Shirley Dickson Kern: Lighting the Way for Female Leaders

In 1944, in the midst of World War II, the roles of men and women were thrown into flux. In the changing and challenging social milieu, women were filling roles traditionally held by men, from working in factories, to piloting airplanes, to becoming community leaders.

Alumna Shirley [Dickson] Kern was one of those women who stepped up, and became the first woman president of Central’s Student Government Association (SGA).

Shirley became involved in leadership at Central early in her undergraduate career. She was a member of the Iyoptians, the women’s service honorary, and was secretary of both the Associated Women Students and her freshman class cohort. In her sophomore year, Shirley became SGA secretary.

As World War II progressed, the Central Washington College of Education (CWCE) campus changed with the rest of the country. Nearly 600 members of the CWCE community, both faculty and students, men and women, would leave to join the war effort. The student newspaper, Campus Crier, ran more ads for military recruitment than for Coca-Cola. The number of men at Central dwindled.

Phil Kern and Shirley Dickson in 1944 outside Sue Lombard Hall
It was this shift in demographics that propelled Shirley into the SGA presidency. President Roy Patrick Wahle and, soon after, Vice-President Ray Jongeward left to serve in the war. As secretary, Shirley was next in line to lead the association. “It was a real challenge, and I was nervous,” she said. “But I did it.” Such resolve is characteristic of Shirley. She attended Okanogan High School, where she was student government secretary and graduated valedictorian of her class. At Central, she majored in education, and earned minors in home economics, physical education, and health.

Women always possessed the ability to be leaders, Shirley said, but the absence of so many men during the war made it both possible and necessary for women to assume leadership posts.

As SGA president, Shirley directed discussions and decisions concerning student conduct issues, committees, and events like the annual Homecoming and Colonial Balls.

Shirley and the remaining CWCE students also strove to support the war effort. In 1942, the area’s apple orchardists faced a crisis due to the labor shortage, and were in danger of losing nearly $60,000 worth of crops. The Central community came forward, voting to close the school for three days in order to allow students to volunteer their time and efforts to pick the fruit.

The following year, Shirley won the position of SGA president by election. After completing another successful year as the association’s leader, Shirley passed the torch on to another woman, who, in turn, would pass it on to another. Shirley joked, “I was a real trendsetter.”

After graduating from Central, Shirley married Phil Kern. Many women of her era sacrificed education for marriage, but Shirley never considered quitting. “In our family, graduation is not an option — it’s a requirement,” she said.

In Shirley’s “family of strong women,” it was never doubted that she could achieve. One of four daughters, Shirley remarks of her upbringing, “We were just expected to be able to take care of ourselves. We were to do the most we could, woman or not.”
Shirley’s views reflect those of her ever-supportive mother, Gladys, a 1920 Central alumna. Shirley has passed those values on to her own five daughters, four of whom have attended or graduated from Central.

Shirley’s daughters recently established a scholarship to honor their parents’ extraordinary service and leadership, and to give a boost to the next generation of Wildcat leaders.

The Philip B. and Shirley Dickson Kern Scholarship is offered to Ellensburg High School (EHS) seniors who commit to attending Central and demonstrate an interest in government, public administration, and community affairs. In addition, the student must hold leadership roles or volunteer in the community.

During the EHS Class of 2010 commencement exercises, Joel Greear learned he was the first recipient of the Kern Scholarship. A 3.969-grade-point-average student in advanced placement courses, he was a member of the National Honor Society, played on the Bulldogs’ football, basketball, and baseball teams, and was active in the EHS student government and a variety of community organizations, including Young Life.

Greear will enroll at Central as a pre-med student. Kern said that Greear holds and reflects many of the Kern family values. “He’s well rounded, has a great work ethic, and is so optimistic,” she added. “He’s an exemplary student—an outstanding young man with an outstanding outlook on life.”

One of Shirley’s daughters, Lael, calls her mother one of the dedicated women of her time who possessed a “strong sense of purpose and followed it.”

That purpose, Shirley says, is to contribute to the community, something she encourages all to pursue.

“Through being a leader, you’re doing yourself such a big service as well as helping your community and your college, and they need all the help they can get.” •

**CWU Student Government Today:**

The issues affecting students in the university community are vastly different from those in the 1940s. Today, students are concerned with budget cuts instead of war bonds, but they still need student leaders to act on their behalf and be a voice for their concerns. Kern was this voice from 1942-44. Keith James served as president of the Associated Students of CWU Board of Directors during the last academic year.

“We facilitate quality student life here in all facets,” James said. “Whether that’s academics, fighting for higher education rights as a whole, diversity programming, inclusiveness . . . We do it all. We make sure that the students are included in the conversation.”

However, the motivation to become involved as a student leader remains the same. “More than anything, it’s about giving back,” he said.
The Director’s Pen:

Welcome the New Welcome Center

Central has long lamented its lack of a proper front door. Barge Hall, formerly the Administration Building, has served that role by default, as have Kamola and Munson halls to some degree, although none were ever designed for that function. In recent years, the flashy new Student Union and Recreation Center has become a first destination on campus, but, as a main entry point, it’s tucked away on the side, like the entrance to one of Frank Lloyd Wright’s famous prairie homes.

So, welcome the new Welcome Center at the corner of University Way and Pearl Street, about two blocks west of campus. Some might remember it as the former University Auto Center showroom, although they certainly won’t recognize the place. Chryslers and Jeeps have been replaced with a comfortable coffee and Internet area, several big screen displays that stream events and information about the university, and a counter where visitors and alumni can pick up maps, directions, parking passes, and even join a campus tour. It’s also the first stop for prospective students in town to check out Central.

Nice as it is, this new Welcome Center is only temporary. When the lease expires in five years we’d like to be ready with a new welcoming point—one that’s actually on campus. Ideally, it will be both the front door for Central’s 75,000 alumni and other campus visitors, and a home for the displays, historical artifacts, and myriad of services we deliver.

Jim Armstrong
Executive Director
CWU Alumni Association
Craig Bill was just six years old when, in 1980, former Governor Dixie Lee Ray signed an executive order to establish the Governor’s Office of Indian Affairs (GOIA), to serve as liaison between state and tribal governments in an advisory, resource, consultation, and educational capacity. For the last five years, Bill, a 1998 CWU graduate, has been guiding the important work of the office as the GOIA director.

“Without a doubt, Craig is a great asset to my office and an outstanding advocate for Native Americans,” said Governor Chris Gregoire. “He is a committed public servant who continually strives to enhance the relationship between our tribes and state government.”

Bill, from Puyallup, is also charged with promoting knowledge of Native American culture, both past and present, enhancing tribal self-sufficiency, and providing assistance to Indian citizens in efforts to work with state government to resolve mutual problems and concerns.

“It’s fascinating work, and it’s constantly changing,” he said. “I do something different every day. One day I could be working on issues with protecting tribal properties, the next it could be health issues.”

The work is also personal for Bill, a member of the Swinomish Tribe and descendant of the Colville Confederated Tribes and Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. The first member of a Skagit County tribe to be appointed to the GOIA post, he now works with the twenty-nine tribes in Washington and tribes in surrounding states.

Teamwork and leadership skills come naturally to Bill, as witnessed during his days as a defensive back on the Wildcats’ football team.

“He had the biggest heart and the biggest work ethic,” recalled his former CWU coach, Jeff Zenisek. “He was not going to be denied what he could do to help Central win football games. He was a great teammate and very loyal. He’s a great one, a salt-of-the-earth kid.”

A four-year letter winner, Bill, then a junior, was the starting strong safety and a standout special teams performer for Central’s 1995 NAIA National Championship team.

“You’d give him a job to do and he would do it, and take it further than you ever thought,” Zenisek said. “That’s probably why he’s so successful now.”

Bill acknowledges, “I worked hard as a student-athlete and made a lot of friendships that have lasted to this day.” He was drawn to Central because of its football team, community feel, and to join his sister, Nadine, who received her Bachelor of Science in business administration in 1993.

During his undergraduate years, Bill earned degrees in political science and social science. He credits the university’s curriculum and professors with providing him the solid foundation to make a difference in his community.

“Central gave me an arena to develop my interests and gain the skills for what I’m doing today,” he said.

Through his current role in strengthening the bond between the tribal community and state government, Bill has seen progress in many issues affecting Native Americans, including the preservation of tribal lands. Based in no small measure on his CWU experience, he also has a pointed interest in the promotion of education within the tribal community.

“Education is an important part of the collaboration,” he said. “Many people have misconceptions about the tribal community that need to be overcome (e.g., that all tribal members are involved with casinos). Each group must understand the other correctly and have proper knowledge.”

Bill also believes that CWU exemplifies the same appreciation for diversity that he seeks to establish in his position within the governor’s office.

“Central is a wonderful place and offers students such a great experience,” he said. “I feel that Central is big enough that one can gain exposure to a very diverse group of people, but it’s small enough that it feels like a real community. I’m proud to be a Wildcat.” •
Students Shine in Innovative STAR Program

“We’ve created something fabulous for this university and it’s the right thing to do.” — Carolyn Thurston, director, Student Transitions and Academic Resources (STAR)

Al Okere, a native of Nigeria, had a burning desire to go to college. But his admission index was below the typical requirement for admission to CWU. Even so, Okere just finished his first year of study at CWU.

“Normally, I wouldn’t have been accepted here, but STAR [Student Transitions and Academic Resources] gave me the chance to come to Central,” Okere said.

In terms of his first-year academic progress, he noted, with a hint of pride, “I’m doing great; I’m getting As.” In fact, he recorded a perfect 4.0 grade point average through his first year at Central.

STAR serves academically high-risk students who show academic potential and an accompanying need for intensive, individualized attention and support. The students come from a wide variety of—and, often, difficult—backgrounds. For example, some have had to cope with a gravely ill family member; others come from backgrounds of drug and alcohol abuse. What they all have in common are obstacles and challenges that prevented them from performing well in high school. But, like Okere, they all want to come to college and be successful.

Through STAR, they’re given the chance to form personal relationships with mentors as one way to transition into college, succeed academically, and graduate. “STAR is not only CWU’s conditional admit support program for at-risk students; it’s a program with a heart,” said its director, Carolyn Thurston.

A two-time CWU graduate (1994 English, 1996 MA English), Thurston launched the STAR program in 2007. A year later, Sam Blazina joined her as program coordinator. Since its inception, the program has grown to serve more than 100 students during the last academic year, including its largest freshman group to date—more than thirty-five students, with Okere among them. Increased enrollments are anticipated in future years.

“It is a challenge, but we’re excited,” Thurston added. “What we do for these students, and being able to watch them succeed, is incredibly rewarding.”

Getting students enrolled is only half the battle. STAR students are at a higher risk of struggling in their courses, so ongoing support is vital. Thurston describes herself as “the whip cracker” in the program—often calling students into her office to help get them on track academically. “I ask them what they need, what problems they might be having, and then we try to get those problems taken care of,” she said.

STAR also offers peer mentoring, under Blazina’s direction. STAR students who have successfully completed their freshman year have the opportunity to mentor new STAR students and show them the ropes. Okere will be among these peer mentors next fall. They guide new STARs around campus, introduce them to various student offices and services, and sometimes simply build relationships by going to the recreation center or out for coffee.

“The experience benefits both the mentor and the mentee,” said Thurston. “Students involved in mentoring perform better academically and have the opportunity to develop leadership skills they didn’t even know they had. It’s connection and friendship—really a transformative experience.”

Thurston notes that, along with the individualized attention and support offered, STAR students are also often referred to other Central services, such as Student Health and Counseling Services or the Center for Disability Services.
“We really couldn’t do this without the support of other campus departments,” Thurston pointed out. “We also couldn’t do it without the support of Dr. [Charlotte] Tullos [vice president for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management]. Without her vision and direction, our [STAR] students wouldn’t be here.”

Part of Blazina’s expertise in working with STAR students stems from her personal experience as a non-traditional undergraduate. A long-time Ellensburg community member, Blazina, who graduated from CWU in 2008 with a degree in community health, admits to struggling in school until she was exposed to the kind of support she now helps provide through STAR.

“At first, I didn’t get rooted on campus, feel connected, or get the advice that I needed,” she said. “I left for one year. When I came back, I connected with Carolyn [who served as her advisor] and learned of student services that were available. I attribute my success to that.”

Like Okere, many of the students Blazina helps just need the opportunity to prove themselves. Thurston notes that although some STARs struggle and need extra guidance to succeed, many more are now excelling.

Or, in other words, STAR gives many Central students, and future alumni, a chance to shine. •
Alumni Association
400 East University Way
Ellensburg WA 98926-7507

CWU ALUMNI UPCOMING EVENTS

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<td>June 24</td>
<td>Men and Women of ’50s and ’60s Annual Picnic</td>
<td>Auburn—Game Farm Park</td>
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<td>July 9</td>
<td>Mariners Night: Seattle vs. New York Yankees</td>
<td>Seattle—Safeco Field</td>
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<td>July 15</td>
<td>8th Annual Jon Kitna CWU Wildcat Golf Classic</td>
<td>Cle Elum—Suncadia</td>
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<td>July 30–</td>
<td>13th Annual Jazz in the Valley (dedicated to the memory of</td>
<td>Ellensburg</td>
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<td>Aug. 1</td>
<td>CWU music professor John Moawad)</td>
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<td>Aug. 5–7</td>
<td>Then &amp; Now (gathering for 1960s graduates)</td>
<td>Ellensburg</td>
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<td>Wine Tour Chelan</td>
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<td>Wildcat football CWU vs. Eastern Washington</td>
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<td>Oct. 16</td>
<td>Wildcat football (Battle in Seattle) CWU vs. Western Oregon</td>
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<td>Oct. 22</td>
<td>Homecoming Banquet</td>
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For more information, call 509-963-2762 or 1-877-846-2287 (1-877-U-Go-Cats)

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Journey through the breathtaking Central Andes to the land of sol y vino—sun and wine

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