

LacrosseLeaders

MATT DaSILVA

## The Chief of Manhasset's Extended Family

Bill Miller remains the rock behind generations of Long Island laxers

**T**here was weeping in Manhasset that day. Could you hear it? There was revelry that night, too. It was the Miller house, a social centrifuge on Long Island's north shore, where the emotional entropy ranges daily from sadness to elation. More often than not, the revelry outlasts the weeping.

The sadness is silenced because Bill Miller has a way of making you think that everything will be OK — that though bad things happen to good people, you can always count on the good emerging from it.

A lot of bad things have happened to Miller in his 69 years. He lost a newborn son to congenital heart failure. One of his grandsons has cerebral palsy, autism and epilepsy. His wife, Angela, died in January after a painful bout with rheumatoid arthritis.

Now, one of his best friends might be dying of cancer.

Through it all, Miller has overseen the Manhasset PAL youth lacrosse league in some capacity for 40 years. Aside from his family, lacrosse is his other passion. As the progenitor of Manhasset lacrosse, he has bore thousands of surrogate children, like Owen Tunney. The author of that thankful e-mail and a former model for *GQ* magazine, Tunney played lacrosse for Miller in sixth grade. When his parents left Manhasset, Tunney wanted to stay. Through college, and lived with the Millers on and off for seven years.

For years, Miller received letters from the University of Miami addressed to "the parents of Owen Tunney."

*Mr. Miller,  
You've been a great example, father and friend to me. Some of you will be passed on to little Owen. Knowing you, I am sure that will be the best thank you gift I could possibly give you, if I can be half the father that you are to your children.*

*Thanks for giving me the honor of being in your life.*

—Owen Tunney

"He was like one of our children," Miller said. "What goes out eventually comes back."

Back to the day *Lacrosse Magazine* paid a visit. The weeping was Harry Baugher. One of Miller's closest friends, Baugher has prostate cancer. It had already metastasized upon discovery. Miller, if only to get his good friend out of the house for a few hours, invited Baugher over for an afternoon chat.

It was actually a good day for Baugher. It seemed his cancer was in remission. But fear of the unknown, combined with a chemical imbalance caused by medication, has left Baugher a broken man — a far cry from the virile lacrosse player who played well into his 30s for the Long Island club team.

What was supposed to be an interview about Miller and his longstanding involvement with Manhasset youth lacrosse had turned into an exhausting session of name dropping.

They traded back and forth for nearly two hours, like boys with baseball cards, celebrating each person's connection to the program. From the 1965 founders (Charlie Morrison, Joe Fields and John Cardillo) to the players (Jim Brown, Dave Pietramala, Lee Vosburgh, John Gagliardi, Tim Goettelmann, Blake



Bill Miller, with one of his 11 grandchildren, has been actively involved in the Manhasset, N.Y., lacrosse community for 40 years.

Miller, Nick Murtha, etc.), each had a story.

"All these guys are part of a family," said Baugher, who came through the league as a boy. "It's an open-door policy. At dinnertime, they're walking through your back door."

"Things evolve. I bring some consistency to it," Miller said of his longtime connection with the program and its alumni. "You need someone around to tell these stories. I'm kind of the chief."

When asked of the supportive role which Miller and Manhasset PAL people have played in helping him deal with his illness, Baugher finally broke down.

"My best friends..."

His words were cut off with a whimper. It was time to go.

"Keep on fighting," Miller said, patting his friend on the back before he left. "Stay positive."

Minutes later, Ryan Miller — the youngest of 11 Miller children — barged into the kitchen with a bagful of sausages, chicken patties, hamburgers and buns.

"Ry guy, hey!"

Like that, the weeping ended and the revelry began.

Miller's countenance, like the sediment of an old neighborhood sidewalk, never changed. His kids call him Ace because of his immutably

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militaristic appearance, fit as an ox, and his "What, me worry?" countenance. He plays it all pretty close to the vest. That's what his wife needed when Peter, who would have been 34, died as a baby. It's what his family needed when Angela, "the captain around here," died six months ago.

It's what Baugher needed that day, some reassurance.

It's what 11-year-old Gordon would need that night.

The house was now crawling with Millers, old and young, their outlandish behavior sometimes making it difficult to tell the difference between them. Why Gordon was grinning, no one knew. Hard to imagine a kid incapacitated by cerebral palsy being so happy, but you could tell he loved coming over Grandpa's house. Or,

perhaps it was the plate of junk food in front of him, enough to put a smile on any kid's face.

Outside was Dean, manning the grill. With him was Drew, trying to convince his older brother to down a beer in a few gulps. After a few futile attempts, Drew retreated inside, a vodka rocket fuel in hand. Kevin, Gordon's father and the oldest Miller son there that night, grabbed Drew to talk about the time they bought junkyard cars together, beat on them in public intersections, and rode off with the scraps. In the kitchen, Kory was reading an article in *Newsday* about her brother Blake, in which the Long Island Lizards midfielder is referred to as the family's lacrosse star.

"Ay they got it all wrong!" she cackled over the clamor. "Everyone

knows I'm the star of the family!"

Gordon laughed.

Kevin wiped a smudge from Gordon's face. "Doesn't he have a great smile?"

Ryan barged in again, this time to boast about how he had won in pool. Patrick, drawn to a black-and-white photo on the nightstand, took it in his hands. It was taken during a St. Mary's high school lacrosse game in the 1980s. In the photo Dean is the goalkeeper. The shot being fired his way is screened only partially by a tall, dark-haired defenseman.

"That's Dave Pietramala," Dean said, pointing at the photo. "And that's me."

Sensing an opportunity to get a job in of his own, Bill Miller snatched the photo from his son. "Dean, you're a shadow of your former self," he said.

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"My how sveite you are!"

They all laughed. A man of few words, Miller could sure pick his spots. It was hard to get a word in edgewise amidst this cacophony, but when he spoke, they listened.

"He's totally the rock," Kory said.

Eleven children were born to Bill and Angela Miller, 12 including Peter. It started with Billy Jr. (now 46 years old), followed by Eugene (45), Kevin (44), Angel (42), Dean (38), Patrick (35), Blake (33), Drew (29), Kory (27), Brady (26) and Ryan (22). Of the 11, only Billy and Angel did not play lacrosse in college.

Angela died in January. A week later, Bill was inducted into the Long Island Metro Chapter Hall of Fame.

"When she died, a lot of my dad was lost as well," Blake said. "I think he

needs the lacrosse right now."

Bill Miller has lacrosse, and more.

As the night progressed and more revelers like Lee Vosburgh and John Gagliardi filtered in through the patio door, stories like those came in abundance.

"It was Mr. Miller from the start," said Vosburgh, a Manhasset product who played at UMass. "Every game I played against his son (Eugene), he was there. That's what I remember. He was always there."

"If every town had a Bill Miller," said Gagliardi, "this sport would be in good shape."

At the dining room table, Gordon began to require more attention. By the time they realized his shaking had become more turbulent, Gordon was having a seizure.

Kevin needed to get him somewhere dark and quiet, quickly. He carried Gordon out to the car. Kevin Jr., 16, followed behind in single file, like a fire drill practiced too many times.

Gordon was OK, but the ordeal brought a sobering end to a night otherwise full of revelry. Thankfully, there would be no weeping that night. With an early morning of meetings ahead, Bill Miller retired early to bed.

The situation well in hand, the chief bade his tribe good night, hardly ever speaking a word about himself. He couldn't — others spoke volumes for him. **LM**

*—"Lacrosse Leaders" profiles a volunteer that goes above and beyond for the sport in his or her community. Send a nomination to [pkrome@uslacrosse.org](mailto:pkrome@uslacrosse.org).*

