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Improving with Age

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Retired professor D. Paul Miller reveals what keeps him going strong at 94.

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Miller sometimes bicycles to Evergreen Lake, almost 25 miles round-trip. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

A report released in November showed that the population of Americans age 90 and over is now 1.9 million — almost triple what it was three decades ago. Faced with the prospect of living longer, many are asking: How can I make the most of those extra years?

Spending time with D. Paul Miller is a good place to start in answering that question. At age 94, he has mental acuity and physical stamina many half his age would envy.

Newspapers and magazines have featured Miller, retired chair of Illinois Wesleyan's sociology department, for his athletic successes. In Senior Olympics track competition, he's won 216 medals, 158 of them gold. His national medal count is seven gold, five silver and two bronze. More medals will likely follow: he plans to compete in next year's Senior Olympics. Miller still holds two national records, both in bicycle road races, and 12 state records.

In recent years, he has also been busy writing a book. Published in 2011, *From the Dust Bowl to the Corn Fields* documents his life from early childhood to the present. His personality emerges on the pages, full of warmth, candor and curiosity. Meeting Miller in person, those same qualities draw you in. As he reflects on his life — and the lifestyle changes he's made that help keep him active — his eyes shine with kindness and twinkle with fun.

What's harder to spot in those gentle eyes is the gleam of a die-hard competitor, but it's there.

"He's an example for all of us," says Norm Eash '75, IWU head football coach and Miller's longtime workout partner. "As you age, there are aches and pains that can stop you from exercising but D. Paul works through it. I admire and respect him. More than that, he's an interesting person and he's fun to be around. Someone at 94 might be set in his ways but he's very accepting of other viewpoints."

To understand how Miller has made the most of what he calls his “reclining years,” it helps to go back to his beginnings, documented in *From the Dust Bowl to the Corn Fields*.

The Kansas farm where Miller grew up.

He was born Aug. 30, 1917, on “The Eighty,” an 80-acre farm 12 miles south of Protection, Kan. His family — including two brothers and two sisters — was part of an even bigger clan (14 aunts and uncles on his father’s side) who shared in common a devotion to their Conservative Mennonite beliefs. Miller attended a tiny country school taught by his father, who was also a Mennonite minister and bishop.

At a young age, Miller was expected to get up early and “chore.” That involved, among other things, slopping the pigs, helping with harvest and milking cows. He also fed the barn cats by squirting milk in their mouths and even took a few squirts himself on occasion.

At age 10, Miller drove his family’s Model-T for the first time alone, sent by his mother to borrow sugar from neighbors. At age 13, he got his first state-issued driver’s license, a document he still possesses. Despite such liberties, “my dad was a strict disciplinarian,” he says, banning class parties and dances.

Miller lived his adolescence against the bleak backdrop of the Great Depression, while dust storms blotted the Kansas sky. He remembers when school was dismissed at 1 p.m. during one such storm. Driving home, he couldn’t see as far as the radiator cap at the front of his car. He recalls shoveling dust that had “drifted like snow” to the top of a pigpen fence, four or five feet high, on his family farm.

Miller's first teaching job was at a small Kansas school. During World War II, he was assigned to a civilian camp for conscientious objectors.

Despite the hard times and strict upbringing, Miller had his share of fun. He and a cousin who lived nearby played, fished, swam and hunted together. To earn spending money, he trapped, skinned and stretched animal pelts, which he sold for about $1.50 each (though one badger pelt fetched $4). One night, they even bagged 10 skunks, dragged out one by one from under an old water tank by the family dog, Jubilee, leaving them “exasperated and well scented with skunk spray,” as he writes in his book.

Encouraged by their father to get as much education as they could, Miller and his siblings all earned bachelor’s degrees, with the three boys completing doctorates. In 1936, Miller attended Hesston College, a Mennonite school north of Wichita, Kan. There, he ran track for the first time. Wearing shorts was forbidden for modesty’s sake, so he rolled his pant legs, held up with rubber bands, to his knees for his races, which he often won.

While taking summer classes at Fort Hays State College to get his teaching certificate, Miller caught his first real glimpse of life outside the Mennonite community. After seeing his first movie, he was shocked when the girl who went with him lit a cigarette. Gradually, the “bashful country boy” began to like the freedoms of life away from his sheltered home environment. “The whole world was out there ready for me to jump in,” he writes in his book.

With World War II, Miller’s life took a profound turn. He and some 12,000 other draft-aged men from historic peace churches and other denominations were granted conscientious objector (CO) classification. Each was assigned to one of 152 Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps set up as an alternative to military service. Serving without wages, CPS men made significant contributions to forestry, agriculture, social services and mental-health practices. Thirty-six COs even voluntarily starved themselves for a study on how best to treat malnourished war refugees.

While most COs were forced to leave behind their families, Miller was luckier: Both a younger brother and brother-in-law were inducted into the same camp at Sideling Hill, Pa., in 1942. Later, Miller was transferred to Delaware State Hospital, where he led a group of 45 COs who worked in the psychiatric wards. For recreation, Miller sang in a CPS men’s chorus and played on softball teams. Such activities helped raise morale among men whom some called “yellow-bellied” for their pacifist beliefs.

Miller looks back on his four-year CPS experience as positive and confidence-building. “I consider it sort of a beginning of ‘coming out of my shell,’” he writes in his memoir.

After concluding his CPS service, Miller taught high school in Hillsboro, Kan., before beginning full-time graduate studies at the University of Nebraska in 1947. That same year he married Anne Wiebe. A music teacher and a Mennonite, she and Miller had met two years earlier while she was touring CPS camps to help develop their music programs.

Miller taught at Nebraska, Wayne State and Mankato State prior to joining Wesleyan’s faculty as sociology chair in 1960. He looks back with special fondness on the travel he did during his IWU tenure, including European sabbaticals and accompanying a January Short Term class to Russia.

During his 1978-79 sabbatical, he lived with Amish in Arthur, Ill. While laboring in a woodworking shop for room and board, he conducted research for his book *The Illinois Amish*, which included a history of the settlement, descriptions of its education and economic activities and a directory of every Amish person living in the community. Miller also taught a popular class at IWU called “Amish Society” that included field trips to Amish communities.

“He’s an example for all of us,” says Norm Eash ’75, IWU head football coach and Miller’s longtime workout partner. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

While an expert in traditional Amish values, Miller’s held beliefs far ahead of his time. He rode a bike to work, and taught about environmental issues such as overpopulation, depletion of resources and pollution. “People thought I was crazy back then,” he says. “I was accused of being a pessimist. I thought, and still think, I was a realist.”

Around 1982, Miller and his wife “quit teaching” (a phrase he prefers to “retired”).

“We went through ‘withdrawal distress,’” he recalls. “We had to realize and adjust to the fact that the institutions from which we retired were going to continue even after we left them.”

Once they adjusted, Miller says, “Anne and I embarked on what has probably become the most enjoyable period of our lives.”

In the late 1990s, the couple moved to a smaller home in the Mennonite Residential Community in Normal and began “disposing of our earthly goods,” as he calls it. Deciding what they wanted to pass along to their children — including such items as a spinning wheel, a Russian glass egg and a British taxi horn — the couple called a family meeting. Told to “take a walk,” when the two returned they found things had been amicably decided. “It was a big relief off our minds to get things settled,” he says.

Miller and his wife were also joined in their commitment to keep in physical shape, exercising together five days a week. However, Anne gradually began to develop trouble walking. Diagnosed with two fractured vertebra, she was eventually confined to using a walker indoors and a wheel chair when traveling. Miller was Anne’s full-time caregiver for the last three years of her life. She died peacefully in her sleep on Feb. 5, 2010.

“It’s hard,” Miller says of losing Anne. Writing in his book, he observes, “Life is different for me, a big void, but time passes. … I often wish she were here to give her input and help make decisions.” He doesn’t offer any advice to someone going through a similar loss but says that for himself, he has simply had to “roll with the punches and adjust.”

Wendell Hess — retired IWU provost and professor and a longtime friend of Miller’s — observes that “Anne’s handicap motivated D. Paul to get in good enough shape to be her caregiver and to keep her home. And, by golly, he did.”

Among the medals Miller has won in senior competition are seven national golds.

Miller arrives at 5 a.m. each weekday at the Shirk Athletic Center to work out. He begins with 15 minutes of stretching and yoga, followed by 20 minutes on the elliptical (it saves his joints) — unless training for the Senior Olympics, in which case he works on the track. This is followed by 40 minutes of weight training with some socializing in between. Miller ends his workout with a shower, goes home, has breakfast and then, as he puts it, “I’m ready to start my day.”

Those days often include driving out to the land he owns — 127 acres of woodland in southern Illinois, now listed as an Illinois Natural Heritage Landmark, and a smaller lot near Carlock, Ill., which he calls his “playground.” Miller is actively involved in maintaining both properties, removing honeysuckle and other brush and working with forestry services in planting and harvesting trees.

For both income and the challenge of it, Miller repairs clocks. He’s fixed more than 1,000 since 1970. He finds it satisfying to take one apart and reassemble its hundreds of pieces into something whole and running. He’s even made it a family project, rebuilding clocks with four of his six grandchildren. “I don’t advertise clock repair,” he says, “but I can’t seem to say ‘no.’”

He enjoys spending time with family and friends, and loves to follow Titan sports, traveling on the fan bus to out-of-town games. As example of that dedication, Eash recalls when Miller sprinted to catch the bus, slipped on the ice and broke his wrist, but went to the game anyway.

In recent years, Miller has made what he calls a “conversion” to vegetarianism, a decision he made after doing extensive research. He believes that eating low on the food chain provides personal-health benefits and lower medical expenses and is also ethically responsible. But it isn’t easy, he admits. He’s modified his diet in recent years, adding fresh-caught ocean salmon and venison to his diet in response to iron and protein deficiencies.

In his kitchen at home, Miller prepares ingredients to bake bread. His diet includes vegetables grown in his garden. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Miller never eats anything that comes from a feedlot because of the added hormones and antibiotics. He gets organic eggs delivered to his house and snacks on nuts and fruits. His breakfast consists of hot whole-grain cereal mixed with dried fruit, whole-wheat toast and orange juice. Lunch and dinner each feature several vegetables, often ones he’s grown himself.

Despite his healthy lifestyle, Miller admits, “My hips, back and knees seem to ache more and more as time passes.” He can foresee the time when he will no longer be able to run in Senior Olympics track events, but hopes his ability to bicycle will last longer. But, as he writes in his book, “Let’s face it, sooner or later, all rigorous activity comes to a close.”

When asked if he fears dying, he responds with a quick and confident “no.”

“I’m ready to die and not at all afraid,” Miller says. He wants to really live until he dies and not use up his money at a nursing home. He describes his personal spiritual journey at some length in his book. It’s a journey that’s taken him from his conservative Kansas home church to something considerably less doctrinal. He says he’s one who can “doubt fiercely and believe ferociously” at the same time.

“God,” he writes, “is the total of all there is.” Miller is content to live within the mystery of both life and death without fear. He knows his views don’t jibe with everyone else’s but he quotes Martin Luther: “Here I stand. I can do no other.” His spiritual journey is not yet over, he says. “I hope I’ll continue to get new ideas as long as I live.”

At the same time, there comes a time to stop all the intellectual pursuits and philosophizing “and keep on trying to improve our state of being and enjoyment.”

With the wisdom learned through more than nine decades of living, Miller boils down his formula for happiness into three simple points.

“You need something to do, someone to love and something to hope for.”

D. Paul Miller’s memoir,* From the Dust Bowl to the Corn Fields*, is available at the IWU Bookstore for $15 or contact D. Paul Miller at 711 S. Cottage, #127, Normal IL 61761 or at (309) 452-7285.