

Vienna Wagner

Junior

Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School

Devon Zingale

Hero: Dr. Gerald Miller

Page 1 of 5

## **From Shpshewana to Somalia: The Journey of a Hoosier Hero**

When lightning struck his family's barn and started a fire, my grandfather, who was only twelve and home alone, saved the Guernseys, and when he discovered the phone line was down, he rode his bike to the nearest neighbor for help. Twenty-two years later, he demonstrated the same determined courage by serving as a doctor in Somalia despite language and cultural barriers. Because of his numerous medical achievements and his courageous, compassionate character, my grandfather, Dr. Gerald Miller, is my nominee for Hoosier Hero.

Dr. Miller has a strong connection with Indiana, a factor that has fostered his desire to help others. Born in Goshen and raised in nearby Shpshewana, he grew up surrounded by livestock and showed cattle in 4-H at the Indiana State Fair. This experience served as his motive to initially pursue veterinary medicine so that he could help animals. However, he was also surrounded by relatives who were former mission workers and teachers whose Mennonite backgrounds had allowed them to connect with international service organizations. His memories of their adventures and how these relatives had positively influenced human lives, later contributed to his change of major at Goshen College from veterinary science to premed.

After marrying my grandmother, Mary Mishler, his girlfriend since high school, Dr. Miller went on to earn his medical degree from the Indiana University School of Medicine.

Vienna Wagner

Junior

Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School

Devon Zingale

Hero: Dr. Gerald Miller

Page 2 of 5

While an intern in Fort Wayne, he received his first calling to bring health care to those lacking a local physician. Several citizens from the rural town of Markle personally invited him to come. Before Dr. Miller and his friend, Dr. Leroy Kinzer, opened the Markle Medical Center in 1964, Markle residents had to drive to Fort Wayne or some other community to receive care. When word of the quality of healthcare in Markle spread and requests came from the surrounding areas of Bluffton and Warren, Dr. Miller responded by expanding his weekly medical rounds and by eventually opening clinics in these towns. During his forty-two years in Markle, he was always willing to make house calls, and he established the first EMT and Paramedic services in Northeastern Indiana.

Although Dr. Miller enjoyed serving Hoosiers, he felt the need to offer his services to some of the most impoverished populations in the world. He volunteered with project HELP in Haiti twenty-five times, and his medical center helped establish a hospital there that is now staffed with Haitian doctors. In 1971, while his daughter, my mom, was in middle school, he

received an urgent request from the Eastern Mennonite Mission Board to serve as a doctor in Jamama, Somalia. Six weeks later, his family of five found themselves on a plane to a region of Africa that had just experienced a revolution in 1969 and was under a military dictatorship. Anti-American attitudes in the government did not prevent Dr. Miller from treating countless patients at a hospital where he was the only doctor. During his tenure in Somalia, he made the medical discovery that malaria can be passed from mothers to their infants by crossing the

Vienna Wagner

Junior

Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School

Devon Zingale

Hero: Dr. Gerald Miller

Page 3 of 5

placental barrier. This information prompted UNICEF to change their medical literature, which saved many newborn lives.

In Somalia, Dr. Miller faced the most intense crisis of his life when he was convicted of the murder of his patient and friend, Hussein Sadad Hassan. Shortly after a government-mandated leg surgery to insert a rod, Mr. Hassan died due to shock. He had been in the Jamama Hospital for more than three months because of a car accident caused by a drunken driver. A surgeon from Kismayo actually performed the surgery, with Dr. Miller assisting. When the Somali government discovered the death, they charged Dr. Miller with murder since he had been in charge of the patient's healthcare. After a one day trial that was conducted in five languages—Somali, Italian, Russian, English and Arabic—the judge ruled that he was guilty.

His sentence demanded a five year stay in the country along with the blood money payment of one hundred camels. This money would have elevated Hassan's family out of poverty, but, remembering the diligence with which Dr. Miller treated their father, even to the extent of donating his own blood, they refused the payment. Instead, they urged my grandfather to appeal. The verdict was later overturned. He and my mother recently wrote of this experience in the 2009 memoir, *A Hundred Camels: a Mission Doctor's Sojourn and Murder Trial in Somalia*, published by Cascadia Publishing House.

Because of his strength of character and achievements, my grandfather has served as an important role model for me. Most people, upon meeting him, have no idea of his achievements

Vienna Wagner

Junior

Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School

Devon Zingale

Hero: Dr. Gerald Miller

Page 4 of 5

or the hardships that he has overcome. I admire his humility in not seeking recognition and his perseverance in continuing his medical work in the States and his mission work in Haiti. My grandfather has a philosophy that emphasizes making personal sacrifices in order to bring about positive change. From overnight visits to my grandparents' home, I remember that he would wake up at five, and by the time I was dressed, he had already made his hospital rounds and driven to the town where he was seeing patients that day. I, myself, was born in the Wells Community Hospital where he worked. Even now that he has retired and moved to Westfield,

Indiana, in order to live near his children and grandchildren, my grandfather continues to be involved in a number of service activities with his church and takes a strong interest in international affairs. I model my efforts in school after his strong work ethic, and like him, I volunteer to help those in need. During my teaching sessions with Indianapolis Public School students through Simply Science and Art with a Heart, I seek the same level of personal care and understanding that my grandfather has modeled.

Dr. Miller is a hero who seeks to understand and improve lives while inspiring others to do the same. Because of his service ethic, my mom was inspired to serve several years as a volunteer in a Louisiana Choctaw community, and she currently works for VSA of Indiana, teaching poetry writing to children with special needs. I am considering a medical profession because of my grandfather's example. But whatever field I enter, his compassion will serve as a guiding influence. "Come in, come in," my grandfather says when someone rings his doorbell,

Vienna Wagner

Junior

Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School

Devon Zingale

Hero: Dr. Gerald Miller

Page 5 of 5

and, after my cat was spayed this fall, he cradled her and examined the stitches with the same tenderness he shows to all creation.

