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A Lifelong Connection

To build new bridges between Titan alumni and students, Elly Jones '91 takes inspiration from her own college experience.

Story by KIM HILL

Portrait photo by LORI ANN COOK-NEISLER

One of Elly (Shreffler) Jones' favorite IWU memories is Homecoming of her senior year. As chair of the Homecoming committee, Jones '91 watched Titans from all corners of campus — fraternities, sororities, student athletes, residence hall leaders — gather in celebration with each other and with alumni.

“It was so exciting to see students and alumni come together to celebrate,” Jones recalls.

Jones wants to see more of those student–alumni connections as she leads the Alumni Association for the next two years. As president of the [Alumni Association's](#) Board of Directors (AABD), Jones says one of the board's strategic priorities will be strengthening relationships between alumni and students.

“As a board we've always worked with students, but I see our role as further exploring ways we can give back to them through mentoring, internships, job opportunities or in other ways,” she says. “We want to support them.”

To that end, Jones convened an informal “fact-finding” task force of 10 students to determine what students want from alumni and how students want to communicate with them.

“They were very forthright about what appealed to them,” Jones says. Want to get students to come to events? Let them know about them via the instant messaging mobile application Snapchat. Students want more networking with alums, but they want it to be organic, such as connecting people around a common interest. Claudia Brogan '77 and Jones will assist Student Senate President Lane Bennett '18 and the AABD in this effort.

Jones also wants more alumni involved in those connections, with each other and with students.



Elly (Shreffler) Jones '91

“My hope is that alums will remember what it was like to be 21 years old, looking for a job or applying for graduate school,” she says. “What I tell alums is this: When you were that age, wouldn’t it have been great to have an alum say, ‘Let’s talk about your situation. What I can do to help?’”

Personal connections such as these are what drew Jones to Illinois Wesleyan. Growing up near Kankakee, she’d heard her older sister talk about the 300 to 400 students in a general education class at her large state university. That off-hand comment affected Jones deeply. “I didn’t want to be a number,” she recalls. “I wanted my professors to know who I was. That really mattered to me.”

She entered IWU on a theatre scholarship, but after the first year, playing a part felt more like going to work. The joy she’d felt on stage in high school was gone. Changing her major to psychology meant giving up her theatre scholarship, but a work-study job, a different scholarship, parental support and a loan took care of her fees.

Her work-study job in the Career Center turned out to be fortuitous for several reasons. At times she found herself advising fellow students on career paths; she’d use those same skills for herself as graduation approached. Ann Harding, who was then the assistant director of the Career Center, recommended that Jones secure an internship. Jones obtained not only one, but two — one at IBM and the other at State Farm. After graduation Jones worked for IBM before joining State Farm in 1992 as a Fire Claim Representative in Phoenix, where she met her husband, Brian, another State Farm employee. Their family includes their daughter, Elise, who is now 14.

Living in the Southwest for many years, Jones reconnected to Illinois Wesleyan through the annual Phoenix Connections event. Then, about nine years ago, Harding (who was then director of Alumni Relations) asked Jones if she would join the newly launched [Council for IWU Women](#). Jones subsequently led the council as president. The Council for IWU Women president is also an auxiliary member of the Alumni Association Board of Directors, where she’s served for the past eight years.



Attending the 2016 Council for IWU Women summit were Alumni Association Board members, from left, Molly Rollings '99, Elly Jones, Ade Olayinka '11, Rachel Paturi '13, Debra Burt-Frazier '75 and Carol Liske '77.

She says she’s drawn to “give back to the campus that gave so much to me” for two pivotal reasons, one joyful and one stressful. The joyful episode was the 1991 Homecoming she’d worked so hard as a student leader to make successful. As is so often the case, the root cause of the stressful situation was money.

In her senior year, Jones ran short of funds for tuition. Twenty-five years after the fact, she vividly recalls sitting in the Financial Aid office while a staff member designed a plan to cover the gap. “I wouldn’t have been able to

continue if I hadn't gotten additional funding," she says. "I've never forgotten that. It was alumni who provided that money that enabled me to go to school here for the first three years, and even more so that last year when I came up short."

Those experiences helped make her a passionate advocate for alumni support of IWU. "We're all busy," Jones says of her fellow alumni, "but we need alums to give of their time, talents and treasure, in whatever percentage they can give in those areas, to help them reconnect to Wesleyan."

Jones is now a claims manager with State Farm, leading first- and second-line managers of third-party litigation against State Farm homeowner and commercial policyholders in all 50 states. She loves leading people and says that leading State Farm associates or the Alumni Association Board of Directors is really no different than leading the student Homecoming committee or a Kappa Delta sorority group during her days as a student.

"As you lead people and manage associates, you understand that people like to be reinforced in different ways," she says. "That volunteer work, both then and now, was a great foundation, no matter what committee you're leading."

Leading the board over the next two years, Jones also wants to create a succession plan for board leadership and to increase the alumni participation rate in giving to the Wesleyan Fund.

These priorities will keep Jones and the rest of the board busy, but it's work she enjoys immensely. "We have so much pride in Wesleyan, and we know that our degrees are worth a great deal," she says. "I feel it's very important for alumni to continue to contribute to the mission and vision of the University. To me, that's first and foremost."