

Smiles and miles have been shared by seven women who bonded at Illinois State. Nicole (Hodgson) Bebiak '97 celebrated her wedding in 2000 with Maggie Maloney '97, right, and April Banks '97, bottom.

California was the spring break destination for the women in 1996. From left are Wendy (Blanton) Kuhl '97, Twanna Hines '98, Anita Solis '97, Maggie, and April.



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Jennifer (Gulotta) Fisher '97 married in 2002, with Maggie and April on hand to celebrate.



Seven alumnae celebrate 15 years of friendship

Circle still unbroken

BY TWANNA A. HINES '98

April Banks '97 sat in a Manhattan apartment located just steps away from the United Nations. "Well, it's all been sort of a chain, really," she said as she reflected on how she met Nicole (Hodgson) Bebiak '97, Wendy (Blanton) Kuhl '97, Jennifer (Gulotta) Fisher '97, Maggie Maloney '97, Anita Solis '97, and me, Twanna Hines '98.

Although we entered Illinois State as distant acquaintances or complete strangers, our diverse group of seven alumnae left the University as a tight-knit circle of friends who will celebrate our 15-year anniversary in 2008. Our bond has remained strong despite life changes, shifting careers, and the fact we are now scattered across the country.

"Amazing how knowing just one person can lead to a big group of friends," April said with eyes so wide they revealed she can't quite believe it herself. She attended high school in Bolingbrook with Nicole. The two 17-year olds departed for Normal to embark on their freshman year at Illinois State. While unpacking their

belongings and hanging pictures in their residence hall rooms, they were surprised to recognize a familiar face in the hallway.

Maggie laughed when she recalled seeing April and Nicole on the third floor of Atkin-Colby. "That was like the weirdest thing ever!" she said. Although the three women hail from the same hometown, they were not well acquainted. Camaraderie developed at Illinois State and in the years that followed graduation.

I met April in my cultural awareness and interracial understanding course during freshman year. Young African-American women who were equally optimistic and committed to social justice causes, April and I immediately became friends. While walking home after class, I noticed that we were headed in the same direction. Slightly disturbed that my new friend might be following me, April quelled my fears when she announced that she lived in Atkin-Colby too.

April introduced me to Nicole and Maggie. I introduced her to my roommate Anita. With that, the five of us

became fast friends. We grew to six when Maggie and Nicole met Wendy through a mutual friend, and I met Wendy through them. Jen joined our group the following year.

All of us eventually became roommates, either while at Illinois State or following graduation. In 1999 while living with Anita and Maggie in Chicago, Jen and I were surprised to recall that we met during the Department of Sociology & Anthropology's freshman orientation.

I remembered a nice, brown-haired, Italian-American girl who hailed from the suburbs of Chicago. She remembered an African-American girl with a big smile by the name of Twanna. The two of us were the first students to show up for the orientation. Nervous freshmen newly inducted into college life, neither Jen nor I could have imagined that we would remain in each other's lives long after graduation.

That unexpected surprise is one we all discuss frequently.

"You guys will always have known me longer than the man that I may or may not marry," Maggie explained. "I can tell him about my life and my past, but that's not the same as experiencing it with me."

To reflect on our lengthy friendship is to see our lives in stages. From graduation and first jobs to international travel, weddings, and pregnancies, our group has experienced almost every major milestone together. "Through all the important events," Anita responded when asked how long she has known each of us. "I can't even think of my life's events without thinking of you guys."

It's hard to imagine what our lives would be like had we not met. It is also difficult to envision our lives without Illinois State, as many of us are harvesting in our careers the seeds that were planted during our classes at the University.

Illinois State pride was apparent as, from left, Anita, Twanna, Wendy, and Maggie waited for a live taping of *The Price is Right* in 1996.



Goofy residence hall moments became good memories for Twanna and April.

Armed with a history education degree, Wendy pursued her dream job in St. Louis, where she works as a seventh-grade social studies teacher. Although the College of Education's strong reputation is what initially attracted Wendy to the University, Illinois State delivered her two unexpected surprises—lifelong friends and a husband. In 2000, she married fellow Illinois State alum Jason Kuhl '97.

Nicole built the foundation for her career when she majored in psychology. She married Kaz Bebiak in 2000. It was important to have her friends present for the wedding, which was made even more special with Maggie and April as bridesmaids. Nicole and Kaz now reside in Arizona and are parents of a son, Konnor.

Exactly two years and one new dress later, Maggie was a bridesmaid in Jen's wedding—an honor she shared with Anita. I was fortunate to attend Jen's wedding as well. April was also there. Jen and her husband, Doug Fisher, live in Chicago Heights. She is a stay-at-home mom with their daughter Evelyn. Their second child is expected later this year.

Anita began her career in risk management for multinational banks by completing her degree in finance. She now resides in Chicago. Maggie works in public relations in Washington, D.C., and April is a nonprofit grant



Commencement at Illinois State was a grand day for, from left, Twanna, Nicole, and April.

writer in New York City. April honed her writing skills as a journalism major at Illinois State. Before I became a New York-based writer, I put my sociology degree to work in an international affairs career.

Maggie, April, Anita, and I are single. With neither children nor husbands clamoring for our time, giggle-filled conference calls take place at least twice a month. Adventures in the dating world, reality television show gossip, and career advice are in the lineup of conversation.

"Our lives are so different," said Jen,

“but we still care about one another.” Anita acknowledged that she hopes to draw upon Jen’s experiences in the future. “I will call Jen when I have a baby and say, ‘Hey, I’ve got this problem. How did you handle this when you went through this with your daughter?’ Jen’s such a good mom.”

While marriage and kids have affected the friendship, it’s highways, not husbands, that create the distance. Telephone calls and e-mail exchanges keep the group together. Even still, communication is not as frequent as is desired because children, busy careers, and multiple time zones combine to make contact difficult.

“We’re all feeling guilty about not keeping in touch,” Maggie lamented during a recent conference call with April, Nicole, and me. “I don’t talk to everyone nearly as much as I used to or I should,” April concurred.

And yet we remain confident in our relationships, regardless of how frequently we are able to converse. “It’s still going to be there even if you don’t talk for six months, or you don’t see each other for a year,” Wendy said. “True friends will always be there and won’t let time or distance sever that.”

Several members of our group often travel far to nourish the tight-knit bond. When April received her master’s degree in journalism from New York University, Anita, Jen, Mag-

gie, and I flew to New York to attend the graduation ceremony.

Anita, Maggie, and Jen headed to Florida for my commencement when I completed a master’s degree in sociology from Florida State University. While I spent a year researching at Universiteit van Amsterdam, Anita and April traveled to The Netherlands for a visit.

A trek to Los Angeles, another road trip to New Orleans, and a vacation in London all made for precious memories. Now there are holidays shared and visits to each other’s homes as often as time allows, with a reunion already being planned for next year.

Anita insisted that the trips allow her to better envision everyone’s day-to-day lives. “I’ve been to your home,” she told me. “In my mind, it’s easier to connect to your life because I’ve visited where you live and work.” Maggie agreed that face-to-face visits are important. “I just saw Jen before I moved to D.C.,” she said. “We all saw Wendy in St. Louis a couple of years ago. I saw Anita when I went home to see my family.”

As frequent as everyone’s trips are, it is still uncommon to find all seven women in the same city at the same time; therefore, it takes effort to sustain the long-term friendship that is tied to Illinois State. Although we would each name different instructors, classes, and extracurricular activities that impacted our lives, we unequivocally agree that

the Office of Residential Life is the cornerstone upon which we built the friendship that we enjoy today.

“Everyone that we know, we met in the dorm,” Wendy said. “You’re right next door, across the hall, you can see each other all the time. You can eat your meals together. You can talk while you’re brushing your teeth. Any time you need to talk to someone or you want to hang out with somebody, you’ve got somebody there.”

“College is like a big world with a lot of firsts,” Jen declared. She and Anita particularly shared a unique bond, as both had the experience of working as a resident assistant in Hewett-Manchester. They also traveled on a university cultural exchange trip to Puerto Rico. April and I studied together at California State University through Illinois State’s National Student Exchange Program.

Such opportunities convince us that our friendship would not have been possible were it not for our shared moments at the University. Many in our group experienced our first time living away from our parents, first boyfriends, and first apartments while at Illinois State. “I guess when you experience a lot of important firsts with the same people,” Jen observed, “it makes bonds stronger.”

As a proud member of this unique circle of friends, I offer my friendship with Jen, Maggie, April, Nicole, Anita, and Wendy as proof that Illinois State forges lifetime bonds. Although a series of rather fortunate events and coincidences brought us together, we’ve made an active choice to remain friends long after we moved our tassels from left to right.

[Editor’s note: Twanna A. Hines ’98 is a writer who lives in New York City. Her writing frequently covers interpersonal relationships, dating, contemporary lifestyle, and travel.]



Twanna celebrated the completion of her master’s degree in 2000 with, from left, April, Anita, and Maggie.