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## Class of 2023 Encouraged and Celebrated at Commencement

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# Class of 2023 Encouraged and Celebrated at Commencement

May 7, 2022

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan University celebrated the graduating class of 2023 on Sunday during a commencement ceremony at the Shirk Center.

Diplomas were handed to 340 graduating Titans on the stage as loved ones watched and cheered from the crowd. Although the event was moved indoors due to weather, graduates roamed the lush Eckley Quadrangle after the ceremony to take photos.

- [See the Commencement program booklet](#)
- [Watch the Commencement ceremony video](#)

Remarks given throughout the University's 173rd commencement ceremony shared similar themes — the value of supportive relationships found at IWU and encouragement to push through challenges and take chances beyond graduation.

In her opening statement, President S. Georgia Nugent explained how Illinois Wesleyan's foundation rests on face-to-face relationships between students and the campus community — something she saw persist even as classes went remote during the pandemic.

"Titans showed their resilience. We made it work. Together, we worked to keep the fundamental relationships that are the heart of this university still strong," she said.

Nugent shared research conducted by Harvard Professor of Teaching and Learning Richard Light, which found that many of Harvard's graduating seniors reported having a positive experience at the Ivy League school, but ultimately felt that no one genuinely understood the growth and accomplishments they made as students.

Nugent said that's not what happens at Illinois Wesleyan University.

"Here, we've seen how you've grown," said Nugent. "Faculty and coaches and deans and staff members have cared about you and mentored you. Some have spent hours helping you through problem sets. Some have shown up to root you on in your games or be inspired by your performances or to marvel at your art. Some have invited you to their homes. Some have offered tissues on a rough day."



President S. Georgia Nugent shared encouragement with the Class of 2023 during the commencement ceremony on Sunday, May 7.



Diplomas were handed to 340 graduating Titans on the stage as loved ones watched and cheered from the crowd.

"We're all here, not for fame or fortune, but for you. You graduate today with that gift from this place," she said to the green-clad students.

President of the Alumni Association Board of Directors Dirk Behrends '87 reminded the crowd of the year's academic theme, The Power of Place. He explained how Illinois Wesleyan helps shape the lives of students in various ways, whether by fulfilling a family dream as a first-generation graduate, honing leadership skills through campus organizations or encouraging students to use their

voice to advocate for positive change.



"The power of this place is palpable," said Behrends. "I don't know if any of us can give back to IWU the way IWU has given to us, but I hope that you — our most recent alumni — will not only do well in places that you go, but will continue to do good and give back through your time, talent and treasure in an attempt to repay the power that this place has instilled in us."

He then welcomed the class of 2023 as the newest members of the [Alumni Association](#).



Class President Mishwa Bhavsar '23 spoke to her peers and reflected on the last four years.

Class President Mishwa Bhavsar '23 asked her peers to think back to their early days on campus as first-year students. Bhavsar said many of her nerves were eased through the support and welcoming energy found through her professors and staff members who "make this campus feel like a true community, where everyone is valued and appreciated."

"So let's take a moment to be grateful for the people who have made our college experience worth more than just studying for a degree," said Bhavsar. "Let's remember what we've learned here and let's take those lessons with us and continue to make connections, to seek out new experiences, and to create communities that support and inspire us."

Representing members of the faculty, Class of 2023 Professor of the Year and Associate Professor of Nursing Amanda Hopkins shared the story of a woman who signed up to run a 5K race, only to realize half way through the run that she had arrived early and accidentally found herself in the middle of a 10K race.

"She ran a race which she had not intended to run," said Hopkins, reminding students of their own college journey which was disrupted by a global pandemic. "When she crossed the finish line, she was elated. She definitely hadn't planned for a race of that nature, yet there she was running across the finish line and receiving her medal."

Hopkins said the last few years could not have happened without support from each other as a community.

"You are stronger because of those challenges you encountered. It has been a long journey, but for each student in this room, there are people who have offered encouragement along the way. I am here as a representative of the numerous faculty, staff and administrators who have supported you. We can do strong things, but only together," she said.

Before addressing the Class of 2023 with his speech titled, "Writing the Rest of Your Story," commencement speaker Burke Nihill '00 was awarded an honorary doctor of humane letters degree. Nihill shared lessons learned during [his journey to becoming the President and CEO of the National Football League's Tennessee Titans](#).

He focused his remarks on a poem by Linda Ellis titled *The Dash*, which describes the significant meaning of the dash inscribed on a tombstone between the birth and death dates.

"Your dash is all the hours and days and years you have the privilege of living. Your dash is your story," said Nihill. "While there are chapters in everyone's story that are completely beyond our control — both good and bad — I've learned that, to some meaningful degree, the pen is in our hands."

Nihill encouraged students to make bold choices, remain authentic and cherish each day.

After working 15 years as an attorney after graduating from IWU, that mentality is what pushed Nihill to take a leap and apply for a job as head lawyer for the Tennessee Titans — eventually leading him to rise to the top role as the team's president and CEO.



The class of 2023 celebrated commencement with hugs and pictures on the Eckley Quad after the ceremony.

"The rest of your story will be heavily influenced by your willingness to make bold and brave decisions from time to time. In my experience, opportunity, growth and adventure often come to those who stretch and strain for the next step on the ladder," he said.

Nihill closed his remarks by emboldening graduates to make the most of the adventure ahead.

"Tomorrow morning, you will wake up and the rest of your life will be underway. You've

spent four years preparing for what you want to be when you leave this campus. Now is your opportunity to set your mind about who you want to be."

By Julia Perez