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Joshua Butts

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Illinois Wesleyan University

Rae Rein 2011

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Homecoming 2010, recorded at The Ames Library

Josh Butts: So my name is Joshua Butts, I go by Josh. I was an English and History double major at Illinois Wesleyan. I graduated in 2001. Organizations I belonged to—gosh, I belonged to Circle K when I was here. I remember that was a volunteer organization. I belonged to *The Argus*, so I wrote for *The Argus* when I was here. I worked for the Career Center, so I did the Career Center Newsletter, wrote the Career Center Newsletter when I was here. There were a lot of other different things that I did but it's kind of hard to remember exactly—

[Rae Rein laughs]

Butts: What it was.

Rein: These are the diversity questions.

Butts: Okay, so should we go with diversity rather than these here?

Rein: Probably.

Butts: Okay.

Rein: I mean, if that's why you're here.

Butts: Yeah, that's totally fine, so my definition of diversity and how it's changed over the years—gosh, well I would say my definition of diversity is probably having community of people who are different in sexual orientation and race and maybe religious beliefs and varied in their upbringing and bringing them into one community and hopefully living in a respectful and peaceful way. I think that's the happy measure of diversity.

Rein: Do you think that was your definition during college?

Butts: I think during college that would have been my definition of diversity. I don't think I would've understood—I don't think I understood diversity as much in college as I do now simply because when I was here, even in 2001 when I graduated, '97 to 2001, the campus wasn't as diverse of a place when I was here certainly. It was mostly white. People identified mostly as straight. People mostly identified as Christian, so I think there was a respect of other people on campus but I don't think we had to encounter diversity that much on campus, which is amazing because that was only ten or fifteen years ago but I think that was true, so my definition of diversity has changed now simply because when I left Illinois Wesleyan, I moved up to Chicago and encountered a much more diverse population. I wasn't out when I was at Illinois Wesleyan. I was out to friends senior year as a gay man but I wasn't out to the wider campus, so I didn't really plug into that diversity either but it seemed to me that even, like I said, ten or fifteen years ago, people mostly thought that the LGBT population was in the Music School or the Theater School. They didn't feel like it existed in other areas, so that's interesting. I'm looking—how diverse was IWU? I covered that, right?

Rein: Mhmm.

Butts: IWU's diversity—how has it changed since I attended? It's actually really striking to me when I walk around campus how different the student body looks. I mean you could walk around campus and actually see people who look different than your white self, which is great and it's

really, I think, invigorating and I think it's added a lot to the campus and—I don't know from experience—but I have to believe it's added a lot to the classroom, so I think the university's done a really good job. I think they should be very proud about the fact that they've been able to bring students of color here. There's now an active Pride student group here, you know, which is great. We had a reception last night, so there are students who are out on campus who are not just in the Music and Theater majors, they're in other majors on campus and I think that's really good.

So the question—did you experience any culture shock when you came to IWU? If so, what happened? I grew up in Central Illinois just an hour south of Bloomington in Mt. Zion, Illinois near Decatur, so really it was very much the same for me. In fact, I was looking at the U of I and decided to come to Illinois Wesleyan and I think when I went to look at the U of I back, you know, when I was a senior in high school, there was some sort of demonstration I vaguely remember going on and I don't remember what it was but it involved a group of Muslim students and I actually remember that making me very uncomfortable because I just had not encountered, you know, that population before, saw that they were protesting something, I don't even remember what it was, and I actually remember at the time instead of thinking, you know, “Wow that's great. I wonder what they're talking about. I could really maybe learn something from these people,” I thought, “Oh god, they're really different from me. I don't think I want to be here. I don't think I belong here,” so choosing Illinois Wesleyan in some way was a safe choice and a safe diversity choice for me.

Is it important for IWU to attract a more diverse population and if so, why? Absolutely, I think it's very important. I think it's especially important—I suspect that even though we have a more diverse population on campus, we still have plenty of students who are coming here from very white and Christian and maybe WASP-y sort of areas who probably haven't experienced a lot of diversity, so this may be their first opportunity here on campus to actually have conversations with someone who's of a different race or has a different sexual orientation or has different religious beliefs.

That's important, I think, academically because it expands your horizons and challenges you intellectually to think in a different way, but it's also important in a very practical way in that when people go to their, you know, begin their careers, they're going to encounter a very diverse population wherever they are. They're going to have to learn to respect other peoples' beliefs, so it's not only something that's kind of an ideal, it's something that in a very practical way now is a reality and you have to learn to navigate that out in the real world.

So the question—what is your favorite memory from IWU that involved you interacting with people who were different than you in some way? [laughs] The sad part is that I really don't have an answer to that one and it kind of makes me sad looking at that question and thinking about that question. I had amazing friends who I'm still very good friends with from Illinois Wesleyan but we're all pretty similar, I must say. We didn't expand our horizons very much. I, you know, now have a much more diverse friendship circle living in Boston and also from friends that I made when I lived in Chicago, so I have a lot of experiences from after Illinois Wesleyan I think that I could point out to you but not a lot from being here on campus, which is another reason why, I think, you know, bringing a diverse population to campus is so important—so people can make those memories.

I guess one other thing I should say in how diversity has changed since I attended IWU, when I graduated in 2001—I came in 1997 and graduated in 2001—that was really kind of just the start of gay people entering the mainstream culture and kind of the Will & Grace era where it started

to be a little more acceptable in mainstream America ... to be gay and I think since I've graduated just nine years ago, which isn't that long, I think that's changed even more. I think that the LGBT population just overall in the country is much more accepted and we have a long way to go, uh, with marriage rights and many other things, being able to serve in the military and what not, but at least those questions are being publically debated now, which is great and I think in some ways being a member of the LGBT community is much less of a big deal than it would've been even back when I was on campus, so I think society has changed, I mean, IWU, I think, has changed along with the world and along with the country—