

## Dr. Miller in His Own Words

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You often hear his resonant voice echoing through the halls of NCSSM. His classes are renowned both for their difficulty and energy. His office is the antidote for many problems, literary or not. Here we present - Dr. Miller.

*Can you tell me where you're originally from?*

Well I was born in Iowa, and it was during the war and my mother was living with her people. When my father came back from the war, he went to law school and so we moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan and we stayed there for a while. Then we went to Philadelphia because my father got a job with the FBI. And then we went to Charlotte for, oh, 6 or 8 months, and then we came to Durham. So I came to Durham when I was in the 3rd grade and have more or less been here except for college and army and graduate school. About 10 blocks from here.

*So I take it that you like it here?*

I didn't say that, I just said I was here. I never could get a job anywhere else.

*That leads to the question, do you like it here?*

Uh yes. I like being at NCSSM a great deal, but sometimes in the summer I wish NCSSM were somewhere else north-er and cooler. But yes, I really do, as far as a being a schoolteacher I think that those of us who are here have the easiest job in the world. I taught public school before I came here. I've not had to break up any fights or put out any fires here, and I used to do those things with some regularity. Nobody has threatened to mangle me or anything else. So it has been not only less hazardous, but on the positive side it has been a lot more fun teaching people who are interested. The students have been good to me and I like the other faculty members and am challenged by them.

*So are the students what you like the most about NCSSM?*

Um, yes. Clearly what teachers do is interact with stu-

dents. Interacting with good students makes your job good. Interacting with interested students makes your job fun. Interacting with curious students pushes you intellectually to find out things. On the other hand, my colleagues have been stimulating and

mathematics or music or English and they're just discovering those. I sit here and listen to them talk about those subjects. It's just fun to hear people excited about the things they do and discovering things about themselves that they didn't know.



*The beloved Dr. Miller strikes a comfortable pose.*

inspiring and supportive and all of those things too. You know it's not like it's just this, but I think teachers are always most interested in their students. But certainly I've been very, very fortunate in having colleagues who are exciting to me and stimulating to me and who are good friends.

*How would you describe yourself?*

Oh dear, I don't know, I'm probably about 6 feet tall, probably talk too loud most the time, probably talk too much all of the time.

*How would you describe your personality?*

Oh, I would think others should make those determinations themselves. I hate to give students the right answers or any answers at all. I try to be optimistic and I think I am. I am interested in students and I try to listen. I always try to remind myself that they're different from me and to find out how they're different I've got to listen. I'm always excited by the fact that they're very different people and they have a world of possibilities in them. It's sometimes most exciting of all to share a little bit into that realization of those possibilities or at least witness those possibilities. Certainly some of the most exciting students I've worked with have really had talents in physics and

*What were you like when you were our age?*

Probably insufferable. In many ways I'm not terribly different. Change is not something I've done a lot of in my life. I expect people that know me the best say, 'He's always the same, boring man.' I liked to read. I liked to talk to people. So I suspect some of what I am today I was then. There's a lot more of me than there was then; I was just a skinny kid.

*You mentioned books. What is your favorite kind of book?*

I like poetry. I'm particularly interested in 17th and 18th century poetry. But I read lots of different kinds of books. There are certain books I go back to regularly and enjoy. I first read *The Scarlet Letter* in the eleventh grade, and I have read it many, many, many, many times since. I'm as moved by it, excited by it and challenged by it now as I was then. There are other books that I can remember not liking the first several times I've read, and even the first several times I've taught. *The Catcher in the Rye*, I didn't find that that book and I connected very well. Of course,

when I was in high school, the first time I read *Catcher in the Rye*, you couldn't read it in school. In fact if you brought it in school you'd probably have been in danger of being thrown out of school. But all of us read it. I mean to be hip and cool you had to have read that book. So I read it. I wondered why, and it was not until I was forty and using it in a seminar here that I read that book and thought, 'This is such a wonderful book.' So you know books kind of pass in and out of one's life as one changes. Different books [at] different times strike one differently.

*What was your greatest influence in becoming who you are now?*

I was very lucky. I grew up in a family that was remarkably loving and supportive. Whatever I was interested in they were for, as long as it was honest and decent. Whatever I wanted to do, they were right behind me. Clearly that affected me greatly. I don't think my father, while my father has read widely, particularly understood my being an English teacher. Certainly it was outside the realm of possibilities for him. He was a mathematician. I had excellent teachers. Teachers who were exciting and interested in me, kind to me.

*Is that one of the reasons you became a teacher?*

I suspect so. When I went off to college, having good teachers continued. I went to an



*Dr. Miller enjoying himself at this year's Halloween Dance.*

idealistic place, a place that believed the good, the true, and the beautiful were possible and more importantly that we should be part of those things. I don't think those values were new to me at that time, but I think that they confirmed in me those values that I had that I'm proudest of. I'm not saying all the values I have I'm particularly proud of, but those values that I'm proudest of and most aspire to, I think, came from family and

teachers and friends and colleagues.

*What college did you go to?*  
I went to Davidson.

*What is your favorite board game?*

I grew up in a family that played games a lot. I don't play board games much anymore. The last few times I've played board games I've played with my nephew, who's in second grade, and we played Sorry. So Sorry's probably my board game of choice right now.

*Can you tell me a piece of trivia that people would most likely not know about you?*

My wife and I met each other, well, she wasn't my wife then, so I met the woman I later married when we moved in next door to her and she and I were in the third grade. We lived literally next door. When my family sat down to eat Sunday dinner, we could look at the Wilson family eating Sunday dinner in the next window right across the driveway. Like I said, I don't change much.

*How does it feel to be an English teacher in the school of Science and Math?*

You know, I was asked that question in my interview before the school was opened. I was asked by Cecily Selby the Academic Dean. I was asked, "What would it be like to teach English in a science and mathematics school?" I said, "Well, I really [don't] think it would be very different from being any other kind of teacher." It seems to me that English teachers and math teachers and science teachers do much the same thing. Mathematicians have numbers and English teachers have words. Math teacher have functions and English teachers have syntax. In each discipline we try to define a problem and solve that

problem in a logical, systematic kind of way. It seems to me that what I do in my English classes is very similar to what the math teachers do in the modeling classes. They hand the students a situation and say, "Go define a problem and solve it." When I ask students to write a paper, I simply ask them to define a problem and solve it. I'm really not interested in the right answer. I'm really interested in the answer they make right.

Dr. Winters