



# FOREVER BLUE

CELEBRATING 125 YEARS

# MILLIKIN MAGAZINE

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Rooted in tradition and energized by transformation, Millikin University has entered its 125th anniversary year with renewed momentum. This issue of Millikin Magazine highlights the students, alumni, faculty, donors, and leaders whose commitment to Millikin continues to move the University forward into a future that is Forever **Blue**.

The purpose of the Magazine is to tell the Millikin story. Through the lives and work of our students, faculty, staff, and alumni, the Magazine spotlights Millikin's distinct brand of education – Performance Learning – and its impact on the larger world. From the arts to business, from the sciences to sports, Millikin Magazine celebrates the inspiring stories of our Big Blue community.

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# FOREVER BLUE:

## *Leadership, Legacy, and Momentum*

In higher education, there are years that feel comfortably ordinary, anchored in the familiar and marked by the cadence of classes, convocations, and Commencement. And then there are years that feel unmistakably different – years that

carry with them a sense of renewal, purpose, and forward motion.

For Millikin University, the 2025-26 academic year served as one of those defining moments.

It was a year marked by the arrival of the University's 17th President, Dr. Dean A. Pribbenow, whose first months on campus were characterized not by sweeping declarations, but by careful listening, visible engagement,



and a clear respect for the institution's identity.

It was also a year full of renewed momentum, culminating in the

**1874**

James Millikin purchases Oakland Park land, the future home of campus

James Millikin University is founded on April 30

**1901**

**1903**

President Theodore Roosevelt dedicates the University as classes begin

Millikin holds its first Commencement ceremony

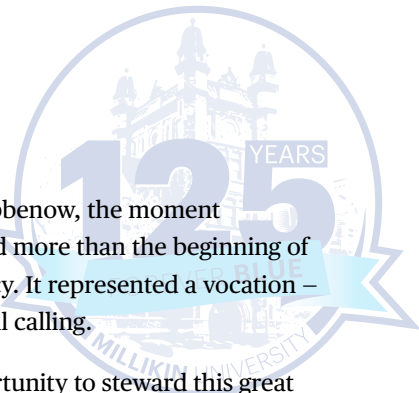
**1904**

**1906**

Construction begins on Aston Hall, the University's first women's residence hall

James Millikin dies; Tau Kappa Epsilon becomes the first national fraternity on campus

**1909**



kickoff of Millikin’s 125th anniversary celebration, uniting the entire Big Blue community under a shared banner as they reflect on what it means to be Forever Blue.

When Dr. Pribbenow stepped onto campus as President, he did so with a clear understanding: Millikin is not simply an institution to be managed – it is a community to be nurtured.

And nurture, he did.

Dr. Pribbenow met with students, stepping into the natural flow of campus life and reinforcing his commitment to accessibility and approachability. He engaged faculty in conversations about teaching and scholarship, and he listened closely to staff whose work sustains the daily life of the University. Campus traditions, community events, and alumni gatherings became opportunities not just for visibility, but for connection.

From his earliest days, this approach was guided by what is now fondly (and alliteratively) referred to as “President Pribbenow’s 4 P’s”: Presence, Purpose, People, and Partnership.

Those themes ultimately became the framework for Dr. Pribbenow’s leadership philosophy – and even his inaugural address – but they were first visible in quieter moments. Conversations in hallways. Attendance at student performances. Community

meetings. Athletic events. Impromptu interactions across and beyond campus.

By the time Dr. Pribbenow stood at the podium for his inauguration and formal investiture on April 10, he had already spent months listening.

He had listened to alumni reminiscing about beloved traditions and relationships forged at Millikin. He had listened to students discuss their hopes and aspirations. He had listened to faculty describe the transformative relationships formed in classrooms, labs, studios, and rehearsal spaces. He had listened to community leaders articulate both the challenges and opportunities facing Decatur and Central Illinois. Somewhere, within those conversations, a vision began to crystallize.

“Who have we been, who are we now, and to what are we called?” Dr. Pribbenow asked during his inaugural address. “How appropriate that we ask these questions as we launch the year-long celebration of our 125th anniversary.”

Dr. Pribbenow’s speech, titled “Millikin Forward: Forever Blue,” served as both reflection and roadmap – honoring the past while challenging the University to embrace the future with courage and creativity.

For Dr. Pribbenow, the moment represented more than the beginning of a presidency. It represented a vocation – his personal calling.

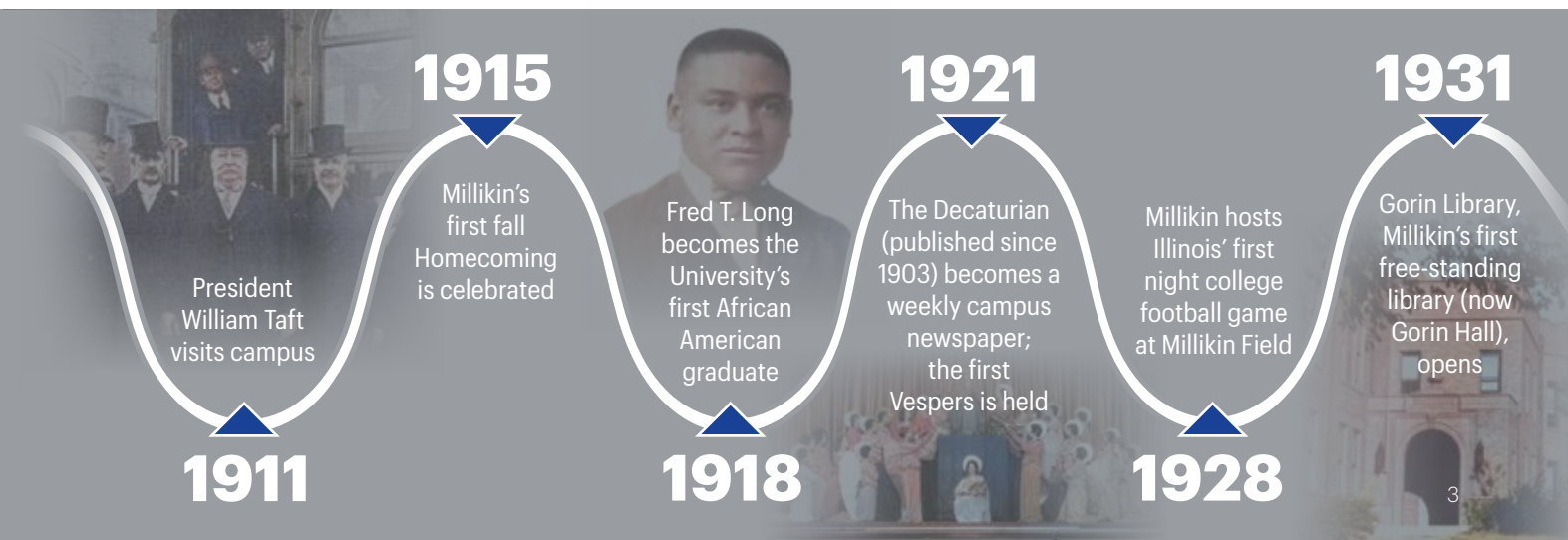
“The opportunity to steward this great University is truly a blessing,” he said. “This is a day I will carry with me for the rest of my life ... with a deep sense of humility and responsibility.”

That sense of stewardship has shaped the tone of his first year in office – a year defined not only by milestone events, but by countless small moments that together reveal the culture and character of Millikin University.

### A Year of Firsts

Looking back on his first several months as President, Dr. Pribbenow struggles to isolate a single defining moment.

“It’s been really hard to think about which [moments] have been most meaningful,” he said. He and his wife, Dr. Kris Mickelson, have called it “The Year of Firsts” and have tried to say yes to everything.



There have, of course, been milestone moments. The connection and community of Homecoming 2025 and the dedication of the David J. & Debra C. Rathje Athletic Center. Commemorating the holiday season with the annual Cookie Party and Vespers. Celebrating a history and future that are Forever Blue with the inauguration ceremony and kickoff of Millikin's 125th anniversary celebration, and April's Forever True Blue Challenge, which raised significant funds in support of student scholarships.

But the moments Dr. Pribbenow returns to most often are not always the ones drawing headlines.

"To see our students personalizing their environment and making this place their own ... that, to me, is the fuel that keeps me going," he said. "These memorable [events] are not just the large ones that everyone pays attention to. It's everything that happens on a daily basis."

He points to student performances, worship gatherings, athletic events, academic showcases like the Poster Symposium, and his everyday encounters around campus as reminders of what makes Millikin distinctive. One such evening stands out in particular.

After a Homecoming weekend packed with more than 50 events in 50 hours,

Dr. Pribbenow and Dr. Mickelson attended Sip & Sing, a beloved musical theatre tradition presented by the School of Theatre & Dance.

"By 8:30 p.m., we were ready to crash," he recalled. "We went to Sip & Sing and just kicked back and were entertained by our students."

Students selected songs from musicals and presented them to accompanist Beth Mason Creighton '01, and then individual students took turns spontaneously performing.

"If we closed our eyes, we would have thought we were in Chicago's theatre district," Dr. Pribbenow said.

What struck him most was not simply the talent, but the support students showed one another. "There is something that goes on with [our] students in the way they show up and support one another," he said. "To see that public support is special."

That sense of belonging – of students finding both their voice and their people – has become one of the defining themes of his first year.

### The Power of Relationships

Over the course of his inaugural address, Dr. Pribbenow identified several enduring truths that have anchored Millikin for 125 years. The first is a deep belief in the centrality of relationships to the educational

experience and is echoed in one of his 4 P's: People.

"From the very beginning, this has been a place where people matter," he said. "Where students are not just names in a gradebook, but individuals with gifts, aspirations, and limitless potential."

That emphasis on relationships has resonated deeply with him since arriving to Decatur.

"We have found both on campus and in the community that people are paying attention," he said. "They have a deep-rooted love for this place. We may frustrate them sometimes and not always do what they want, but whether they've graduated from here or not, people feel an attachment to this place that surpasses anything I could have imagined."

Again and again, Dr. Pribbenow describes moments when students articulate the transformation they have experienced during their time at Millikin – seniors reflecting on who they were as first-year students, scholarship recipients describing the impact of donor generosity, and scholars confidently, as he described it, "putting on the cloak of their discipline."

For Dr. Pribbenow, those moments reveal a deeper calling of higher education: helping students develop

1932

Charlene Levinson is named Millikin's first Homecoming Queen

1934

Marian Vanderburg becomes first female African American graduate

1939

Albert Taylor Hall is dedicated to honor Millikin's first president

1942

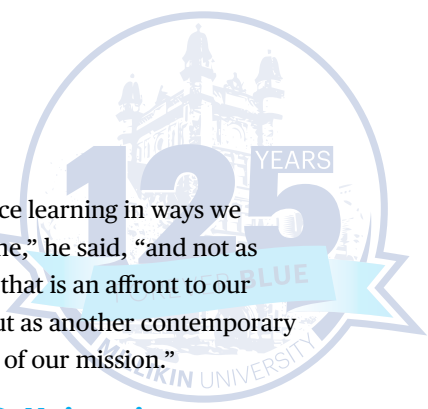
The Millikin Homestead (the former Millikin family residence) is conveyed to the University

1948

Fred Torrey's "Lincoln at Twenty-One" sculpture is formally dedicated

1955

Scovill Science Hall, Millikin's first science building, opens



confidence, purpose, and voice. It is his hope that students go out into the world, understanding that Millikin remains part of their story long after graduation.

“I want them to leave with the sense that they’re not leaving us for good,” he said. “That this is their home; they’re welcome back any time.”

**Tradition and Transformation**

If there is one phrase that best captures Dr. Pribbenow’s philosophy for Millikin’s future, it may be the one repeated throughout his inaugural address: tradition and transformation.

Not tradition *or* transformation. *And*. Both.

Drawing inspiration from noted philosopher and educator John Dewey, Dr. Pribbenow challenged the notion that institutions must choose between preserving identity and embracing change.

“The story of Millikin University is, in many ways, the story of how these two forces have existed together in exquisite tension across generations to shape something that is lasting and meaningful,” he said.

That balance is especially meaningful during the University’s milestone 125th anniversary year. “To be Forever Blue is to accept that this legacy is now ours to steward, to renew, and reimagine.”

For Dr. Pribbenow, Millikin’s longevity is rooted precisely in its willingness to evolve.

“Millikin embraced Performance Learning before it was cool,” he said, pointing to the University’s history as evidence that adaptation is not a departure from the institution’s identity – it is a fundamental part of it. “We will adapt, because we always have.”

That adaptability, however, must be intentional. “We have to do it in thoughtful and strategic ways,” he said. “We don’t just practice this work. We have to become scholars of it and understand it.”

That thinking informed much of his inaugural address as well, in which he outlined four imperatives that he believes will shape Millikin’s future: becoming increasingly student-ready; expanding services to new student populations; aligning academic programs with workforce and regional needs; and pursuing bold external partnerships.

Those themes have surfaced repeatedly throughout his first year in conversations about enrollment, graduate education, online learning, partnerships with community colleges, workforce development, and more.

“We need to take risks, be innovative,

and embrace learning in ways we haven’t done,” he said, “and not as something that is an affront to our mission, but as another contemporary expression of our mission.”

**Decatur’s University**

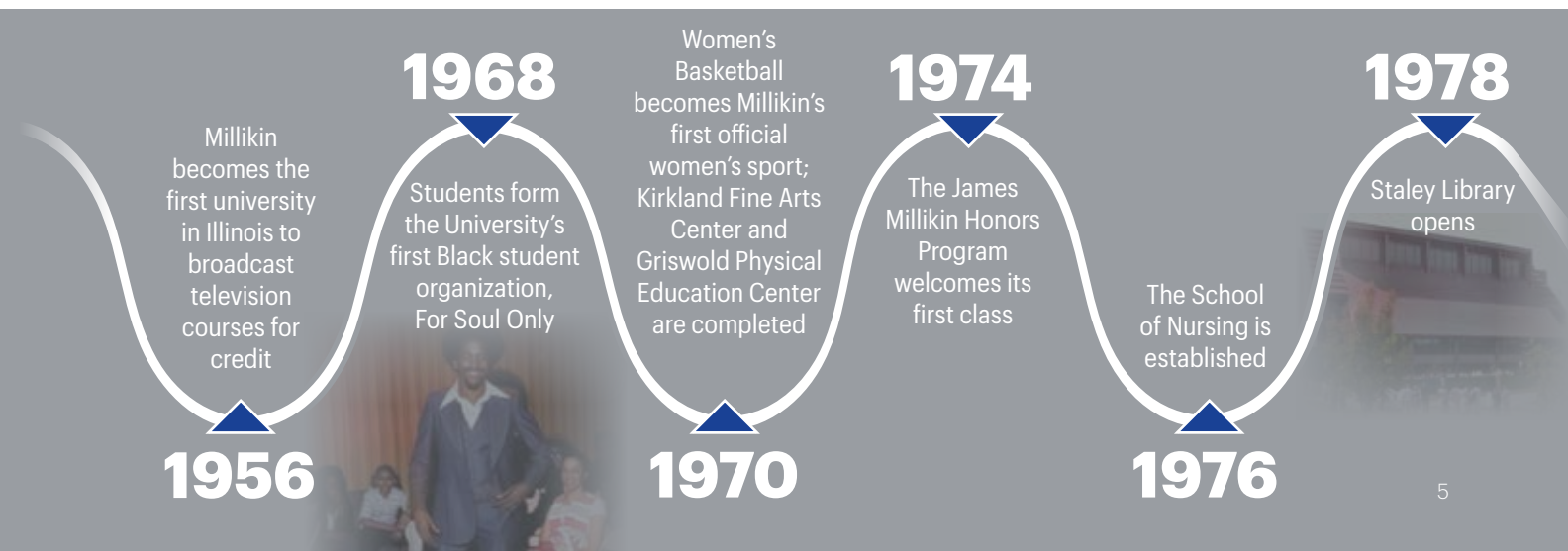
Dr. Pribbenow often speaks about Millikin’s relationship with Decatur not as a transactional partnership, but as one with a shared sense of purpose.

“We are Decatur’s University, and Decatur is our home,” he often says. “When we thrive, our community is strengthened. And when our community thrives, we are strengthened.”

Early in his presidency, he established a goal of holding 30 meetings with community partners in his first 30 days. He exceeded that benchmark, beginning conversations with leaders in education, healthcare, industry, government, and nonprofit organizations.

Partnerships, Dr. Pribbenow believes, are essential to supporting enrollment pipelines, creating internship and employment opportunities, and contributing to broader economic and community development. Examples already exist on campus and throughout the community.

Millikin’s partnership with Decatur Memorial Hospital supports Nursing





phrase: “What’s going on is a capital ‘M’ Momentum.”

Dr. Pribbenow agrees. “I feel very fortunate and blessed to come to this place at a time when it was preparing to celebrate its 125th anniversary and people were looking for reasons to do good work,” he said. “By releasing that, we have some momentum going forward.”

### Forever True Blue

That momentum turned tangible during the Forever True Blue Challenge, a campaign tied closely to Millikin’s 125th anniversary celebration. The initiative embodied themes that have surfaced repeatedly throughout Dr. Pribbenow’s first year: support, community, shared purpose, and belief in students.

When reflecting on the University’s legacy, he often points to the remarkable culture and tradition of philanthropy surrounding Millikin.

That tradition is not merely financial. It reflects collective investment in students and the University’s mission. Again and again, Dr. Pribbenow returns to the idea that Millikin people care deeply about the institution because they believe it changes lives.

“[When] you attend a capstone presentation,” he said, “or go to the Scholarship Dinner and hear the students [and donors] talk about what this place has meant to them, it’s a very

students while addressing workforce shortages. Collaboration with Illinois community colleges is helping strengthen transfer admission. The Millikin Market addresses food insecurity through partnerships with local organizations. And the arrival of the Decatur Bean Ballers at the Workman Family Baseball Field is a reflection of community-centered collaboration.

Dr. Pribbenow believes higher education institutions must increasingly embrace their role as engaged anchor institutions within their communities. “Our best work occurs when we do it together,” he said.

### A Culture Emerging

Perhaps one of the most striking developments during Dr. Pribbenow’s first year has been the growing conversation around culture. “In organizational theory literature, they

say it can take years to shift the culture of a place,” he said. “People are saying they’ve witnessed a culture shift on this campus in the last year.”

He is hesitant to take personal credit for that perception.

“I don’t know that we’ve sensed a culture shift or that there was just so much else going on that it was preventing the culture from fully presenting itself,” he said. “It needed permission to do things.”

In his view, leadership is less about control and more about creating conditions that allow others to flourish. “I think that’s some of what’s happened,” he said. “We’ve given permission, removed barriers, and embraced good ideas.”

The result is a growing sense of energy and optimism across campus. One trustee recently captured it in a single

**1981**

Tabor School of Business is dedicated

President Ronald Reagan visits campus

**1984**

**1997**

The Woods at Millikin is dedicated; Pilling Chapel opened; “Big Bronze Man on Campus” by J. Seward Johnson Jr. is installed

Perkinson Music Center, named for C.D. “Perk” and Patricia Smith Perkinson ‘45, is dedicated; Decatur Indoor Sports Center opens

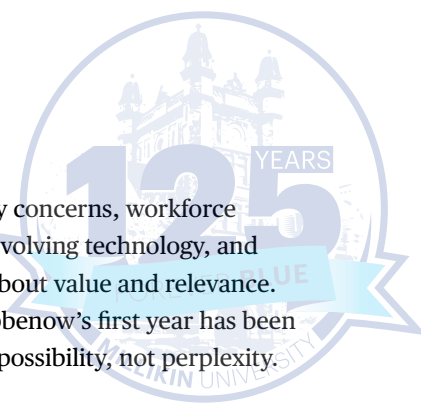
**2000**

**2001**

Leighty-Tabor Science Center is completed

Women’s Basketball wins the NCAA Division III National Championship; Scovill Science Hall reopens as ADM-Scovill Hall, home to the Tabor School of Business

**2005**



visible reminder of why we keep doing what we're doing."

The Forever True Blue Challenge became another expression of that enduring commitment – an opportunity for alumni, friends, faculty, staff, and supporters to participate in the next chapter of Millikin's story.

And participate they did. By the end of the first week of May, more than \$685,000 had been given to support Millikin students, demonstrating more than generosity – it demonstrated belief.

Belief in the power of a Millikin education. Belief in students who arrive on campus searching for purpose and leave with confidence, clarity, and direction. And belief in an institution that, 125 years after its founding, continues to evolve while remaining rooted in the relationships and values that have always defined it.

In many ways, the Forever True Blue Challenge became more than a fundraising initiative. It became a visible expression of the momentum surrounding Millikin University and a collective affirmation that its next chapter is one worth the investment.

**Meeting the Moment**

At the conclusion of his inauguration speech, Dr. Pribbenow quoted poet Wendell Berry: "What we need is here."

The line encapsulates much of how he speaks about Millikin.

He sees an institution rooted in tradition, grounded in relationships, strengthened by community, sustained through generosity, and capable of transformation. He sees students driven by passion for their disciplines. He sees faculty and staff eager to do meaningful work.

And he sees a University positioned not merely to survive an ever-changing higher education landscape, but to help shape it. Of the many truths Dr. Pribbenow spoke about Millikin on the afternoon of his inauguration, he concluded with this one: "We will meet the moment."

It's a phrase that carries with it both challenge and conviction.

The challenges facing higher education are real: demographic shifts,

affordability concerns, workforce demands, evolving technology, and questions about value and relevance. But Dr. Pribbenow's first year has been marked by possibility, not perplexity.

"We're trying to do bolder, more ambitious things," he said. "I have found that when you do that, and when you talk to people about that, it gets them excited."

As Millikin celebrates 125 years, the University finds itself balancing reflection with reinvention, honoring the past while preparing for the future.

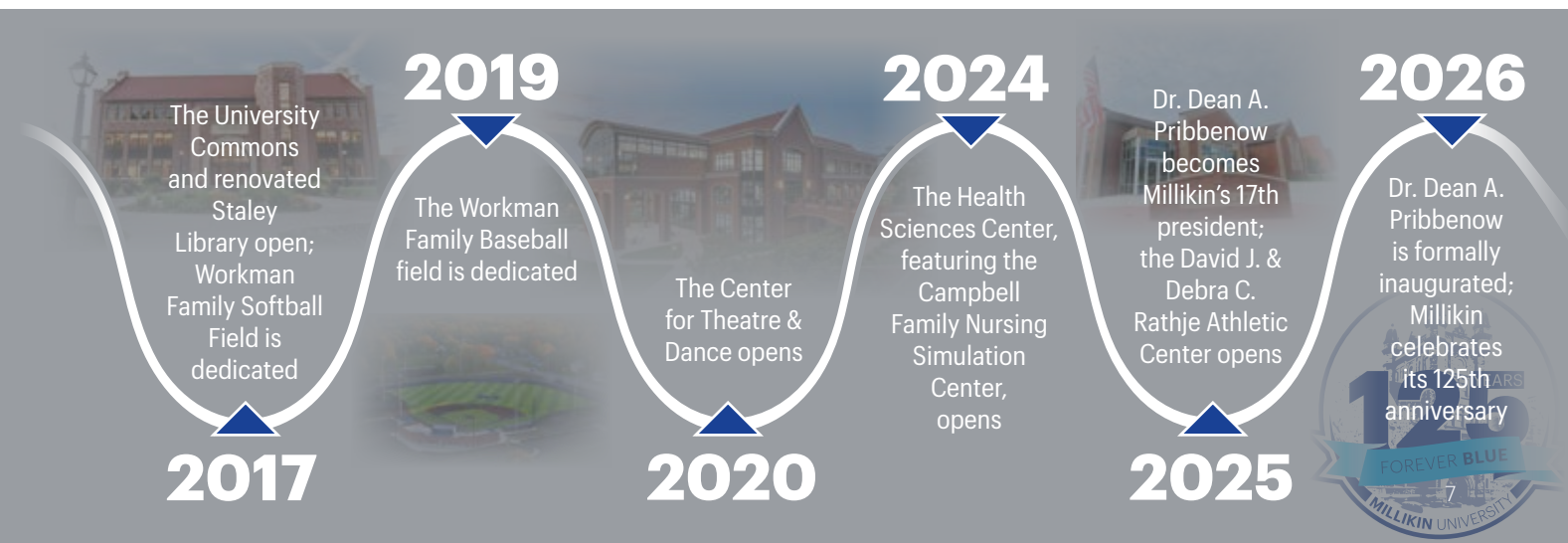
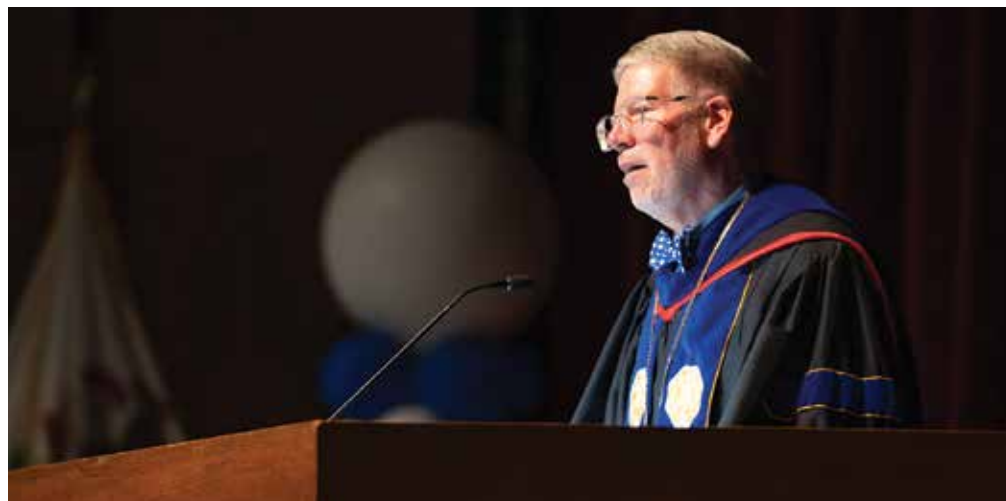
And for Dr. Pribbenow, that balance is not a contradiction.

It is the essence of Millikin itself.

Tradition and transformation.

Millikin Forward.

**Forever Blue.**



# CELEBRATION OF LIFE HONORS MILLIKIN FOOTBALL COACH CARL POELKER

Former Millikin University Football players, coaches, family members, and friends gathered in May to celebrate the life and legacy of former Big Blue Football Coach Carl Poelker '68.

The Celebration of Life ceremony was held in the Rathje Athletic Center's Perryman Family/Coach Carl Poelker Weight Room, a fitting setting for a tribute to a coach remembered for his toughness, discipline, attention to detail, and deep devotion to the young men he coached. Poelker, Millikin's all-time winningest Football coach, led the Big Blue from 1982-95, compiling an 88-39-1 record and winning two College Conference of Illinois & Wisconsin championships. Before becoming Head Coach, he served 14 years as an Assistant Coach, including nine years as Defensive Coordinator.

A 1968 Millikin graduate, Poelker played defensive line for the Big Blue and earned All-District honors. He was inducted into the Millikin Athletic

Hall of Fame in 1981 for Football, Basketball, and Track & Field.

The day's events were led by Master of Ceremonies Jeff Monken '89, a former Big Blue player and current Head Football Coach at Army West Point, who welcomed generations of Millikin Football alumni back home to remember the coach who helped shape their lives.

"We're all tied together in this brotherhood, in this family of Millikin Football because of Coach Poelker," Monken said. "We're all here because of him."

Poelker's daughter, Traci Poelker Eckenrod '90, offered a family reflection, thanking the former players, coaches, and friends who came to celebrate "your coach and friend, and our dad and papa."

"If our lives are measured by people's lives we touch, by lessons we leave, and by stories being told after we're gone, then my dad's life was very fruitful, and we're all better because he was here," she said.

During the ceremony, current Millikin Head Football Coach Billy Riebock announced that Millikin Football will honor Poelker throughout the upcoming season by wearing "CP" on the back of its helmets, a tribute he said would remain in place as long as he is Head Coach. The current team also revealed a No. 77 jersey in honor of Poelker's playing number.

For more on Poelker, read his memorial on page 41.





THINGS WE LOVE

**Our Values**

**Safety**

- + We put safety first.
- + We speak up and take action to create an environment of zero harm.
- + We build an inclusive culture where everyone can fully engage.

**Integrity**

- + We are accountable for our attitude, actions and health.
- + We honor diverse abilities, beliefs and identities.
- + We respect others by being honest and showing compassion.

**Quality**

- + We listen to learn and partner for success.
- + We embrace continuous improvement by enhancing our knowledge.
- + We practice evidence-based care to improve patient outcomes.
- + We work wisely.
- + We coordinate care.

# Millikin and DMH Partner for Nursing Scholars Program

Millikin University and Decatur Memorial Hospital (DMH), part of Memorial Health, announced a new partnership designed to strengthen the nursing workforce in Central Illinois while expanding opportunities for Millikin Nursing students.

The Decatur Memorial Foundation/ Millikin University Nursing Scholars Program provides

significant scholarship support, hands-on clinical experience, and guaranteed employment opportunities for eligible Millikin students pursuing careers in nursing.

Through the program, Millikin students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) or Master's Entry into Nursing Practice (MENP) programs may receive scholarship and tuition assistance totaling up to \$50,000,

along with paid clinical experience while completing their degree. Participating students will gain more than 200 hours of hands-on patient care experience through per diem employment at Decatur Memorial Hospital while still enrolled at Millikin.

In return for financial support and clinical training, participants commit to working full-time for three years at Decatur Memorial Hospital following graduation and licensure, thereby strengthening the local healthcare workforce.

# Nursing Graduate Programs Earn Recognition in U.S. News & World Report Rankings

Millikin University's School of Nursing continues to gain national and statewide recognition, as its graduate programs were highlighted in the latest graduate school rankings released by U.S. News & World Report.

Millikin's Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program earned distinction as one of the top programs in Illinois,

ranking No. 4 in the state and No. 1 outside the Chicago metropolitan area.

Millikin's DNP – Nurse Anesthesia Program (NAP) was selected as the No. 2 program in Illinois and the No. 1 in Central Illinois, highlighting its continued impact in educating highly skilled nurse anesthetists.



*“These rankings affirm the quality of our programs and the dedication of our faculty to student success,” said Dr. Teresa Gulley, Assistant Professor and Director of Millikin’s School of Nursing. “Our DNP and Nurse Anesthesia programs are designed to develop advanced clinical expertise through rigorous academics and extensive, immersive clinical training.”*

# STUDENTS AND FACULTY RECOGNIZED AT 2026 HONORS CONVOCATION

In April, Millikin University honored the academic achievements, service, and leadership of its students and faculty during the 2026 Honors Convocation and Distinguished Faculty Lecture.

The annual event is one of Millikin's most meaningful academic traditions, celebrating the University's top scholars and educators while reinforcing its commitment to excellence through Performance Learning. Each year, dozens of awards are presented across the University's four colleges and Student Affairs, honoring students for their work in the classroom, in their fields of study, and throughout the campus community.

The ceremony also featured the Distinguished Faculty Lecture, a keynote address delivered by a faculty member selected by their peers, continuing a longstanding tradition of faculty excellence and scholarship. Dr. Travis Wilcoxon, Professor & Interim Director of the School of Biological & Environmental Studies, delivered this year's speech, blending humor, personal reflection, and science to highlight leadership and resilience.

This year, 140 students and five faculty members received awards, totaling over \$85,000.

The next day, students took center stage to present original research and creative scholarship during the 33rd

Annual Judith & G. Richard Locke Poster Symposium. The symposium featured 26 presentations from more than 40 students across a wide range of academic disciplines, including Biology, Nursing, Political Science, Finance, and Psychology.

Open to students of all majors and class years, the event provides a platform for participants to share scholarly work developed through coursework, independent study, internships, and research initiatives.





## CLASS OF 2026 CELEBRATED AT SPRING COMMENCEMENT

Millikin University celebrated more than 250 graduates from the Class of 2026 during Spring Commencement ceremonies on Sunday, May 17, at Kirkland Fine Arts Center. The day included two ceremonies recognizing undergraduate and graduate students from Millikin's four academic colleges.

Millikin President Dr. Dean Pribbenow placed the day in the context of Millikin's 125-year history, referencing President Theodore Roosevelt's visit to Decatur in 1903 for the dedication of Millikin University and Roosevelt's reminder that "to whom much has been given, from them much shall rightly be expected."

For Pribbenow, that charge remains central to the purpose of a Millikin education. "You have experienced the gift of knowledge. Skills. Mentorship. Opportunity. Friendship. Perspective," Pribbenow said. "And now, graduates, what shall rightly be expected of you? I believe it's to be a force for good in the world."

This year's Commencement keynote speaker was Dr. James Rauff, Professor of Mathematics & Computer Science, who is retiring after 38 years at Millikin. Rauff has served Millikin students since 1988, and his career has spanned Mathematics, Computer Science, Linguistics, and Anthropology.

During his time at Millikin, he published more than 200 works and mentored numerous student researchers, James Millikin Scholars, and capstone students.

Rauff offered graduates four items to carry with them into the next chapter of their lives: be kind, show up and be there, be thankful, and be yourself.

The ceremonies also featured remarks from student speakers Carissa Guerrier of Grayslake, Ill., and Miamaya Parra of Chicago, who reflected on the uncertainty, growth, and transformation that shaped their Millikin experiences.



## MILLIKIN LAUNCHES ACCELERATED ONLINE ELEMENTARY EDUCATION PROGRAM

Millikin University is expanding access to its highly regarded teacher preparation programs with the launch of a new accelerated Online Elementary Education Program, designed specifically for working professionals, transfer students, and other non-traditional learners seeking flexibility while earning their teaching degree or licensure.

Offered through Millikin's College of Professional Studies and School

of Education, the program provides a flexible, asynchronous online format that allows students to complete coursework on a schedule that fits their professional and personal commitments. Teaching-methods courses are delivered in accelerated eight-week sessions, while required internships provide hands-on classroom experience through field placements in classrooms for grades 1-6.

The program offers multiple pathways to becoming a licensed elementary teacher in Illinois. Students who already hold a bachelor's degree in another field may pursue a Licensure-Only track, allowing them to move quickly into the classroom, while students without a previous degree can complete a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education and earn licensure simultaneously.

**For more on the School of Education, and its Director, Dr. Chris Cunnings, see his profile on page 24.**

## Millikin and Blackburn College Establish MBA Direct Admit Partnership

Millikin University and Blackburn College have established a new MBA Direct Admit partnership that will create a seamless pathway for qualified Blackburn students to pursue Millikin's Accelerated Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree through the University's Tabor School of Business.

The partnership strengthens collaboration between the two institutions while expanding opportunities for Blackburn students

to continue their education through Millikin's graduate business program. The agreement guarantees placement opportunities in Millikin's Accelerated MBA program for a minimum of four qualified Blackburn students each academic cycle, provided they meet the program's admission requirements.

Beginning with the 2026-27 academic year, Blackburn students who meet the partnership's eligibility criteria – including maintaining a cumulative 3.0 GPA, submitting a resume, and

completing an interview with the Millikin MBA Program Director – will have a direct path to pursue the Accelerated MBA program.

In addition to the admission pathway, Millikin will reserve graduate assistant positions for Blackburn students who enroll in the program, allowing students to gain leadership experience while pursuing graduate study.





## Millikin Students Earn Honors at Model Illinois Government Conference

Millikin University students earned top individual honors at the 2026 Model Illinois Government Conference, continuing the University’s tradition of civic engagement and hands-on education through Performance Learning.

Held annually in Springfield, the conference immerses students in the inner workings of Illinois state government and the legal system. Participants serve in roles such

as legislators, committee chairs, attorneys, justices, journalists, and photographers while debating legislation, arguing cases, and navigating the processes that shape public policy and legal proceedings.

Haley Willan ’26 of Bloomington, Ill., earned the David Hunt Award for Outstanding House Committee Chair after serving as chair of the Human Services, Education, and Environment Committee.

Gavin Estes ’27 of Murphysboro, Ill., also served in a leadership role as chair of the Labor and Commerce, Transportation Committee.

Dr. Laura Dean, Associate Professor of Political Science, said the conference offers students a rare opportunity to put classroom learning into practice in an immersive, meaningful setting.

## Millikin Hosts SCALE Conference for Creative Entrepreneurs

Millikin University welcomed student artists and creatives from across the Midwest for the 2026 SCALE Conference (Student Creatives & Artists Learning Entrepreneurship), a two-day event designed to help emerging artists build sustainable careers while developing the business skills needed to succeed in the creative industries.

Held in February on Millikin’s campus, the conference brought together students, faculty, and industry professionals for workshops, keynote sessions, and networking focused on the intersection of creativity and business. Topics included branding, marketing, intellectual property, pricing creative work, financial planning, and work-life balance.

SCALE is a partnership among Millikin University, Saint Louis University, and University of Missouri-Kansas City, providing students with practical tools, professional connections, and real-world insights as they prepare for careers in the arts and creative industries and navigate the future of creative entrepreneurship.

# MILLIKIN BASEBALL WINS CCIW, SETS SEASON RECORD

Millikin earned the CCIW's automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament by winning the conference tournament championship in May, with a 6-5 walk-off victory over North Park University. The Big Blue also captured the CCIW regular season title, continuing a season that had already rewritten the program record book.

Senior outfielder Sam Bushur said the team winning a program-best

35 wins during his final season has already delivered nearly everything he hoped it would.

"I couldn't have asked for a better senior season," Bushur said. "Breaking the team record for most wins, winning the regular season for conference, winning the conference tournament, and now hosting a regional. I literally could not dream it up any better, and it's just been so much fun."

Bushur, a Finance major from Teutopolis, Ill., has been one of the leaders of Millikin's rise. A right fielder and one of the most accomplished players in program history, Bushur set Millikin's single-season hits record with 68 in 2025, when he hit .402 with 12 doubles, two triples, four home runs, and 43 RBI.





## Millikin Athletics Finishes Top Four in NCAA Community Engagement Challenge

Millikin student-athletes earned national recognition for their commitment to service, finishing in the top four among all NCAA Division III institutions in the NCAA Fall Service Challenge.

The annual NCAA Community Engagement Impact Challenge celebrates student-athletes who go beyond competition to make meaningful contributions in their communities.

During the challenge, Millikin student-athletes logged approximately 1,500 hours of service, generating an estimated \$51,000 in community impact through volunteer efforts.

Vice President for Athletics & Community Engagement Lori Kerans '85 emphasized the intentional culture of service within Millikin Athletics.

*"I'm incredibly proud of our student-athletes and coaches*

*for embracing service as a core part of their Millikin experience," said Kerans. "This honor represents thousands of moments where our teams chose to show up for their community, whether that meant fighting food insecurity, supporting local initiatives, or creating safer spaces for others. It speaks to the heart and character of Big Blue Athletics."*

## Decatur Prospect League Team Sets Name, Schedule

The new era of summer baseball that will be played on Millikin's campus began with the unveiling of the team's name and schedule in the run-up to the 2026 season. After receiving more than 1,000 fan submissions, the Decatur Baseball Club revealed its Prospect League team name was the Decatur Bean Ballers. The name is a community-driven brand that reflects the city's agricultural roots, sports history, and partnership with Millikin.

The Bean Ballers began play on May 26 at Millikin University's Workman Family Baseball Field, competing in the collegiate summer Prospect League with a 56-game schedule that includes 28 home dates in Decatur. The season runs through early August, bringing baseball action to Millikin throughout the summer months.

**Tickets are on sale now at [beanballers.com](http://beanballers.com).**



# MORGAN RECKAMP EARNS TOP HONORS AT 2026 HOLLIS PRIZE COMPETITION

Millikin University's School of Music celebrated one of its most prestigious student performance traditions in March, as soprano Morgan Reckamp '27 of River Forest, Ill., was named the winner of the 2026 Hollis Prize Competition following a night of standout performances in Kaeuper Hall.

Now in its 24th year, the Hollis Prize Competition is a signature event within Millikin's College of Fine Arts, designed to showcase the University's top student musicians while encouraging them to reach the highest level of artistic excellence.

The Hollis Prize Competition is made possible through the generosity of Dr. Kimm Hollis '72, whose support for music education and student achievement has helped sustain the event for more than two decades.



"It is always a competition with spectacular performance, and it is Millikin music at its best – three stellar students with excellent applied teachers," Hollis said. "I look forward to it each year."

## Millikin Hosts Premiere for James Millikin Documentary

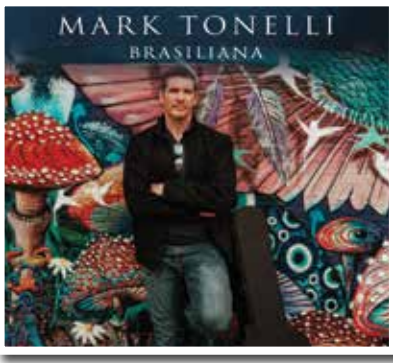
Millikin University hosted a special premiere event in April for a new documentary chronicling the life and legacy of its founder, James Millikin, offering attendees a deeper look at the vision and values that continue to shape the institution today.

Held in conjunction with the University's 125th anniversary celebration, the premiere of "The Original Big Blue: The Life and Times of James Millikin" brought together campus and community members to reflect on the enduring impact of Millikin's founding story.

In opening remarks, Millikin University President Dr. Dean Pribbenow welcomed guests and emphasized the significance of revisiting the University's origins.

"A little over a year ago, I didn't know much about James Millikin," Pribbenow shared. "But through this journey, I've come to understand that he and Anna were visionaries and philanthropists who believed deeply that personal prosperity and community health were inseparable."

The documentary, produced and directed by Jim Wilkerson '97, President of the Board of Directors of the James Millikin Homestead, represents more than two years of research, travel, and production.



## Album & Documentary Chart Creative Journey of School of Music’s Dr. Mark Tonelli

For Dr. Mark Tonelli, music has always been about connection – but his latest project takes that idea across continents, cultures, and artistic mediums.

Tonelli, Associate Professor of Music and Coordinator of Guitar Studies in Millikin University’s School of Music, has released “Brasiliana,” a new album of original compositions inspired by his extensive travels in

Brazil. Alongside the album comes an unexpected companion piece: a feature-length film that captures the creative journey behind the music.

“Brasiliana” represents the culmination of decades of aspiration and several years of immersive travel. Between 2022 and 2025, Tonelli made 13 trips to Brazil – including two as a Fulbright Scholar – studying, teaching, performing, and building lasting

relationships with Brazilian musicians.

A Brazilian filmmaker, Thiago S. Barbosa, became interested in Tonelli’s story and produced “Brasiliana – The Film,” a 50-minute documentary chronicling the creative process behind the album and the decades-long journey that led to it. The film not only explores Tonelli’s time in Brazil but also brings the story back to Decatur – highlighting how those experiences shape his work at Millikin.

## Art & Creative Media Students Earn American Advertising Awards

Millikin University Art & Creative Media students earned major recognition at the 2026 American Advertising Awards, winning seven Gold ADDYs and eight Silver ADDYs across regional and district levels.

The American Advertising Awards are one of the advertising industry’s largest creative competitions, attracting nearly 35,000 professional and student entries annually through local club competitions.

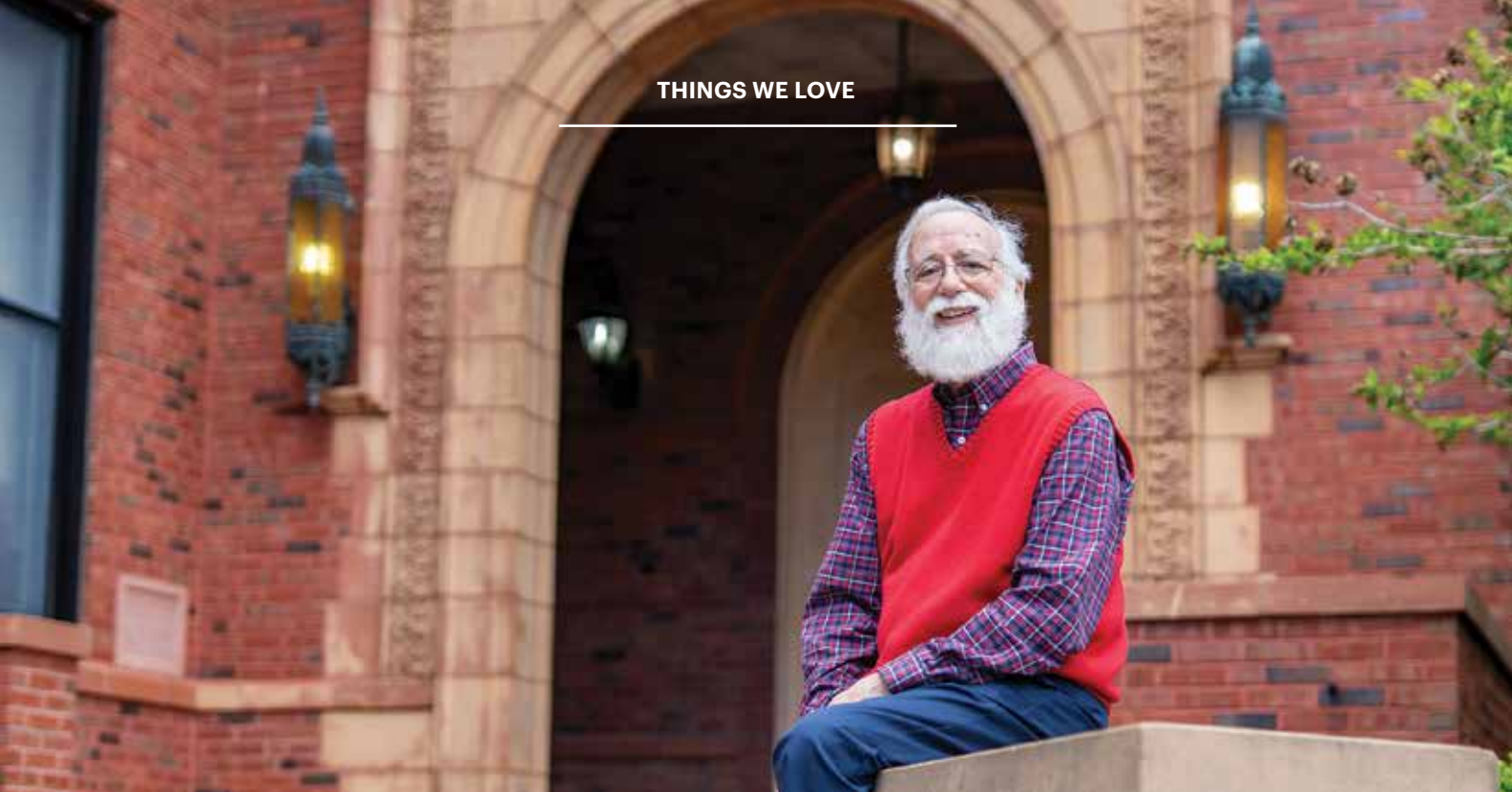
The awards recognize and reward creative excellence in advertising.

Millikin students competed in the Southern Illinois chapter at the regional level, and goldwinning entries advanced to the district competition, where students competed against work from Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan.

Among Millikin’s top honorees were junior Film majors Kenley Dufresne of Decatur and Dallas Wuoremna of Lindenhurst, Ill., who earned multiple

Gold ADDY awards for projects that showcased their storytelling, photography, and filmmaking skills.





## EVERYWHERE AND FOREVER: DR. JAMES RAUFF REFLECTS ON 38 YEARS OF TEACHING

Dr. James Rauff, Professor of Mathematics & Computer Science, is retiring after a career defined by interdisciplinary scholarship, student mentorship, and a deep belief in the power of kindness, gratitude, and presence.

Rauff served as Millikin's Spring 2026 Commencement keynote speaker, offering one final lesson to graduates during the University's 125th anniversary year. His address, titled "Everywhere and Forever," drew from one of his longtime intellectual fascinations: infinity. Those timeless ideas formed the heart of his message, in which he presented four charges to the graduates: be kind, show up and be there, be thankful, and be yourself.

For those who know Rauff, the message fits the man.

Throughout his career, his teaching and scholarship have spanned Mathematics, Computer Science, Linguistics, and Anthropology. Rauff's

Millikin honors include the Alpha Lambda Delta Outstanding Teacher Award, the James Millikin Scholars' Educator of the Year Award, the Research and Artistic Achievement Award, and the Teaching Excellence and Campus Leadership Award.

A prolific scholar, Rauff has published nearly 200 works across his fields of study, building a body of scholarship that reflects his curiosity about patterns, language, computation, culture, and human thought.

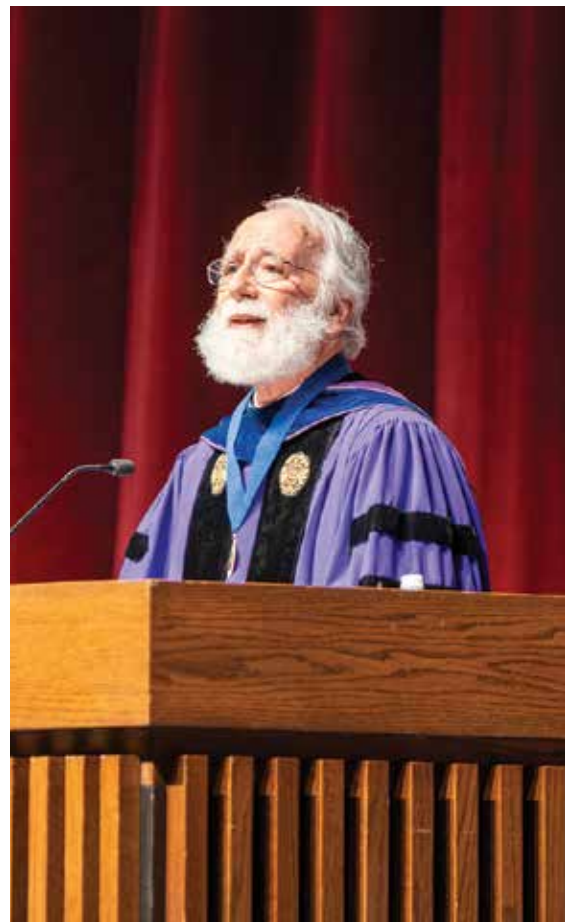
But when Rauff reflects on his 38 years at Millikin, he does not focus on awards or publications. He focuses on those he has taught along the way.

"It's all about the students," Rauff said. "And that's why I came here. I had other choices. But it's that student-focused approach to things that I like."

"I think everybody should know that the faculty here, and I'm not exaggerating, really love teaching, and

they really love to see their students learn," Rauff said. "As long as that spirit continues, I think Millikin will be in good shape for the next 125 years."

Read more at [millikin.edu/rauff](https://millikin.edu/rauff).



# Law Enforcement Cadets' Food Drive Supports Millikin Market

In the spring, Millikin University leaders joined the Macon County Law Enforcement Training Center to accept a significant food donation benefiting the Millikin Market, following a food drive competition among the police officer cadet cohorts.

Representing Millikin were President Dean Pribbenow, Vice President for

Athletics & Community Engagement Lori Kerans '85, Director of Wrestling Ryan Birt, Head Baseball Coach and Assistant Athletic Director Brandon Townsend, and Head Football Coach Billy Riebock. The donation of more than 3,000 pounds of food was coordinated in partnership with the Northeast Community Fund, which

will deliver the collected food to the Millikin Market.

The Millikin Market is an on-campus nutrition resource that supports Millikin students facing food insecurity. Open each week, the Market provides free groceries and essentials in a welcoming, stigma-free environment.



## City of Decatur Designates 'Millikin University Day'

Millikin University was recognized by the Decatur City Council as the City of Decatur officially proclaimed April 30, 2026, as "Millikin University Day" in honor of the institution's 125th anniversary.

Lori Kerans '85, Vice President for Athletics & Community Engagement, read the proclamation during the meeting, highlighting the University's longstanding contributions to the city and region.

Issued by Decatur Mayor Julie Moore Wolfe, the proclamation recognizes Millikin's role as a "steadfast and transformative anchor institution" in Decatur for more than a century, citing its impact on education, cultural enrichment, workforce development, and economic growth.

As "Decatur's University," Millikin continues to play a vital role in the city's cultural and civic life through performances, exhibitions, service

initiatives, and partnerships with local organizations. The City's recognition also acknowledges the University's ongoing commitment to expanding access to higher education and preparing future leaders who will contribute to the vitality of the region and beyond.

Bachelor of Science in Biology/Master of Business Administration

# Dr. Karen Broaders '91/MBA '27

Family Medicine Physician at Carle Health

For Dr. Karen Broaders '91, the path to becoming a physician began long before she stepped onto Millikin University's campus – but it was at Millikin where that lifelong dream took shape, gained momentum, and ultimately led to a career defined by care, leadership, and service.

"I've known that I wanted to be a physician since I was eight years old," Broaders said, recalling a childhood moment watching a doctor care for her younger brother. "I just liked the way he interacted with patients. I said, 'I'm going to be a doctor,' and I never changed my mind."

Originally from Danville, Ill., Broaders came to Millikin with a

clear goal: attend medical school. What set Millikin apart was its strong track record of preparing students for that next step.

*"At the time, Millikin had a 95% acceptance rate for their Pre-Med students getting into medical school," she said. "That, combined with the small, private setting, made it the right choice for me."*

That decision proved pivotal – not only for her academic journey but also for her personal life. On her very first day on campus, she met fellow freshman Ron Broaders '91, who helped carry her luggage into the residence hall. More than three decades later, the couple still reflect on that moment as the beginning of a lifelong partnership.

"I got a wife out of the deal," Ron said with a smile. "Millikin brought us together – and it's given us a lot."

At Millikin, Broaders found both rigorous academic preparation and a supportive learning environment. Faculty members like Dr. Neil Baird '65, Dr. Thomas Mcquiston, and Dr. Homer Smith played key roles in her development, offering mentorship and hands-on learning opportunities.

"They made learning fun and were always willing to help," she said.

One memorable experience involved hands-on parasitology work – an example of the type of immersive learning that would later define Millikin's Performance Learning approach.

That preparation paid off.

"When I was accepted into medical school, there was only one class I hadn't already taken at Millikin," Broaders said. "I was extremely well-prepared."

She went on to earn her Doctor of Medicine from Rush Medical College and completed her Family

# A LIFETIME OF CARE

Medicine residency at Indiana University/Methodist Hospital. Dr. Broaders is currently pursuing a Master of Business Administration at Millikin, with an expected graduation date of May 2027.

Today, Broaders serves as a Family Medicine Physician and Associate Medical Director at Carle Health in Danville, where she has built a career spanning nearly three decades.

While she initially considered specializing in obstetrics and gynecology, she ultimately chose Family Medicine for its breadth and variety.

“I take care of patients from birth to death,” she said. “You never know what you’re going to see when you walk into a room, and I love that.”

In addition to her primary care work, Broaders has spent nearly 20 years specializing in wound care, helping patients recover from complex, non-healing conditions.

Her work is deeply personal and often spans generations.

“It’s something when you end up taking care of a baby that you delivered – and then later seeing them grow up,” she said. “There are students currently enrolled at Millikin that I delivered.”

Beyond clinical care, Broaders is a leader in healthcare administration, medical education, and public health. She trains future physicians and healthcare professionals, serves on multiple boards and committees, and works to address social

determinants of health – ensuring patients have access to the resources they need to live healthier lives.

Though their careers have taken them back to Danville, the Broaders have remained closely connected to Millikin, returning for Homecoming, supporting campus events, and maintaining friendships formed during their college years.

For Broaders, that connection is something she hopes other alumni will rediscover.

“Get back on campus,” she said. “That’s what reignites the spark. You remember your experiences, and that connection comes back.”

Joining the Millikin Board of Trustees was a natural extension of a lifelong commitment to service.

“When I reflect on my time at Millikin, it was such a positive experience,” she said. “The question becomes: how can you give back some of what it gave to you?”

Her answer is to share her time, expertise, and perspective, particularly in areas such as healthcare education and workforce development.

*“I gained an excellent education, lifelong friendships, and a great college experience,” she said. “Being able to give back now is very rewarding.”*



Bachelor of Music Education

# Kathy Springer Kuddes '83

Director of Fine Arts for the Plano Independent School District

For Kathy Springer Kuddes '83, choosing Millikin University was never just about earning a degree – it was about finding a place that felt like home.

*“I think the minute I stepped on campus, I knew,” Kuddes recalls. “It felt like a place where people cared about your well-being – where faculty knew your name and were invested in your success.”*

A Class of 1983 graduate with a Bachelor of Music Education, Kuddes found exactly what she was looking for in Millikin's close-knit campus and hands-on learning environment. That experience would launch a career

spanning nearly four decades in music education and arts leadership – and inspire a legacy of giving that continues to impact Millikin students today.

After graduating, Kuddes returned to her family's roots in Texas and began her teaching career, first in band and choir, then discovering her true calling in elementary music education.

Her career evolved from the classroom to leadership, culminating in a 20-year tenure as Director of Fine Arts for the Plano Independent School District, where she helped shape programs serving thousands of students.

With 38 years in public music education, Kuddes also became a nationally recognized Kodály specialist, curriculum leader, and contributor to music education research, particularly in folk music studies.

Reflecting on her path, she credits Millikin for laying the foundation:

“I probably would not have been in music education without the right training and a place where I really could thrive,” she says.

That gratitude has translated into a deep and meaningful commitment to giving back.

In 2007, Kuddes and her husband, Kent, established the Kathryn Springer Kuddes Endowed Scholarship for Music Education, supporting Millikin students pursuing the same path that shaped her life.

The scholarship reflects both personal experience and a broader understanding of the rising cost of higher education.

“I had scholarships when I was here, and they made all the difference,” Kuddes says. “It's an easy way to support the ongoing work of a university that meant a lot to me and to support students who have similar goals.”

# FROM STUDENT TO SUPPORTER

Her giving is not limited to academics. Kuddes has also supported Millikin Athletics, including helping establish an endowed fund for the Softball program, an effort rooted in personal connections and a desire to honor others.

*“We were looking for a way to honor that connection and support the program,” she explains. “It just seemed like the right way to give back and help provide for needs that aren’t always part of a university’s operating budget.”*

For Kuddes, the impact of giving is most meaningful when it connects directly to students.

During a recent return to campus, she met with Music Education students, led discussions, and shared insights from her career, continuing her lifelong role as an educator while witnessing firsthand the impact of her support.

She believes even small contributions can make a difference:

“Even if it’s just an annual gift, it’s a start,” she says. “You look for opportunities that resonate with you – whether it’s your field of study or a place that made you feel valued as a learner.”

Though now based in Texas, Kuddes remains closely connected to Millikin through giving, mentorship, and ongoing engagement.

“I think giving is a way to stay connected,” she says.

“You don’t have to be in Central Illinois to make an impact.”

Her story reflects a belief that Millikin is more than a place students attend – it’s a community that continues long after graduation.

“There was always an understanding that once you were done paying tuition, you weren’t done,” she adds. “Giving becomes part of a lifelong habit.”

From her days as a Music Education student to her leadership in one of

Texas’ largest school districts, Kathy Springer Kuddes has dedicated her life to education, artistry, and service.

Through her scholarship, her support of Athletics, and her continued engagement with students, she ensures that future generations of Big Blue students have the same opportunities that shaped her own journey.

And for Kuddes, it all comes back to that first feeling on campus decades ago – a place that felt like home, and still does.

Abigail Salgado '28 of Frankfort, Ill., is the recipient of the Kathryn Springer Kuddes Endowed Scholarship for Music Education for 2025-26. The scholarship is sponsored by Kathy & Ken Kuddes.





# Dr. Chris Cunnings

Director of the School of Education & Associate Professor

Talk to School of Education Director Dr. Chris Cunnings and you quickly discover the path that brought him to the Big Blue is, as he says, “a strange one.” But one that’s also a testament to his philosophy for both teaching and life.

“I tell my students, ‘Don’t expect perfection. Expect progress.’ Work hard, believe in yourself, be the best you can be professionally, socially, emotionally. I never want to beat myself up if I have a bad day in the classroom, but instead I focus on always looking to get better. The goal is always progress, and in the right direction.”

Finding that direction can take some doing though. The direction that Cunnings’ career took was anything but a straight line.

“Coming out of Wilmington High School, I was a three-sport athlete – I considered myself an athlete more than a student. My parents tried to push me into pre-med because my mom was a nurse. But I also really wanted to play football.

“So, I went to McKendree as an Exploratory major and played football under Coach Carl Poelker ([for more on Coach Poelker, see page 8](#)). There, I declared Chemistry as my major. But then I got to my senior year and said, ‘You know, I don’t like sitting in labs at midnight just writing numbers down. So, what do I want to do?’ And then a professor came up to me after class and said, ‘You have an amazing ability to explain things so your classmates can make sense of it. Have you ever thought about teaching?’

“I hadn’t, but the more I thought about it, I realized that would also allow me to coach. So coaching was the impetus that drove me to get into teaching. But the irony is that, after my second year teaching, I fell in love with it.”

And Cunnings’ career continued to unfold in unexpected ways. After finishing a second bachelor’s degree, he returned to Wilmington High School to teach math and science. He spent five years there, before leaving to become a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. After graduating with his doctorate, he turned his attention to the higher ed job market. And, because of Coach Poelker, Millikin University was top of mind.

“I left my job at Wilmington to go be a doctoral student, then returned, then found my way to Millikin. I don’t know why, but I feel like there’s a through line connecting all these places for me. And I just find that there’s a beauty in that sort of simplicity where all my roots get tangled. And it’s cool that they all tangled and brought me here.”

His time at Millikin as a Director and Associate Professor has been marked by great challenges – chief among them COVID – and great successes, including the School of Education’s Elementary Education program receiving the Illinois State Board of Education’s

# EXPECTING PROGRESS, NOT PERFECTION

coveted “Exemplary” rating, the highest they give, five years running.

Cunnings credits this success to one of the greatest strengths of the Millikin community – its people.

*“The thing that drew me to Millikin was the strong bond I felt with the people. I said, ‘I really could see myself working there. They’re a close-knit group. They’re down-to-earth.’ And they were very good at their job, very student-centered.*”

“And that’s what’s kept me here 10 years – we have very strong Education programs, and they’re built the right way. We have a very high-energy group, which I love.

“The students we get in class, they want to be engaging themselves as teachers. So, they want to see evidence of that from us. Our faculty are energetic, they develop cool curriculum, they’re very hands-

on. And that’s why our Education candidates come out well-prepared: Because we show them what the best practice is every day in class.”

Those best practices extend beyond the classroom too. Cunnings is especially proud of the Performance Learning opportunities provided by one of the School of Education’s “crown jewels,” its annual Interview Boot Camp.

“Every college and university is going to say, ‘We have a great education program,’ but you want to see the proof. One of our proofs is Interview Boot Camp. Our alumni go out and do such great things in the field, and then care enough about the program to come back as mentors. They had a powerful, transformative experience here, and want to contribute to that same experience for our students now.”

And, under Cunnings’ leadership, the School has continued to expand student opportunities, most recently with the announcement of a new accelerated Online Elementary Education Program ([for more on the program, see page 12](#)).

“Our traditional Education programs are delivered well. They are designed well. But in the 21st century, every higher education institution has to adapt. Learners have different needs. And I felt like the next big change we needed to see was in our online programs.

“A lot of people think online programs are easy, or a degree mill. That you come out with a degree but no skills. So, we decided that, if we were going to do it, we wanted to do it the right way. Design it so it was just as effective as our traditional program, with the same strong student outcomes.”

Cunnings’ track record of doing things the right way has earned him recognition throughout his career. In 2015, he was invited by Harvard University to share his doctoral dissertation focusing on how he implemented digital learning technologies in a high school physics classroom. In 2018, he was the recipient of Millikin’s Alpha Lambda Delta Outstanding Teaching Award. In 2020, he received the James Millikin Estate Professorship in Education. And, in 2023, he won the College Football Playoff Foundation’s Extra Yard for Teachers Award.

When asked for an assessment of his career path so far, he had this to say: “Times change. People change. Society changes. You’re going to face ups and downs, but at the end of the day, your goal is to always better yourself professionally and personally. If you can do that, things will work out. I know, because I’m a testament to it.”



# College of Fine Arts

## Audrey Soetermans '26

Commercial Music Major



WATCH VIDEO

For Audrey Soetermans, Millikin University was always part of the story – even if she wasn't sure at first that it would become her story.

A second-generation Big Blue student from Rockford, Ill., Audrey grew up hearing about Millikin from her mother, Valerie Brandt Soetermans '88, who studied Musical Theatre. Still, Audrey wanted to find a place where she could build her own artistic identity. That changed when she visited campus and immediately felt the close-knit community.

*“When I toured Millikin, I already felt at home,” Audrey said. “I loved that it had this small, close-knit feel. I wanted a place where I could connect with my professors and not just be a number.”*

Now a 2026 Commercial Music graduate, Audrey has created a path shaped by exploration, artistic growth, and a deep commitment to storytelling through music.

Her passion for songwriting began in middle school, when music became both a creative outlet and a way to process the world around her.

“I became a very serious songwriter,” she said. “I realized I had to do something with music – I couldn't *not* do this.”

Audrey arrived at Millikin as a Music Business major with a primary focus on viola, but quickly discovered that her interests were broader. She transitioned into Commercial Music and Voice while continuing to expand her skills across multiple instruments, including violin, electric violin, drums, and piano.

“I wanted to have as many different skill sets as possible,” she said. “So that whatever people need me for, I can do it.”

That versatility has become one of the defining features of Audrey's Millikin journey. Her work blends pop, alternative, and classical influences, reflecting an artistic identity that continues to grow across genres and disciplines.

Composition has become especially meaningful. Through the Millikin Composers Collective, Audrey found a creative community that encouraged her to develop both independently and collaboratively.

“I've really identified more and more as a composer,” she said.

Her work has already reached an international audience. Two of her compositions were selected for broadcast on Radiophrenia in Glasgow, Scotland, including an original piece inspired by her travels in Europe. She continues to explore a range of styles, from contemporary songwriting to formal vocal and instrumental works, often drawing inspiration from literature, travel, and personal experience.

# FINDING HER VOICE

Some of Audrey's most meaningful growth came from opportunities she did not initially expect, including joining Millikin's University Choir.

*“Being in choir changed my life,” she said. “Singing in European cathedrals and making music with people from all over the world – there’s nothing like it.”*

Those experiences included traveling to France and Belgium, fulfilling a lifelong dream of visiting Paris while performing in historic spaces. She also found a deep connection to Millikin traditions such as Vespers, which she describes as meaningful not only to Millikin but to the surrounding Decatur community.

Through ensembles like OneVoice, Audrey further expanded her musical

range, discovering a passion for vocal jazz and collaborative performance.

She has also participated in numerous recording sessions, often working late into the night with fellow students to complete projects. While the process can be demanding, Audrey says the experience has been deeply fulfilling because it allows her to be part of something larger than herself.

In addition to her studio work, Audrey has held leadership roles in the Millikin Music Business Club, helping organize events and support fellow student artists.

As graduation approached, Audrey focused on preparing a deeply personal capstone project: an original EP titled “Vulnerable.” The project brought together years of songwriting and artistic growth, with some songs written years ago.

“The oldest song on the EP goes back to my senior year of high school,” she said. “It’s really a culmination of everything I’ve created over time.”

After graduation, Audrey plans to attend graduate school to continue studying music, with interests in composition, commercial music, and music business. Her long-term goals include building a career in Nashville while balancing multiple roles as a performer, composer, and educator.

Being a legacy student has added another meaningful layer to Audrey's Millikin story. Following graduation, she looks forward to returning to campus alongside her mother as a fellow alumna.

In finding her voice, Audrey Soetermans has not just followed a Millikin legacy. She has created one of her own.



# College of Professional Studies

## Carissa Guerrier '26

Exercise Science Major  
(Pre-Physical Therapy)



WATCH VIDEO



When Carissa Guerrier '26 first arrived at Millikin University, basketball was one of the biggest parts of her identity.

Recruited as a student-athlete from Grayslake, Ill., Carissa came to campus ready to compete and quickly felt that Millikin could become home. Even during her first visit, she sensed something different about the University and the community she was joining.

*“I remember visiting campus and telling my family, ‘This feels like home,’” Guerrier said. “I knew I could be happy here, even if basketball wasn’t a part of my future.”*

That feeling became especially important after her first year, when a long-term injury brought her basketball career to an end.

After playing the sport for 12 years, Carissa faced a difficult decision:

“I had played basketball for 12 years, and my body was worn down,” she said. “I could either keep playing in pain or step back, take care of myself, and see what else life had to offer as a student.”

Rather than seeing the transition as a loss, Carissa used it as an opportunity. Stepping away from basketball opened the door to a deeply involved Millikin experience filled with academic growth, professional preparation, leadership, and service.

Carissa arrived at Millikin knowing she wanted to pursue a career in physical therapy. She began as a Biology major before transitioning into the Exercise Science program with a pre-professional focus in Physical Therapy. The change proved transformational, giving her the hands-on, applied learning experience she had been seeking.

“Exercise Science gave me exactly what I was looking for: hands-on learning,”

she said. “We’re rarely just sitting in a classroom. Every day we’re doing something active, something practical.”

Through Millikin’s Performance Learning opportunities, Carissa conducted undergraduate research examining how different activity levels affect lactate buildup in athletes. The project allowed her to work closely with faculty mentors while gaining experience in study design, data collection, and statistical analysis.

Her preparation also extended through the Exercise Science program’s built-in certifications, including personal training, strength and conditioning, and CPR. For Carissa, those credentials helped bridge the gap between classroom learning and professional readiness.

“That combination of coursework and certifications makes you feel incredibly prepared,” she said. “You’re graduating with real credentials and real experience.”

Carissa has also gained valuable professional experience beyond

# FUTURE IN MOTION

campus. She worked as a Physical Therapy Technician at Decatur Orthopedic Center, where she assisted patients directly and worked alongside licensed physical therapists who serve as mentors.

“I got that job because my professors forwarded the opportunity to me,” she said. “That support has been huge. I already feel confident and prepared stepping into the field.”

During her final semester, Carissa completed a full-time internship at Apex Network Physical Therapy in Mount Zion, Ill., immersing herself in a local physical therapy clinic as she prepared for graduate school.

Outside the classroom, Carissa embraced leadership and service across campus. She served as a Strength and Conditioning Intern in the Rathje Athletic Center, Secretary of Delta Sigma Theta

Sorority Inc., Vice President of the Latin American Student Association, President of the National Panhellenic Council, a Wellness Peer Advocate, and a Big Blue Ambassador.

Through those roles, she helped organize voter transportation initiatives, community service projects, wellness programming, and cultural celebrations, including La Fiesta. For Carissa, each role was connected by a desire to help other students feel supported and welcomed.

“My goal has always been to help people feel connected,” Carissa said. “College can feel isolating sometimes, so creating spaces where people want to show up and feel welcome really matters to me.”

As Carissa prepares for life post-graduation this spring, she is looking ahead to Saint Louis University, where she will pursue her Doctor of Physical

Therapy degree. Her journey at Millikin has taken her in directions she could not have predicted as a first-year student, but it has also affirmed the purpose she has worked toward.

Looking back, Carissa says Millikin gave her far more than she expected: a home, a professional path, and the confidence to lead.

*“If I could talk to my freshman self, I’d say, ‘You don’t even know what you’re capable of.’ I’ve done so much more than I ever imagined,” Guerrier said. “This University has given me so much. I absolutely see myself coming back, staying connected, and giving back when I can.”*



# Tabor School of Business

## Oakley Tate '26

Accounting & Finance Double Major



WATCH VIDEO

Even though he grew up in Decatur, Oakley Tate '26 never expected Millikin University would be part of his college story.

Like many students, Oakley pictured himself at a larger university. That changed during a campus visit, when a conversation with a Finance professor helped him see Millikin in a different light. The professor described a place where faculty know students by name, notice when they are engaged, and take a genuine interest in their success.

That message stayed with Oakley.

*“He told me that at Millikin, we learn people’s names,” Oakley said. “That really resonated with me.”*

Four years later, Oakley says choosing Millikin became one of the most meaningful decisions of his life. After graduating with majors in Accounting and Finance, he is poised to begin a full-time Assurance role with Forvis Mazars in Decatur after completing a successful summer internship with the firm.

Oakley’s academic path sharpened early in his Millikin career, especially after taking a Cost Accounting course with Accounting Instructor Nicole Allen. Her teaching style and the course material helped spark his interest in accounting and pushed him toward his chosen career path.

That path has been shaped by Millikin’s Performance Learning model, which gave Oakley opportunities to apply what he was learning in real-world settings. As a Managing Partner for Millikin University Performance Consulting, he helped lead accounting operations while working with classmates on client projects, including website development for local nonprofits and

an online portfolio platform designed to support Millikin Art students.

He also gained professional experience as a bookkeeper for the College of Fine Arts and through Millikin’s Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program, where he helped community members file taxes and work through more complex tax return questions. Those experiences strengthened his technical skills while helping him build his communication, problem-solving skills, and professional confidence, which he will carry into his career as a CPA.

One of Oakley’s most memorable academic opportunities came outside his majors. Through an Honors course focused on the geopolitics of technology, Oakley and his classmates researched global best practices in technology education and cybersecurity. Their work culminated in a virtual presentation to Belize’s Minister of Technology and other international officials.

The project expanded Oakley’s perspective and challenged him to think beyond his primary field of study.

# LIFTING OTHERS UP

While academics and professional experiences helped shape Oakley's future, cheerleading shaped his Millikin experience in a deeply personal way.

Oakley joined the Millikin Cheer team as a first-year student after first discovering the sport in high school. It quickly became one of the most important parts of his college life, giving him a community, a sense of purpose, and a group of teammates who became like family.

"Cheerleading might be my favorite thing about Millikin, hands down," Oakley said.

As a co-captain, Oakley has helped guide the team on and off the field. He describes the program as a family built on encouragement, accountability, and shared commitment. The team gave him confidence, a sense of belonging, and friendships that felt like siblings away from home.

Competing at Nationals in Daytona Beach, Fla., has been one of the highlights of his Millikin journey. Performing a two-and-a-half-minute routine on an elevated stage, with only two chances to get it right, requires discipline, trust, and resilience. For Oakley, that experience captures what makes cheer so powerful: the energy, the pressure, and the belief each teammate places in the others.

Even in his final year, when he stepped back from sideline cheer to focus on academics, Oakley continued training with Millikin's national competition team and

remained committed to helping strengthen the program for future Big Blue cheerleaders.

Oakley's leadership, academic excellence, and campus involvement also earned him the Scovill Prize, Millikin's highest student honor. He first learned about the award during his first year and set it as a long-term goal. The pursuit motivated him to maintain strong grades, stay involved, and contribute meaningfully to the campus community.

Looking back, Oakley says Millikin exceeded his expectations as a

first-year student. The opportunities he found – in the classroom, through Performance Learning, in his future profession, and with the Cheer team – helped him grow into a more confident leader and teammate.

His advice for future students is simple: be willing to say yes.

*"Millikin is full of opportunities," Oakley said. "A lot of what I've done came from just being willing to try something new."*



# College of Arts & Sciences

## Ameena Harris '26

Political Science & Criminal Justice  
Double Major



From her first day on campus, Ameena Al-Nurridin Harris '26 has made it her mission to get the most out of her Millikin University experience – and to give even more back.

A senior Political Science and Criminal Justice double major from Riverdale, Ill., Ameena has become one of Millikin's most visible and inspiring student leaders, leaving her mark through advocacy, mentorship, and an unshakable belief in the power of community.

Ameena's journey to Millikin began with a college mailing list and a leap of faith. During her senior year of high school, she was overwhelmed by options until Millikin's personal outreach caught her attention. A campus visit with her parents helped seal the decision.

"It was a sunny day, everyone was welcoming, and my dad loved it," Ameena said. "I felt like I could do something here."

Her decision was reinforced by an email from Dr. Laura Dean, Associate Professor of Political Science, who reached out personally to discuss Ameena's interest in political science.

*"That connection showed me Millikin cared before I even said yes," Ameena said. "From that point on, I knew I was in the right place."*

Since arriving on campus, Ameena has immersed herself in leadership and service. She serves as President of the Black Student Union and the Kappa Zeta Chapter President of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. She has also been an EDGE mentor, a member of the Council of Student Advisors, and Millikin's Homecoming Queen.

For Ameena, leadership has always been personal. Her mother, Fatimah,

has long been an advocate for youth and community engagement, often taking Ameena to Springfield as a child to lobby for workers' rights and fair wages. Her late father, Darryl, was her steady source of encouragement and motivation.

During her junior year at Millikin, Ameena's world changed when her father passed away unexpectedly.

"He was my biggest supporter," she said. "We talked every first day of classes, and he always told me, 'Even if I didn't get the full college experience, I want you to have it for both of us.'"

Rather than step back, Ameena found the courage to keep moving forward with support from her Millikin community. Professors, staff, and classmates reached out with messages, cards, and care packages, reminding her that she was not alone.

"The support I received was incredible," Ameena said. "Millikin really wrapped its arms around me. When I came back to campus, I knew I was in the right hands."

# LEADING WITH PURPOSE

Fueled by her father's memory and her mother's unwavering support, Ameena returned to campus determined to honor her father's legacy through service, excellence, and perseverance.

"He wanted me to finish strong," she said. "That became my promise to him and to myself."

In September, Ameena addressed the Class of 2029 at Millikin's Fall Opening Convocation, challenging new students to make the most of every opportunity. Her message was honest, humorous, and rooted in her own experience.

"I tell students to squeeze every drop out of this experience like it's the last Capri Sun on earth," she said. "Join the clubs, show up for events, go to that guest lecture, say yes to something that scares you. That's how you grow."

That mindset has shaped Ameena's approach to leadership. As an EDGE

mentor, she has guided three cohorts of first-year students, many of whom still reach out for advice. Through the Black Student Union and Delta Sigma Theta, she has focused on building connection, belonging, and empowerment across campus.

"I love when my mentees tell me they got an internship or transferred and are thriving," Ameena said. "It's full-circle – it shows that the support you give at Millikin lasts long after you leave."

The Black Student Union also gave Ameena a place to find community and help create that same sense of belonging for others.

"BSU gave me a family within the Millikin community," she said. "I wanted to continue that legacy for future students and to make sure everyone knows they belong here."

Following graduation, Ameena plans to pursue a master's degree in Public Administration with hopes of a future in civic leadership and community engagement.

Looking back, Ameena says her Millikin experience has exceeded every expectation. What began as a leap of faith became a place where she found direction, confidence, and purpose.

*"I came here hoping to find my place," Ameena said. "Instead, I found my purpose. Millikin has poured into me, and I've poured everything I have right back. That's what it means to get your money's worth."*

## SOCIOLOGY & CRIMINAL JUSTICE



# CELEBRATING THE IMPACT OF SCHOLARSHIPS



## Millikin Hosts Annual Scholarship Dinner

More than 150 students, alumni, faculty, staff, and donors gathered this spring for Millikin's 2026 Scholarship Dinner, an evening dedicated to celebrating the transformative impact of scholarship support and the relationships that make a Millikin education possible. Held as part of the University's 125th anniversary celebration, the event highlighted the power of philanthropy to create opportunity, build confidence, and shape future leaders.

Throughout the evening, speakers emphasized the far-reaching influence of scholarships, allowing students to fully engage in the Millikin experience by participating

in leadership opportunities, service projects, internships, research, athletics, and Performance Learning experiences that prepare them for success after graduation.

Student speakers Teyla Wendt '28 and Jallah Kollie Jr. '26 shared powerful personal stories about how scholarship support has transformed their educational journeys. Wendt reflected on how scholarships have allowed her to focus on serving others and developing as a student-athlete, campus leader, and ambassador. Kollie spoke about his path from Liberia to Millikin and the opportunities that scholarship support has provided to pursue his academic and

professional goals. Both students expressed gratitude for donors whose generosity has opened doors and helped them realize their potential.

The evening also featured remarks from alumna Krista Scott '16, who spoke about the mentorship she received as a first-generation student and how it inspired her to establish the Scott-Rauff Mathematics Scholarship, also named in honor of retiring Professor of Mathematics & Computer Science Dr. James Rauff. Scott's story illustrated how generosity often comes full circle, with scholarship recipients becoming scholarship supporters in the future.



# 2026 The SCHOLARSHIP DINNER 2026



# ESTATE GIFT ESTABLISHES TRANSFORMATIONAL MUSIC SCHOLARSHIP FUND



One of the ways the Millikin community's commitment to student success is tangibly demonstrated is through enduring legacy gifts that continue to create opportunities for future students.

The University recently received a remarkable \$3.3 million gift from the estate of Helen Cox Kersting '56, establishing the Helen Cox Kersting and Dr. Hans-Joachim Kersting Scholarship Fund. The gift, the largest scholarship commitment in the history of Millikin's College of Fine Arts, will provide renewable scholarship support for students in the School of Music for generations to come.

A native of Belleville, Ill., Helen Kersting graduated from Millikin's School of Music in 1956 and went on to build an internationally distinguished career as a concert and operatic soloist. After completing her studies at Millikin, she earned a scholarship to the Juilliard School of Music and later performed with the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall under the direction of Leonard Bernstein. Her career also took her to major opera houses and cultural centers across Europe, where she performed leading roles and premiered new works.

Throughout her life, Kersting remained deeply committed to music education

and the development of young artists. She understood firsthand how scholarship support and mentorship could open doors to transformative opportunities. Kersting's estate gift reflects a desire to ensure that talented students have access to the same possibilities that helped shape her own journey.

The scholarship fund will provide students with greater financial stability as they pursue their educational and artistic goals, allowing them to focus more fully on developing their talents through Millikin's distinctive Performance Learning approach.

*"Helen Kersting understood the power of scholarship support because her own Millikin experience helped open doors to Juilliard, Carnegie Hall, and international stages," said Rick Darnell, Millikin's Vice President of University Advancement. "Through this fund, Helen and Hans-Joachim Kersting will continue to open doors for students for generations to come."*

## Leave the Legacy of an Estate Gift

A legacy gift is a profound way to ensure that the values you hold dear continue to flourish. It's a commitment that reaches beyond the here and now, touching lives for years to come.

By including Millikin University in your estate plan, you do more than support academic excellence – you create opportunities for future students to write their success stories. It's a simple

yet impactful way to make a lasting difference.

Millikin's partnership with FreeWill offers a simple and accessible way to create your estate plan, at no cost to you. It's a convenient process that allows you to plan for the future, communicate your wishes, and support the next generation of Millikin students.

**TO LEARN ABOUT DESIGNATING YOUR GIFT OR HOW THOSE GIFTS CAN PROVIDE YOU INCOME, VISIT [millikin.edu/planned-gifts](https://millikin.edu/planned-gifts)**



**INTERESTED IN REMEMBERING MILLIKIN IN YOUR PLANNED GIVING? VISIT FREEWILL TO LEARN MORE.**

# ALUMNI & FRIENDS EVENTS

From ballparks to banquet rooms, we are celebrating our 125th birthday all year. We want you with us for all of it!

FOR MORE DETAILS:



**July 23**

Central Illinois Regional Alumni Group Social  
*Decatur Brew Works*

**July 25**

Millikin at the Bean Ballers  
*Workman Family Baseball Field*

**Sep. 2**

Retirees Brunch  
*University Commons*

**Oct. 2-4**

Homecoming Weekend: Forever Blue  
*Millikin University*

**Oct. 27**

Fall Associates Dinner  
*University Commons*

**Dec. 1**

Athletics Giving Day  
*Online*

# ATHLETICS GOLF OUTING FUNDRAISERS

Join us on the links in support of your favorite Big Blue team!



TO REGISTER:

- » **July 24** — Football: Coach Carl Poelker Memorial Outing
- » **Aug. 1** — Women's Basketball
- » **Aug. 15** — Women's Soccer
- » **Aug. 31** — Men's Basketball
- » **Oct. 17** — Baseball



1970

**Roseanne Apyan '72** served as President of the Rotary Club of Chattanooga Hamilton Place from July 2024 through June 2025, leading a successful year that included 12 new members and a district award. The club received the Germ, Lacy, Bomar Award for a literacy initiative providing bilingual books and classroom support to a local elementary school.

**William R. Kreuger '75** retired in November 2022 after a 40+ year career in museums and libraries, most recently at the Iowa Masonic Library in Cedar Rapids. He currently volunteers at the Cedar Rapids Veterans Museum and spends time traveling to Colorado with his spouse.

**Timothy Joseph Armstrong '78** received the MVC Track Coach of the Year award on May 8, 2025, as voted on by conference coaches following the Mississippi Valley Conference Track Meet.

1980

**Cynthia Warner Crowell '80** retired on May 1, 2025, after 42 years of service as a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) pastor. She most recently served as Pastor/Head of Staff at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Pasadena, Calif.

**Sharon Peters Bloch '85** is a Professor of Biology at Blackburn College in Carlinville, Ill., teaching courses in Anatomy & Physiology, Cell Biology, Microbiology, and Immunology.



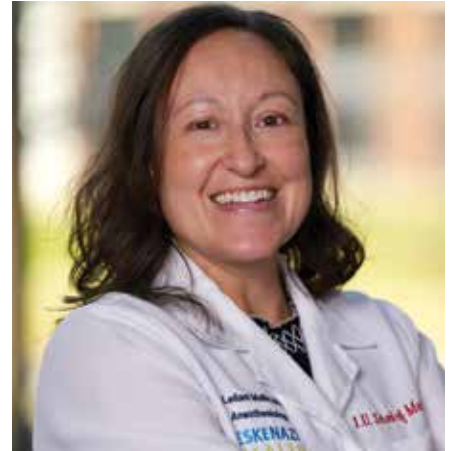
**Joy Burris Eshleman '86** published her first book, a poetic memoir titled "Light Finds Joy" in April 2026. Joy is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and owns a clinical practice in Beacon, N.Y., specializing in grief, trauma, loss, and life adjustments for more than 30 years. She has written poetry since her years at Millikin, as a means to process life, relationships, and her treasured work as a therapist.

**Todd Peter Neumann '88** serves as an Instructional Designer at ATI Physical Therapy in Downers Grove, Ill., developing leadership training and digital learning content to support skill development across the organization. ATI is the largest physical therapy provider in the U.S., with nearly 900 clinics nationwide and additional employer and athletic training partnerships.

1990

**Chad Mitchell '96** recently opened a new 2,000-square-foot photography studio in Forsyth, Ill., featuring expansive sets and a large cyclorama wall designed for group, portrait, and commercial photography. The Chad Mitchell Photography LLC studio expands its long-standing Central Illinois

photography business, established in 2003, specializing in senior, sports, family, and commercial photography.



**Leilani Saum Mullis '96** is a Board Certified Anesthesiologist and Fellow of the American Society of Anesthesiologists (ASA) at Eskenazi Hospital in Indianapolis. Dr. Mullins was recently promoted to Associate Professor of Clinical Anesthesia and Vice Chair of Faculty Development for the Department of Anesthesia at Indiana University School of Medicine. She currently serves as a Board Member of the Indiana Society of Anesthesiologists and also serves as a Delegate to the American Society of Anesthesiologists House of Delegates. She serves as a Professional Learning Community Physician Mentor for the IU School of Medicine. Earning a medical degree from the University of North Carolina School of Medicine in 2003, Dr. Mullins is serving a three-year term on the University of North Carolina Medical Alumni Council.

**Deidra Dame '99**, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, is the founder and owner of Moonlight Trauma & Counseling Center in Champaign, Ill., where she provides trauma-informed therapy for individuals navigating PTSD, complex trauma, coercive control, anxiety, and major life transitions. In addition to clinical practice, she is involved in community leadership and advocacy efforts focused on mental health, domestic violence awareness, and strengthening support systems for individuals and families in the community.

**2000**



**Eric Kohn '04** serves as CEO of America's Future (AF), the nation's premiere talent accelerator and social network for liberty-minded young people. AF offers rising generations opportunities for talent development, networking, and mentoring through their national network and extensive array of programming and fellowships. He previously led the Chicago chapter of the organization for over 10 years and served on the board of directors beginning in 2022 before being named CEO in May 2025.

**Jonathan B. Shepherd '05** serves as Director of Sales at Ally Financial, overseeing regional sales across multiple states.



**Paula Burnett Sontag '05** graduated with an Ed.D. in Administration and Supervision from Loyola University Chicago in May 2026. Her project title was "When Professional Learning Fails to Transform Teaching Practice," and as part of her doctoral work, she developed a theoretical framework combining root cause analysis and adult learning theory to diagnose why learning fails to transfer into practice.

**Sara Lynn Kendall Gottman '06** graduated with her J.D. from St. Louis University School of Law in May 2025.

**Charles Purnell '07** serves as Director of Marketing at Greater St. Louis Inc., where he drives digital innovation in support of regional economic development. He also is the Membership Co-Chair of the Lafayette Square Neighborhood Association (St. Louis).

**Odell Mitchell III '07** works for Epic Games as a Senior Attorney handling entertainment and brand partnerships for high-profile games such as Fortnite.

**Chris Linden '08** was a featured speaker in the River Corridor Foundation of St. Charles' lecture series, presenting on Prohibition-era bootleggers in the Fox

Valley. He is in his 16th year with Northwest Quarterly Magazine, a regional lifestyle publication covering northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin.

**Christina Lee McDaniel '09** earned a Doctorate of Medical Science degree through Southern Illinois University in May 2025.

**2010**

**Brittney Dunson-Soto '10** is the Director of People Operations at Casechek Software in Chicago, overseeing HR, talent acquisition, internal IT, and corporate operations leadership. She also serves on the board of Prevention First, a nonprofit focused on youth substance misuse prevention, as well as the Millikin University Alumni Association Board, and is a member of the GAA Chapter of Sigma Lambda Gamma.

**Kelsey Lynn McDaniel '10**, married to Jared McDaniel, welcomed a daughter, Ellowyn Mae.

**Justin Bledsaw '11** received the Dr. Robert and Kathryn Augustine Master's Thesis Award from Eastern Illinois University on November 4, 2024, recognizing the top thesis.

**Brittani Garner '14** serves as Assistant State Director for the Illinois Small Business Development Center Program with the State of Illinois.

**2020**

**Andrew Henderson '24** is a Client Development Specialist for Indeed in Phoenix.

# IN MEMORIAM

**Dr. Barbara Carol Broadbear**  
(1966–2026)



Dr. Barbara Broadbear came to Millikin by way of North Dakota, South Florida, and Indiana – collecting degrees and building a career that moved from medically based wellness centers to academia, where she found her truest calling. As Associate Professor and Director of the School of Exercise Science & Sport, she was known as a fierce advocate for her students and a genuinely beloved teacher. Outside the classroom, Dr. Broadbear was a competitor at heart: She ran marathons, tackled adventure races, and for years led the beloved “Broadbear Boot Camp” workouts in McGraw Park, shaping the fitness lives of children and adults alike. Diagnosed with cancer in February 2023, she faced the disease with the same courage and directness she brought to everything. In her final wish as a lifelong teacher, she urged everyone to take full advantage of preventive and early-detection screenings. She is survived by her husband, Jim, and their four sons. Her legacy lives on through the Barbara Carol Broadbear Scholarship in Exercise Science & Sport.

**Dr. Jerald “Jerry” Hunt**  
(1936–2026)



Dr. Jerry Hunt was, by all accounts, a man with a quiet strength – the kind of person who would fight hard for the people and ideas he believed in. After earning his master's degree at Ohio State and his Ph.D. at the University of Michigan, he built a 32-year career at Millikin as Professor and Director of Teacher Education, mentoring thousands of students and shaping conversations about education across the Illinois community. He also served on the Illinois Teacher Certification Board, extending his influence on education policy well beyond Millikin's campus. Dr. Hunt was a dedicated member of Phi Delta Kappa, the Lions Club, Golden K-Kiwanis, and the Decatur Public Library. He loved jazz, maps, sports – especially Millikin Basketball – and traveling the world. He passed away peacefully on Good Friday at age 90, surrounded by his wife, Phyllis, and son, Brian.

**Lester “Skip” Mathieson**  
(1935–2026)



Skip Mathieson loved three things above all: his family, his friends, and football. He was a standout athlete at DePauw University, where he was later inducted into the Hall of Fame, and built a coaching career that spanned New York, Indianapolis, and Central Illinois before landing at Millikin. He served as Head Football Coach and Athletic Director for the Big Blue from 1966 to 1977, leading them to two bowl games and was inducted into Millikin's Athletic Hall of Fame in 1990. After stints at the University of Cincinnati, he returned to Decatur to found Coaches' Corner and Touchdown Sportswear. Whether on the sidelines or behind a counter, Skip's gift was expecting the best from people and helping them find it in themselves. He passed away March 26 at 90 years old, survived by Sally, his wife of nearly 70 years; their four children; and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

*This issue, we've set aside our traditional Alumni In Memoriam listing to honor the recent losses of six remarkable members of the Millikin family. Among them are current faculty, long-time administrators, and retired coaches whose various careers at Millikin spanned decades. We hope these tributes reflect the depth of what they gave to Millikin and to the people fortunate enough to know them.*

- Alyse Knust, Assistant Vice President of Development & Strategic Engagement

**Carl R. Poelker '68**  
(1944–2026)



Carl Poelker's story is a Millikin story told over six decades. He arrived as a recruited athlete in 1962, earned letters in Football, Basketball, and Track & Field, and never really left – coaching, teaching, and shaping the Football program for decades. Mentored by Skip Mathieson, Carl joined the full-time staff in 1973, eventually becoming Head Football Coach in 1982, a position he held with an 88-39-1 record through 1995. He then brought the same standard to McKendree University, where he guided the Bearcats to 117 wins over 17 seasons. He concluded his 31-year head coaching career with 205 victories and a graduation rate that approached 100 percent, the statistic he cared about most. Carl is survived by his wife, Peggy; four children; 18 grandchildren; and 11 great-grandchildren. For more on Millikin's Celebration of Life honoring Poelker, see page 8.

**Gerald "Jerry" Redford**  
(1931–2026)



Jerry Redford arrived at Millikin in November 1961 as Director of University Relations and stayed for 33 years – serving as Provost, Director of Physical Plant, Assistant to two Presidents, and Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences. Before Millikin, he served in the Army in Korea, was a journalist at the Defiance Crescent-News (Ohio), and directed public relations at Ripon College. He was proud of the buildings that rose on campus during his tenure at Millikin, and prouder still of the academic standards he helped protect. After retiring in 1994 he was named Emeritus Dean and awarded an honorary degree. He and his wife, Barbara, co-authored the 100-year history of Millikin, and in 2002 the two were honored with the Millikin Medallion. He is survived by five children, 10 grandchildren, and 10 great-grandchildren.

**Dr. James "Jim" Watson**  
(1944–2026)



Dr. Jim Watson joined the Tabor School of Business faculty in 1979 and spent the next three decades doing what he loved most: teaching. His International Business Consulting course was a particular point of pride – a hands-on experience that took students to company headquarters in places like Italy, Zambia, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic to solve real business problems. After retiring in 2007, Dr. Watson couldn't quite stay away, returning to teach part-time and serving as Interim Dean before stepping back in 2012. He then channeled that same love of learning into tutoring at Brush College and Dennis School. Dr. Watson and his wife, Trish, were also known for opening their home to international and exchange students, building friendships that lasted a lifetime. He passed away April 13, 2026, and is survived by Trish and their two sons, James and Adam.

A Way to Remember: Each of these individuals left an enduring mark on Millikin University. If you'd like to pay tribute to any of them, memorial gifts can be made in their honor, including several established named funds. Make a Gift at: [millikin.edu/memorialgifts](http://millikin.edu/memorialgifts)



**MILLIKIN UNIVERSITY**

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“MILLIKIN UNIVERSITY IS  
WHERE THE SCIENTIFIC, THE  
PRACTICAL, AND INDUSTRIAL  
SHALL HAVE A PLACE OF  
EQUAL IMPORTANCE, SIDE BY  
SIDE, WITH THE LITERARY  
AND CLASSICAL.”

- JAMES MILLIKIN