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Mary Ellen Miller

(1935-2018)

Western Kentucky University has lost one of its most devoted teachers and most luminous presences. Professor Mary Ellen Miller died Saturday, June 9, 2018. She was widely admired by her colleagues and friends and almost universally revered by students through her fifty-plus years as a teacher at the university: a record tenure.

Miller was born January 21, 1935, in Grayson, Kentucky, the daughter of Richie Yates and Carrie Faye Ratliff Yates. She was preceded in death by her husband, Dr. Jim Wayne Miller, siblings Frances Yates Cook, Charles Yates, Herman Yates, Janet Yates Reitter, and nephews Philip Cook and Ron Cook. She is survived by her daughter Ruth Miller (Ergin Guney) of San Francisco, and sons James Miller (Wilma Downs) of Bowling Green, and Frederic Miller (Lynne Miller) of Louisville, and their children Marietta and James Turner Miller, and niece Carrie Reitter.

She met her husband-to-be, the renowned poet Jim Wayne Miller, when they were both students at Berea. In 1960, she earned her M.A. in English at the University of Kentucky. Their two sons were born in Nashville, where their father was a graduate student studying German at Vanderbilt. Their daughter, Ruth, was born after they moved to Bowling Green where both parents had taken teaching positions at WKU in 1963, she in English, he as a German teacher in Foreign Languages.

When Professor Miller began teaching at Western, Creative Writing was a one-hour elective course that counted toward nothing. Over the years she played a pivotal role in helping it evolve into a minor, then a major, then a graduate emphasis within the English Department offerings. In 2015, she became a

founding member of WKU's MFA in Creative Writing Faculty. She supported incoming new programs during the seventies and eighties, like Women's Studies, and also established the Winter Workshop, which brought in established writers from the nation at large to work with writers from within the region. She wrote and produced the award-winning "Poetry: A Beginner's Guide," a video that helped make poetry accessible. Prof. Miller was also a co-founder of the Robert Penn Warren Center at WKU, which celebrates the work of the Kentucky native who became the nation's first Poet Laureate. In addition, Miller served as Faculty Regent for two terms, once in the 1980s, once in the 1990s. In 1997 she created the Celebration of Writing in memory of her husband, who died the year before. This annual event brings well-known writers to the campus to present new work to the community and counsel with Western's creative writing students. WKU Provost Dr. David Lee remarked, "the list of Mary Ellen's efforts on behalf of poetry is seemingly endless."

In addition to her record-breaking decades of teaching and service to the university, Mary Ellen Miller continued right up to the end to write and publish her own poems. "Poetry is, for me, absolutely central to my happiness," she said. She saw it as "life-saving." Her volume, *The Poet's Wife Speaks* (2011), won the Old Seventy Cress Press Prize. In her introduction Sallie Bingham commented, "biting into these crisp, delicious poems is like biting into a fresh hard apple. The sweetness is intensified by the sharpness."

In May, 2017, former WKU President Gary Ransdell called Mary Ellen Miller "a treasure" and designated her as University Poet Laureate. It was a fitting honor, capping an illustrious career.

Frank Steele