



Robert Miller

South Dakota Supreme Court justice

Pierre, family chief for this justice

Robert Miller came to Pierre for a legal career first in 1963.

Call what's happened since then — a 45-year marriage, five children, four grandchildren and an esteemed legal career — a product of life in Pierre.

"Pierre is home," the 70-year old Miller said. "We are very happy in Pierre. We love the community."

Still active with the state supreme court since leaving it in 2001 after 11 years as chief justice and four more as justice, Miller said his career and family life are tied to the city.

"Life is good," he said. "I've been blessed."

In 1963, Miller worked as assistant attorney general in the same building as his wife, Shirlee Schlim. He went on to practice law in Phillip as the Haakon County State's Attorney and Phillip city attorney before appointment to the sixth circuit court in 1971.

In 1986, Miller went to the state supreme court. Since then he has served on numerous legal boards including as chairman of the State Justice Institute, a current post which required presidential appointment.

The work from the highest bench in the state

Story by Jeff Bunn

Photo by Cindy Bahe

Photo: Retired South Dakota Supreme Court justice Robert Miller stands outside the South Dakota state Capitol building.

HOMETOWN HEROES

likely has impacted thousands of lives but Miller, who was raised in Sioux Falls, said law did not send him the clearest calling.

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~ Robert Miller

"I really wasn't particularly interested in it," he said. "I mainly went to law school because my dad really wanted me to go that way. After I started in law school, I really enjoyed it and had no regrets. When I first started college, I just wanted to go into business."

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Miller said he responded to law because of how important it is to people involved in cases, something he's kept in mind at all court levels.

"I liked the idea of helping people and protecting rights," he said. "I always felt every case was the most important one to every litigant who was before me."

Miller noted some cases that went before him on the supreme court weighed more heavily on his mind than others.

"I wrote three death penalty cases," he said. "Those are difficult for the obvious reasons. Those were the ones a person really had to work hard. A person has to determine what the law is and then apply it to the facts as they exist. You can't change the facts. You can't change the law. You deal with the cards that are passed out to you."

A golfer, woodworker and traveler, Miller said he's proud of the legal system in place in South Dakota and understands criticism the system as a whole takes.

"Sometimes it deserves it. I'm proud to say I think we have the most modern, most efficient court system in the country," said Miller, who credits that to a unified justice system with the supreme court at the top.

"Our governors have all taken their jobs real seriously and have appointed very qualified, able people to the bench without regard for politics. Partisan politics doesn't enter into the judiciary of South Dakota and I'm real proud of that."

Miller belongs to organizations with other former and current supreme court chief justices and works with other state court systems through the State Justice Institute, a non-profit corporation that provides grants and other resources to states for their systems.

"We work with Congress to get our budget, and then we take that money and dole it out to states based upon the quality of their applications," he said. "That's been a real good experience."

The decision to retire from the supreme court was meant to give Miller and his wife time to do activities they were still capable of doing, such as traveling.

"I was in good health," he said. "My wife's in good health. We just thought that was the time."

As much as Miller has accomplished in the courtroom, he said it was made possible by those closest to him.

"I feel I've had a good career," he said. "I've been very lucky, and I've had a lot of good support from my family who's always been there when I needed them. I've had tremendous support from the judges and justices around the state and all the admin-

istrative staff. No one person can do it. I was lucky to have a lot of wonderful people working with me."

Chad Cooper, CEO of St. Mary's Healthcare Center, said Miller brings valuable insight as chairman of the governing board, which he has been on since 2002.

"Judge Miller is a pleasure to work with," Cooper said. "Not only has he provided consistent leadership and support on a variety of issues and topics, but he does an excellent job engaging other board members and key stakeholders in relevant discussions and decisions.

"I have learned much from him."