

PEOPLE OF ACTION

James I Miller, Jr. (Jim)

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(Member since 2006)



Jim Miller Jr. and Art Wasserman with RCM Scholar Abygail Israel at her graduation from UW Platteville in 2014.

Jim Miller was first introduced to Rotary in 1953 when this young man from Okmulgee, OK was named a Rotary Fellow. The \$2,400 awarded enabled Jim to pursue graduate study at Oxford University in England for two years. Ultimately, Jim would earn a PhD in English from Harvard with a scholastic emphasis on English literature published before 1500. (Something he and fellow Rotarian Harry Drake have in common; although Harry's literary interests center on German writers.)

Jim's father was a retail merchant in Okmulgee and during WWII, Jim and his mother manned the store full time. Okmulgee was also the capital of the Creek Indian nation. (Native Americans victimized by the U.S. Congress 1830

Indian Removal Act, were forced to relocate from their southeastern U.S. ancestral homes to areas to the west designated as Indian Territory. Along the way, the relocated peoples suffered from exposure, disease and starvation. The forced march and the horrific losses are remembered as *The Trail of Tears*.) Those relocated Native Americans who settled in Okmulgee – considered a civilized and welcoming place -- assimilated well with the townspeople and other tribes. Many of Jim's high school classmates were Native American.

Jim's undergraduate degree was earned at the University of Oklahoma. When he was a student tuition was \$48 a semester; increasing to \$66 during his graduate year. Jim, as a resident counselor in his dormitory escaped the tuition payment and increase.

Jim retired from Northern Illinois University after teaching there for nearly 30 years; however, his career also included teaching at the Air Force Academy in Colorado, the University of Tulsa and in Iowa.

Jim met his wife, Victoria, at Northern Illinois University. Victoria, also an English scholar, accepted a teaching position at Alverno College. Commuting from DeKalb, Illinois to Milwaukee was draining, so upon Jim's retirement, Hales Corners became home.

Jim met Rotarian Art Wasserman at a Rotary International meeting. (Interestingly, Art was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, while Jim was also studying there. The two, however, would not meet until they were both in Milwaukee.) Art sponsored Jim's RCM membership.

As a Rotary Fellow Jim spoke to many students and Rotary clubs about his experiences at Oxford. His love of teaching and appreciation for the value of education led Jim to propose an idea that would have a lasting impact on the Rotary Club of Milwaukee, as well as lower income students throughout Milwaukee.

Ten years ago, when Jim Barry was the RCM President and the club was considering its Centennial projects, Jim approached President Jim with the idea of creating a RCM Scholarship program for Milwaukee area high school students. President Jim endorsed the idea and suggested a committee be formed. And voila what would become the Rotary Scholarship Committee was born. Since then, 50 scholarships have been awarded. There are 23 active scholars in the 2018-19 school year and seven new scholarships will be awarded this summer for the upcoming 2019-20 semesters. In addition to helping pay for college, each scholar is assigned two mentors to help shepherd the student all four years.

Scholarships are funded primarily from proceeds of the annual RCM Scholarship Golf Classic; individual donations, legacy gifts and endowed programs are also welcome. In 2013, Jim endowed a scholarship in his son's name: James I. Miller III Scholarship Fund. The \$2500 scholarship is awarded annually.

The first year of the program, there were six applicants; the second year 20, and this past near school year nearly 75, primarily African-American and Latino students, applied. In addition to academic performance, qualifications for consideration include the student being the first in his/her family to attend college and demonstration of a financial need.

Jim didn't just come up with the idea; he has also worked on the committee since its inception. Each year he completes the initial vetting for every scholarship application. Jim reviews every applicant's grade point average, residency and ACT test scores.

The RCM Scholars have Jim Miller to thank for tirelessly advancing the idea and framework for this very successful program. The graduation rate for RCM Scholars is five times greater than the national average.

"I am very, very pleased to be associated with RCM and grateful leadership was receptive to the scholarship idea. It has taken on greater significance than I ever imagined. It's like the tap water was turned on and the water pressure keeps building."

Language continues to stimulate and inspire The Millers. Victoria is an active student at Alliance Francaise de Milwaukee. Jim's mind is always working and to keep it tip-top he reads a bit of *Aeneid* by Publius Vergilius Maro (Virgil) every day, in Latin.

Thank you, Jim Miller, for being an inspirational Rotary Person of Action.



Editor's Note: We feature the popular Rotary People of Action series bi-monthly. The week of June 28 will profile Jean Casey. Rotary People of Action is written by RCM Board Member (and its Sargent at Arms) Barbara Velez.