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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

EIU CLASS OF '98 TO INCLUDE ILLINOIS' FIRST LADY -- BRENDA EDGAR

CHARLESTON -- She never dreamed she would be walking across the stage to receive her college degree three months shy of her 50th birthday, but Illinois' first lady, Brenda Edgar, has no regrets.

"I always knew I would finish my degree," said Edgar, who left Eastern Illinois University after two years when new husband and current Illinois governor Jim Edgar graduated in 1968. "I just never imagined it would take me 30 years to do it!"

Edgar will be accompanied Saturday by her husband, who will be marking the 30th anniversary of his own graduation from Eastern by delivering the keynote speech at the 1 p.m. ceremony in Charleston.

Brenda Edgar has been quietly working toward finishing her degree since 1994. While she initially enrolled as an education major in 1966, she will be leaving Eastern with a Board of Trustees Bachelor of Arts (BOT/BA) degree, a non-traditional program for adults

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who wish to complete a bachelor's degree while maintaining busy careers and raising families.

Edgar learned about the BOT/BA degree the year her husband was elected to his second term as governor. She was buoyed by the fact that the program provided several options on how she could complete the degree.

"I knew it would be impossible to be a traditional student again," Edgar said. "We are gone more nights than we are home."

The opportunity to graduate from Eastern was also a strong draw for Edgar. Her grandfather, Frank Chamberlin, graduated from the university in 1909. Her mother, Margaret Smith, graduated from Eastern in 1942, making Edgar a third-generation EIU alumnus. Edgar's mother will be attending the ceremony, along with the first couple's daughter, Elizabeth.

The BOT/BA degree allows returning adult students to create a portfolio which documents college-level learning acquired through life experiences. This portfolio is reviewed by faculty to ensure that the students' experiences meet course requirements.

Edgar admits she was overwhelmed at the beginning, but the process yielded a record of achievement.

"Our lives have been so full, I've never had the time to review my life experiences and what I've learned along the way," Edgar said. "Now, I have something I will treasure and give to my children and grandchildren someday."

Brenda Edgar graduated from Anna-Jonesboro High School in 1966 and met Jim Edgar a month later when she enrolled in summer school as a freshman. She said she has fond memories of Eastern -- life at "Pem" Hall, football games and dates at local spots. But, in 1968, she embarked on a life that took her all over the world and produced two children for the Edgars -- Brad and Elizabeth. Edgar does not regret her decision and believes the only thing she has missed the past 30 years is that elusive college degree.

"In the first 10 years of our marriage, we moved 10 times," Edgar said. "I would always enroll in college wherever I could, but before I could complete my degree, we would move again."

She said she knew that someday she would have the opportunity to finish, although she expresses deep gratitude to Eastern's BOT/BA program director Kaye Woodward for helping her realize her goal.

"Kaye encouraged me during the entire process," Edgar said. "I hope other adults in my position realize that it is a different day than when we were first enrolled in college. There are opportunities out there for people who have busy lives, yet want to finish that college degree.

"It really is, never too late."