

A TRIBUTE TO DANNY L. MILLER

Sharon Hatfield

Appalachian Literature lost a dear friend and advocate on November 9 with the passing of Danny Miller, chair of the English Department at Northern Kentucky University. The enormous respect and esteem in which he was held by his colleagues and students was evident at the memorial service held on campus November 15. Against a photographic backdrop of Danny in his prime as an academic and as a toddler in his rural Appalachian home, mourners paid tribute to their fallen friend through performances of original poetry, modern dance, a bluegrass hymn, a Rachmaninoff concerto, and his favorite song from *Phantom of the Opera*. The event seemed to reflect perfectly the many facets of Danny's catholic nature, from his deep attachment to home, kinfolk, and friends back in Ashe County, North Carolina, to his love for the fine arts and the urban life of Cincinnati, where he had made his home for many years.

My own connection with Danny was both personal and professional. It all began several years ago at an Appalachian Studies Conference in Helen, Georgia, where I was introduced to him over dinner. He immediately asked me where I was from and what my mother's maiden name was. By the end of the meal, using his vast genealogical knowledge of Appalachian families and a napkin as his notepad, he had established that we were indeed distant cousins. It was a scene I was to see repeated many times over the next several years, as Danny would delve into the family tree of a perfect stranger with abandon. He was particularly enthusiastic to meet those with associations to his undergraduate Alma Mater, Berea College, and to the University of Cincinnati, where he received his doctorate. The point is, Danny was inclusive. He felt a sense of connection to many people throughout the mountains, and even if you were not his blood kin, he would surely claim you as a kindred spirit.

A few years later I gained an appreciation of Danny's scholarship while serving with him and Gurney Norman as a coeditor of *An American Vein*, a collection of critical essays on Appalachian literature.

Danny's book about female characters in Appalachian fiction, *Wingless Flights*, had been published in 1996, and by 2000 he had helped set into motion this significant venture—creating a foundational volume that would tie together all the critical work that had been done over the decades of the Appalachian literary renaissance. His knowledge of Appalachian writing was encyclopedic, and beneath his sunny exterior burned the conviction that literature was not just something for academics or librarians to peruse, but a tool by which activists could, in his words, “offer resistance.”

Over the four years we worked on the book, meeting in both Ohio and Kentucky, I came to realize that Danny, through his keen intellect and unpretentious style, had fashioned a charmed circle of friends and colleagues that was constantly widening. Always juggling several projects in addition to his job, Danny was never too busy to take your hand, pull you aside, and demand to hear your news.

At the time of his death from a stroke at age 59, Danny had nearly completed his tenure as chair of his department, having overseen the creation of a master's degree program in English and an enormous growth in the number of faculty. He was looking forward to stepping down to a quieter life within the academy. There were things he had left to do, and we as the Appalachian community are the poorer for his absence. But in thinking of all he did accomplish in six short decades, I am reminded of a passage from Jesse Stuart that was quoted at Danny's memorial:

“And I am firm in my belief that a teacher lives on and on through his students. I will live if my teaching is inspirational, good, and stands firm for good values and character training. Tell me how can good teaching ever die? Good teaching is forever and the teacher is immortal.”

Having heard the notes of praise and laughter rising to the ceiling of the concert hall at Northern Kentucky—and witnessing tears falling freely in the audience of several hundred that day—I know the saying is true.

Memorial donations may be made to the Danny L. Miller Scholarship Fund, Department of English, Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY 41099.