

# The Savvy Senior



Linda Lee Fleming and Frieda Bambas welcome Jim Miller, left, back to Rivermont Retirement Community.

When it comes to helping older Americans enrich their lives and understand their options, the go-to guy is a 40-year-old PA announcer who asks, “Would my mom understand this?”

BY DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI  
PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR



**J**IM MILLER IS SOMETHING OF AN OVERNIGHT SENSATION.

And his celebrity has little to do with his free-lance announcing career, where his voice has become familiar to Sooners as the public address announcer for OU home football and men's basketball games and Commencement ceremonies, as well as for national and international gymnastics competitions and a prestigious annual tennis tournament.

Rather, at age 40, Miller is making a name for himself as an authority on senior citizen issues.

In the past year, he has appeared on NBC's "Today" show multiple times, been interviewed by *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *Writer's Digest* and *Editor & Publisher* magazine, inked a deal for a book with plans for a second one—all because of the meteoric success of a newspaper column that started three years ago as a promotional piece for a local retirement community. Today, Miller syndicates "Savvy Senior" to 400 newspapers, reaching a potential audience of 12 million, making it one of the most widely distributed columns in America.

It all started in October 2000, when both of Miller's parents died within weeks of one another. "My mom had breast cancer and was just withering away for months. My dad had a [fatal] heart attack a few weeks before she died," he recalls. "I was totally grief-stricken. I was very close to my parents."

After his parents' deaths, the Independence, Kansas, native, an education graduate with a bachelor's degree from Kansas State University and a master's from Wichita State University, returned to Norman. He had made his home in Soonerland since 1988, first working full-time in facilities and event operations in OU's Athletics Department and then going out on his own as a free-lance announcer.

"I wasn't that busy when I came back after my parents died, so I took a temporary job at Rivermont Retirement Community," Miller explains. "I thought being around people my parents' age would make me feel better. While I was there, I started a column called 'Rivermont Response,' a monthly Q&A to promote the retirement community that ran in *The Norman Transcript*. Over time, interest grew in the column, and I saw that there was a need for a different type of senior news.

"Let's face it; most of what's out there is kind of gloomy. I covered many of the same topics but took a lighter approach. I contacted other newspapers in the area to see if they were interested in carrying the column, and four of them—including the *Moore American* and the *Pauls Valley Daily Democrat*—said yes."

Miller left Rivermont after six months—he had taken the job knowing he did not want to make a career out of it—and researched the possibility of syndicating his column himself. "The senior demographic is the one that most often reads the newspaper, and I discovered that there were no nationally syndicated newspaper columns that offered seniors practical information in an understandable way," he says.



Senior citizen issues will not distract Jim Miller from his freelance duties as the public address announcer for OU football and men's basketball, the greatest "hobby" job he can imagine having.



Jim Miller draws a crowd whenever he revisits Rivermont Retirement Community, where his celebrated new career as a self-taught authority on problems facing seniors had its origin as he sought to provide answers in the simplest of terms.

By January 2002, he had named the column—"Savvy Senior" just popped into my head"—developed a business plan, talked to editors and people who had successfully syndicated their own work, and put together a promotional packet that included four sample columns, which he sent to 750 daily and weekly newspapers in a test market consisting of Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas. Within two months, the column was running in 75 papers.

He is self-taught on senior-related topics ranging from Social Security, Medicare and access to prescription medications to transitioning into retirement and housing options for seniors. His expertise came primarily from reading the vast body of



information available through government books and pamphlets, organization newsletters, national senior magazines and the Internet, as well as talking to various experts who cover senior issues.

Of the 30 to 50 letters he receives each week—a third by mail and two-thirds by e-mail—about half ask about Social Security benefits and restrictions. He can answer only one question in each column, but those he does not publish he answers either with a direct response or by a referral to a Web site or other readily available resource.

Miller keeps his parents—particularly his mother—in mind as he tries to provide helpful information to seniors in an easily understandable way. “My mom always had trouble understanding financial issues,” he says. “When I write a column, I always ask myself: Would Mom understand this? I try to state everything as simply as I can.”

Miller has no illusions about getting rich from the column, on which he spends 40 to 50 hours per week.

“‘Savvy Senior’ is a service column,” he explains. “When I first decided to market it, I wanted to make it affordable by offering it for \$3 a week to newspapers with a circulation of up to 25,000 and \$5 a week to papers with a circulation of more than 25,000. Many newspapers, especially small-town, community newspapers, can’t afford to pay \$10 or \$25 a week for a column, which is what most syndication services would charge.” So when one of the biggest syndication companies approached Miller with an eye toward distributing “Savvy Senior,” he declined.

With 400 newspapers carrying the column by the end of 2002, Miller decided to cast an even wider net to reach more seniors. He put together a national flier about the column and sent it to members of the national media. *The New York Times* was the first to bite, running a story in February 2003, which was followed by a *Time* magazine article in April. Then came calls from publishing companies and literary agents about the possibility of a book. Miller ultimately struck a deal for *The Savvy Senior*, a full-service resource book for senior citizens, with Hyperion Books, a division of Walt Disney Company. He also signed on with literary agent Bill Adler, whose clients include CBS News anchor Dan Rather and former U.S. Senate majority leader Bob Dole.

“[Adler] called me and asked me to send some of my columns,” Miller says. “He said I didn’t have to sign anything until he could get me a book deal that I was happy with. So I sent him 15 columns the next day by Federal Express, and within a week he had the book offer from Hyperion.” *The Savvy Senior* is



“Savvy Senior” Jim Miller, here with Ann Curry on “Today,” is now a frequent contributor to the NBC show’s “Forever Young” segment.

later, Miller was spotlighted again in “Forever Young,” this time with Lester Holt and Al Roker over three consecutive days, describing such gadgets for vision-impaired seniors as a talking clock that tells the time, temperature and weather conditions; a voice-activated TV/VCR/DVD remote control device; a standing lamp with a magnifier; and a screen enlarger that turns a regular television into a big-screen TV. More segments are in the

works, including ones on how to modify a home to make it “senior proof,” how to psychologically prepare for retirement and how to find the best housing option.

His increasingly frequent visits to the Big Apple to meet with his agent or appear on national television have not tempted him to leave Norman. “I can do what I do from anywhere and just fly to New York when I need to,” Miller says.

And he has no intention of giving up his gig as PA announcer for OU football and

basketball. “It’s the greatest hobby job you could have, and I’m honored to do it,” he says of his year-to-year agreement with the Department of Athletics.

Despite the long hours necessary to research, write and, yes, continue to promote “Savvy Senior” (which includes maintaining the column’s Web site at [www.savvysenior.org](http://www.savvysenior.org)), Miller still periodically announces for the U.S. Gymnastics Federation (he announced the men’s and women’s gymnastics competitions in the Georgia Dome at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta) and The Family Circle Cup tennis tournament in Charleston, South Carolina, one of the biggest events on the women’s tour. For the past five years, he also has served as one of the hosts of the on-air fund-raising efforts of OETA, Oklahoma City’s public television station. His exposure in the national media has led to other potential opportunities to promote senior issues and products, including one with public television and one with a home shopping channel.

Miller admits he is enjoying his newfound fame, but his focus remains on providing practical information to senior citizens. And he never, ever forgets the inspiration for his new vocation. “My parents would have been very proud,” he says, adding with a smile, “and my dad would have been tickled pink that I was on ‘Today!’”

