Olga “Kay” Kennedy, a 1946 graduate of WIU, may have lived in Chicago, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Kansas, but west-central Illinois is truly her home. Known in the WIU community for her association with the property known as Vishnu Springs, Kennedy has a vibrant history of her own in this place she calls home.

During her junior high and high school years, Kennedy lived with her grandparents, Ira and Reatha T. Post, on Carroll Street in Macomb.

“My grandparents moved from the farm into the Carroll Street House in 1912 and lived there the rest of their lives. They kept all their homestead and farmland that had been purchased early in their married lives. Then, when I was growing up, they purchased other adjoining parcels of farmland, additional timber, the Vishnu Springs property, plus another farm near Tennessee (Illinois).

“We spent considerable time at Vishnu from the time my grandparents purchased and improved the hotel building so it was livable. The ground floor had the large fireplace, and our family’s rooms were on the floor just above. We had a kitchen, bedroom, and the large full room the width of the building.”

Kennedy said that although they always lived in town (contrary to popular myth that the family lived at Vishnu), her grandfather tried to visit “the farm” every day, regardless of weather, until his death in 1951.

Kennedy entered Western Academy (high school) as a freshman the year it opened.

“It was a beautiful school,” remembered Kennedy. “Everything was brand new and we had the best of everything.”

She worked in the library through high school and graduated in 1942. She then attended Western Illinois State Teachers College, earning a degree in physical education with minors in business and biology in 1946. All of her practice...
teaching took place at Western Academy where she had attended high school. Following graduation, Kennedy taught school in Riverside, (IL), began graduate work at the University of Wisconsin, taught six years in Illinois schools, and then moved to California. After earning a master’s degree at Stanford University, Kennedy continued to teach, until retiring in 1976. Kennedy, who now resides in Kansas, donated the 140 acres just north of Tennessee, (IL), including the property known as Vishnu Springs, to WIU in 2003. She inherited the land from her grandfather, as he knew she shared his fondness for it.

“I thought Western could use the property, much as the Alice Kibbe Life Science Research Station and the Frank J. Horn Field Campus have been used for educational purposes,” said Kennedy. “My grandparents instilled in me their passion and enthusiasm for preserving the natural habitat for wildlife and their interest in protecting this sanctuary for future generations. The terms and conditions of the land gift honor my grandparents’ wishes.”

Kennedy’s sense of philanthropy was instilled by her family. Her aunt, Betty Post Cutler, left her estate to Western to help construct and support the College of Fine Arts and Communication Recital Hall. And, of course, the Posts taught Kennedy the belief in preservation for the greater good. In addition to the gift of what is now called the Ira and Reatha T. Post Wildlife Sanctuary, and significant contributions to the biology department, Kennedy also plans to make donations of land and support to Western through her own estate.

“My grandfather had a love and a vision for maintaining this naturally beautiful piece of land,” said Kennedy. “It is rewarding for me to know that others will have an opportunity to enjoy and benefit from this gift while ensuring that my grandparents’ wishes will be honored.”

The remarkable generosity of the family and friends of Gene Kozlowski has resulted in the endowment of the Gene Kozlowski New Playwright Fund.

Originally conceived by Kozlowski at his retirement in 2005, the fund is intended to facilitate the production of an as-yet unpublished play at Western Illinois University. Ideally, the Department of Theatre and Dance will choose one play annually to produce on campus, directed by a graduate student or one of the department’s directors. The fund will pay a royalty to the playwright, who will then be invited to campus for rehearsals and production.

Endowments require a minimum of $25,000, at which point the principal is maintained intact in perpetuity and the interest income is expended to support the purpose of the endowment. Sadly, Kozlowski’s untimely death in November 2008 was the catalyst to drive this fund into permanency.

Kozlowski, an actor, director and playwright, was a well-known and established personality at Western. He joined the faculty in 1973 and served as chair of the theatre department, head of the acting program, managing director of Summer Music Theatre, artistic director of Western’s Regional Touring Theatre Company, and two stints as interim dean of the College of Fine Arts and Communication. His professional accolades were numerous and his regard as a teacher beyond compare.
“The time Gene spent in and out of the classroom nurturing young, talented students was truly remarkable,” said Dave Patrick, chair of Western’s theatre and dance department. “As the script is the framework for all theatre artists to work with, this fund will be Gene’s most visible legacy for our department and university.”

“We always expected that the fund would reach the level of endowment,” said his wife, Marsha, “due to Gene’s popularity as a teacher and the friendships he made over the years. We just didn’t expect that it would happen so quickly.”

An infusion of memorial gifts by family, colleagues, friends and former students boosted the fund substantially, as did a golf outing hosted by Kozlowski’s sons Matt and Adam in September 2009. What put the fund over the top, however, was an anonymous $10,000 contribution.

“While we cannot publicly disclose this particular donor, we would like to thank this individual and all those who honored Gene in this most meaningful way,” said COFAC Dean Paul Kreider. “By remembering him so generously, his idea will really happen. I can’t think of a more fitting tribute to Gene’s life and work than the ability to showcase a new playwright each year in his name.”

“Our family is gratified to see how appreciated Gene was,” added Marsha. “All teachers hope that their students and colleagues remember them well. It does our hearts good to see that he is remembered in this way.”

Reyburns to the Rescue!

Last spring, the WIU Jazz Studio Orchestra (JSO) received the honor of an invitation to perform on May 30 at one of the world’s greatest concert halls—Carnegie Hall—to appear with composer Marco Renzi and clarinetist Bepi D’Amato. Renzi and D’Amato served as artists in-residence in April 2009 for the School of Music Jazz Studies program at Western.

“Maestros Renzi and D’Amato wanted to work with us again based on the wonderful performance that they gave in Macomb with the JSO and Jazz Band,” said John Cooper, director of jazz studies and the JSO.

Not only was this invited engagement a tribute to the talent of the JSO members, but also, it will be an especially meaningful memory given that the trip and appearance were initially cancelled.

When students received the news that their hard-earned trip was cancelled due to the difficult budget crisis in the state of Illinois, Jerry and LaNae Reyburn, parents of JSO member Andrew Reyburn, of Geneseo (IL), intervened.

“We were so excited when we heard that the JSO was going to perform in Carnegie Hall. This is one of the greatest music venues in the country. The students in the JSO have worked hard for many years to be capable of playing at this level. When we heard that the trip was canceled, we simply decided that we wanted to do anything we could to help make the trip a reality,” said the Reyburns. “All the students in JSO deserve this opportunity.”

The Reyburn’s “intervention” consisted of a sizeable donation to help with travel costs, matched by Jerry’s employer, IBM. According to Cooper, “this donation put the trip within reach.” In addition to the Reyburns’ support, the students conducted some fundraising on their own, local groups such as the Macomb Country Club hosted fundraisers, and up to 40 participants were invited to join the JSO on their trip.
Two of those participants were, of course, the Reyburns.

“We wouldn’t have missed it for anything. The smile on the faces of the students at the conclusion of the concert was what we looked forward to most!”

The Reyburns have been steadfast supporters of various WIU initiatives, particularly in the College of Fine Arts and Communication, since their son Andrew’s enrollment in 2007.

“The music department has exceptional faculty and outstanding music programs, both academic and extracurricular,” said Jerry. “LaNae and I attend most of the performances at WIU and have seen first hand the talented and hardworking faculty and staff.”

“I am grateful to the Reyburns for their interest and investment in this trip; they really did save it for students,” said Cooper. “I’m thrilled Jerry and LaNae were there with us at Carnegie Hall to witness the impact this experience had on all the JSO members.”