a recent reunion of camp counselors.

In October, the group of former camp staff united once again in honor of Maurice Willis. “As proof of our love for this man, almost all of his loyal staff attended his funeral service,” Casper said. Alumni traveled from as far as New Orleans and New Hampshire. “We who have been so close to Maury all these many years will miss his presence at our annual reunions, but memories are a wonderful thing and will continue to support us in the coming years.”