



WILLIAM MILLER

Call of the wild

Miller brings lessons from the plains of Africa to the wild jungle of Silicon Valley

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BY RHONDA ASCIERTO

One constant in William Miller's varied life is balance. He was born into a balance of the cerebral and physical, with a father who was a farmer and a mother who was an industrial chemist before becoming a professor of Greek, Latin and classic literature at a local Indiana university, near the family's farm.

His bachelor's degree in science was interrupted after two semesters, by his voluntary decision to join the army at the end of World War II. At 19 he became a civilian sheriff in post-war Germany for the army.

And Miller's protractive career since then has been almost equally divided between academia and business.

As a young researcher he helped develop the foundation for what is now called computational science at the Argonne National Laboratory. He then moved to Silicon Valley in 1965 to help form the computer science department at Stanford University.

But he wanted to both develop new technologies and to find practical uses for them, which led him a few years later to help found Mayfield Fund, a venture capital firm in Menlo Park.

By 1971, Miller was Stanford's vice president and provost. He left in 1979 to become CEO of SRI International in Menlo Park. When he retired from SRI in 1990, he returned

to Stanford to teach half time and spent the rest of his time working with nonprofits and startup tech companies as an angel investor.

Last October, Miller founded Nanostellar Inc., a Menlo Park-based nanotechnology startup that is developing nano-materials to control auto emissions and generate clean-energy power in fuel cells.

Nanostellar CEO Michael Pak said Miller has an uncommon balance between science and business. "He likes to challenge cutting-edge technology. Sometimes he intellectually beats the young people," Pak said.

Miller, whose energetic dialogue belies his 78 years, said he has strived for equilibrium in his life.

"Balance between doing practical and intellectual things, balance between my work activities and my non-work activities," Miller said. "I was a great vacation taker."

The first time he visited Africa, in 1975, Miller experienced a turning point in his life, he said. The variety, proximity and abundance of wildlife on the continent stirred in Miller a deep-seated passion for animals and wilderness.

"In Africa, you can go out and there's nobody else around, and you kind of understand this is how the animal world was before humans intervened," Miller said.

Since then, Miller and his wife have tracked the world to shoot birds, big cats, elephants, bison and other exotic animals -- all with professional cameras, of course.

"I think going to Africa was kind of an awakening," Miller said. "It got us very interested in wildlife and wildlife photography."

One of the most unique experiences for Miller in Africa was the first time he photographed a leopard. For several years in a row, he had unsuccessfully tried to capture one of the elusive cats on film. Leopards he sighted were too far away or perched too high in a tree to clearly photograph, he said.

Then, on the last day of an expedition in Namibia, his local guide drove him to where he had spotted a leopard earlier in the day. A kudu calf a species of antelope, jumped across the track as they made their way to the sighting area, to join its mother on the other side of the road. The mother kudu was making sharp coughing noises, a signal of distress. The guide figured the kudu had been alarmed by a leopard, so they drove further down the track, very slowly.

"All of a sudden, there it was, sitting by the side of the road, paying no attention to us whatsoever," Miller recalled. "I remember saying afterwards that this animal was so focused on the kudu that it never even looked at us. And then when I got home and developed the pictures, I had shots where it was staring at me right in the camera. I was so excited, I hadn't noticed the cat was looking straight at me," he laughed.

For the past 15 years, the Millers have spent several weeks each year on at least three trips to either Africa, North or South America, Asia or Australasia, taking several thousand photos each. Close-ups of lions, birds and wolves adorn the offices of Nanostellar. Original photographs are scattered throughout Miller's former workplaces and the homes of friends and colleagues, but he does not sell them, nor hang them in his own home. He and his wife instead prefer Asian art.

The Millers also support the conservation of some of the endangered animals they photograph, including wolves in North America and cheetahs in Africa through the Cheetah Conservation Fund, which they visit each year.

Safari in Africa with the Millers is a photographic junket with an intimate group of four or six friends. Local guides, drivers and pilots are all organized by Miller and his wife to Botswana, Zimbabwe and Tanzania. "It's easier to tell you where we don't go," laughed Miller.

His travels to other continents have not just been to photograph wildlife, but also to establish technology practices and policies.

He has served on the National Science Board and the National Research Council, and has been honored for his work in advancing technology in the Republic of Korea, China and Tokyo.

Miller's agricultural-intellectual upbringing in rural Indiana gave him the head and hands to help shape technology around the globe. But he can't pinpoint exactly why he was driven to do so.

"When most people tell you what impacts their lives, they don't really know," Miller said. "If you ask most executives why they've been successful they give you the wrong answer because they don't really know."

Miller's tales of work and travel evoke the ancient African goddess Ma'at, who personified the time-worn notion of universal balance and order. Seems Ma'at had an influence on Miller long before he visited Africa's heartlands.

Rhonda Ascierio is Biz Ink's managing editor. You can reach her at

rasciarto@svbizink.com.

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