

MARY ELLEN MILLER

Gets things going



Story by Doug Janz ❖ Photos by Mike Murphy

Communicating has always been Mary Ellen Miller's mission — bringing together people and ideas. While she's shifted careers on numerous occasions, she never strays far from the task of connecting with others and passing on information.

She's a consensus builder, a project starter and a people connector who's known for her enthusiasm, her organizational and motivational skills and her willingness to take on new and good causes.

Asked to describe herself, Miller thought for a moment and then, with a sparkle in her eyes, settled on "adventurous and creative. I like to get things going."

While an ambition to succeed has been one of her driving forces, Miller said she's also influenced by her desire to help people. One of her proudest accomplishments was spearheading the creation of the local Salvation Army Souper Bowl for the Hungry fundraiser event that brings in football legends as guest speakers. Entering its 12th year, it has brought in greats like Archie Manning, Ron Jaworski, Bill Bates and Bill Curry.

She and restaurateur Tom Seaton spearheaded the first

event, which targeted CEOs and business and community leaders, with a goal to raise awareness for the Salvation Army's needs. The event has raised thousands of dollars for the Salvation Army.

"It was really neat to see that go on years after I was involved with it," she said. "Tom Krieger has taken it since then and done a tremendous job with it."

"I think of the Bible verse Luke 12:48: 'To whom much is given, much is expected.' And the Salvation Army is an example. I feel I've been very blessed and so I try to give back a lot. I like helping people."

Miller's journey has taken her from doing radio work in New York to Johnson City careers in TV, university development and magazines as well as public relations/marketing for a law firm, a nuclear fuels company and a digital media business. Along the way, she's made her mark through service for the Salvation Army, her church, her alma mater Cornell, work-related mentoring and the Kiwanis Club, among other organizations.

She works as marketing director for digital media heavyweight n-tara, headquartered in Johnson City. Miller said all the jobs she's held, as well as her formative years, have prepared her for this one.

Miller's father was a professional fundraiser who raised money to build hospitals and Salvation Army buildings.



Danny and Mary Ellen

Her mother was a journalist. Growing up, Miller remembers playing lots of word games, and her parents encouraged her inquisitive nature.

Her father passed away in late 2007.

“They were huge influences on my life,” she said.

She graduated from Cornell with a degree in communications and began her career doing radio and TV work for a small station in New York before coming to Johnson City as a TV news anchor for WJHL. That job introduced her to Northeast Tennessee and gave her the most public exposure of any career path she’s taken. Even though her TV work was in the 1980s, people still remember her as Mary Ellen Plubell, the newscaster who appeared in their living rooms at 6 and 11 o’clock.

From there, Miller went to work for Nuclear Fuel Services in marketing, along with fellow former WJHL anchor Tony Treadway. She and Treadway ended up founding the powerful marketing firm Creative Energy that continues to represent NFS.

Then Miller went back to school, getting an MBA from East Tennessee State University in 2000 — “I always felt a business degree with a communications degree would be valuable in the workplace,” she said — and that led her to take a job in ETSU development.

From there, she got an offer to do marketing for the law firm of Hunter, Smith & Davis, then was offered the job as editor of Marquee Magazine and finally was recruited to work for n-tara.

“The skill set of both communications and business, and now you add technology — I’m liking it because it’s all about communicating. There’s always the common thread of professional communications,” she said, adding that, “I’ve loved all my jobs.”

But the “people” aspect of life is what has interested her most, starting with mentoring. She’s also the person many will call if they’re looking for a job or for someone to fill a position.

“It’s like I’ve got ‘human resources’ tattooed on my forehead,” she said with a laugh. “I love getting people together. And internships have been a big part of my life, mentoring young people. I had a wonderful mentor in my first job in Buffalo, and I’ve always tried to have interns in whatever jobs I’ve had.”

Her work with the Kiwanis Club, helping to establish a relationship with a local organization that assists troubled children, Camelot Care Centers, earned her Kiwanian of the Year for 2005-06. She earned a Business Horizon Award from ETSU and was also a recipient of the J.C. Penney Golden Rule Award for volunteer work.



Photo courtesy of Murray Lee

Miller is a member of the prestigious President's Council for Cornell Women. She is chair of the development committee, which has helped raise more than \$1 million for one endowment and almost that much on a second endowment. One of them benefits rising young female faculty members and the other goes to female students.

Another of her favorite projects was the Trustee Program at her church, Grace Fellowship. The pastor selected 10 volunteers each from the church's four Sunday services to receive \$100 from the church and take 90 days to simply "do the work of Christ." It was just the kind of thing Miller relishes. She chose work that benefited the Children's Advocacy Center.

"There were a lot of others who did great works, some really great projects," she said. "I think over \$40,000, maybe \$50,000 of good works was created from that initial \$4,000."

She's also a student of people and good works. Miller has studied, written and spoken about women in philanthropy and about Malcolm Gladwell's book "The Tipping Point," which examines social epidemics and change.

While Miller's career path has been filled with business opportunities, she's also shifted focus onto family in the last few years. She and her husband, Danny Miller, have a son, 6-year-old Skyler. She said she loves her role as a mother and has tried to arrange it so her various careers allow her to spend time with Skyler.

"That's sort of the ultimate job, being a mother," she said.

She loves famous motivational quotes, like Ghandi's "Be the change you want to see in the world." She also loves a song by Christian music singer Nichole Nordeman called "Legacy" with the lyrics:

"I want to leave a legacy
How will they remember me?
Did I choose to love? Did I point
to You enough
To make a mark on things?"

Miller has tried to leave her mark on each phase of her life. It's been all about making things happen.

"You can't wait around for someone else to do it," she said with a grin.

