

Road trip leads to 15-year degree

BY MICHELLE MARTIN
Staff Reporter

Fifteen years after senior Jennifer Miller began school at the University, she finally is about to graduate.

Miller said she started her education at the University in 1992 and was the first person in her family to attend college. Although she came in with a full scholarship, she said coming to school was a big adjustment.

"I'd never been away from home before," Miller said. "... I just wasn't very adventurous, and I was really shy, so shy that people would have to buy my stuff at the store for me. I didn't want to go to the cashier."

In addition to the typical roommate struggles of a freshman, Miller said struggling with a calculus class hindered her academic self-confidence.

"I had an instructor who didn't really teach," she said. "... And I did not do well in calculus. Partly because of that and because of my loss of self-confidence, having never gotten a D in anything before — [it] was a huge adjustment."

Miller said everything else went downhill after this initial setback.

"It was really a blow to my self-confidence, and I really didn't do as well the next semester," she said.

Miller said that soon after that she lost her scholarship and decided to go home and work for a semester, hoping that school would get better after her time off.

"I came back after the semester off and didn't do well then, either," she said. "I was dealing with a lot of issues, like I had come out [with being homosexual] to my mom. And I was having episodes where I'd be really, really happy, and I could not sleep at all for days when I just didn't want to leave my room or my bed."

Miller said that for about a year and a half she remained enrolled at Truman but rarely attended class. Soon, Miller discovered she had been struggling with bipolar disorder, she said.

"I was on the verge of being kicked

out, but I left on academic probation so I could get back in," she said.

Miller said she fared a lot better without school, mostly because she had less stress. For eight or nine years, she worked to pay off her student loans at home, she said. During this period, she said she also worked to completely come out to her family.

"I felt like I let [my mom] down," she said. "I felt like she was crying because she was disappointed. And she was crying because she felt like she disappointed me because I had been gay for so long, and I hadn't been able to tell her."

Miller said that once she and her mom began talking about her sexuality, they became even closer.

"She was great," she said. "She kind of convinced me that it was all right that I was however I was."

Miller said that in the '90s, being gay was slightly less socially acceptable than it is now. She said this concept was very confusing for her.

"When I was growing up, there were no gay people on television," she said. "... It was something you got beat up for or was wrong. I just thought I was the only gay person in Independence growing up."

Miller said her family was more than accepting of who she was but that she had more obstacles to overcome.

"I got a job," she said. "I excelled at that — everything was fine. But my brother and my sister have both graduated, and I'm the oldest, and I thought, 'I could do better.'"

Miller said she decided to take a trip before she came back to school. For a year, she followed the 2002 tour of the Indigo Girls, a lesbian band.

"Coming from Independence and coming here in the '90s, I kind of felt like if I weren't the only gay woman or lesbian, I'm at least the only normal one," she said.

The cross-country tour turned out to be a fantastic, eye-opening experience, she said.

"I did the first two or three shows, and I loved it," Miller said. "I loved be-

All eyes on Jennifer Miller

“Everybody’s path is different. Mine’s just been long and windy.”



Blake Peterson/Index

Senior Jennifer Miller with her truck that she used as a home during the year she spent following the Indigo Girls on a cross-country tour. The confidence she gained ultimately led her back to Truman to complete her degree.

ing on the road. I slept in the back of my truck with a camp mat and a baseball bat, and it was fabulous."

Miller said she then bought tickets for the rest of the tour. However, she said her favorite part wasn't the music but getting to know the other diverse audience members.

"You have to talk to people unless you want to be completely alone the whole time," she said. "So I started introducing myself in the line."

Miller said this didn't only help her overcome her shyness, but it also gave her the means to accept her sexuality.

"I think part of my quietness was that I felt uncomfortable, like someone was going to find me out, and it was going to be a problem," she said. "Around all these women and these men and these families, however, you were fine."

Miller said that because of the limitless diversity of the people she met, she saw

that it was all right to break social norms.

"It was like, 'Oh my gosh, I didn't know there is no normal,'" she said. "... I realized I could be anybody I wanted to be and that at least on the road, it was OK because I was never going to see these people again, or if I did, they were my friends."

After following the tour on and off for about a year, Miller said she lived in Los Angeles for a few months before moving home to Independence again, where she worked until she decided to go back to the University.

"I came back to Truman specifically because this was the place that beat me before," she said. "I failed, and so I had to come back to the site of that failure and not fail so I can get over it."

Looking back on her recent years at the University, Miller said she thinks she has accomplished a lot. In

addition to improving her grades from before, Miller said she has become involved in women's and gender studies and recently published the women's submission magazine, Jane Says, with her rent money.

"I loved really talking to the women about their work and the place it came from and what inspired them to write it," she said. "I feel like, yeah, I put up my rent money for Jane Says, but I got so much out of it."

Miller said she currently is deciding whether to go to graduate school or work for a publishing company next year. She also said that although she has certainly learned to be accepting of herself, she is not finished with her journey.

"I think everybody has to figure it out for themselves, unfortunately," she said. "Everybody's path is different. Mine's just been long and windy."

"I loved being on the road. I slept in the back of my truck with a camp mat and a baseball bat, and it was fantastic."

Jennifer Miller
Senior



Krista Goodman/Index
Trinda Sidwell fills her gas tank at the Sinclair station on Normal Street.

Gas prices hurt, help jobs

BY CHRIS BONING
Staff Reporter

Tim Maclean, assistant manager at Enterprise Rent-a-Car, said high gas prices have benefited business to some extent.

The price of gas has risen to more than \$3.25 a gallon, and from the local car rental company to the Amtrak station in La Plata, the cost of fuel has meant either a boon or a bust for businesses.

"People aren't wanting to buy as large as vehicles, and whenever they do need something they can always come to us in that sense, but now whenever they want to go on a trip or something, they are looking for more fuel-efficient [vehicles]," he said.

Maclean said his niche in Kirksville is renting cars to customers who are without a vehicle because their cars are being repaired.

"While their car's in the shop, I'm a good substitute for their car, so I'm going to be needed, unfortunately, no matter what," he said.

Fuel prices don't affect the cost of renting a car, although the company can charge customers if they don't return their rental car with a full tank of gas, Maclean added.

He said high fuel costs can be useful because they force drivers to be more conscious about fuel efficiency.

"It's a crunch on us all, but it's teach-

ing the consumer to buy cars that are a little more fuel-efficient," Maclean said. "Then when they need a car, like a minivan or a larger SUV, to go somewhere, they call me and I'll have that available for them."

Billy Bunch, owner of D&D Cab Co., said his business has taken a hit because of high gas prices.

"When I started the taxi business, [gas] was \$1 a gallon," he said. "Now, it's 3 1/2 a gallon. It takes a lot of calls to run for 3 1/2 a gallon. There ain't much money left to operate on."

Bunch said he plans on raising his fares from \$5 a ride to \$6 a ride May 1 in order to compensate for the cost of fuel.

He added that the city used to distribute grant money to his company, but now it goes to other transportation services such as Kirk Tran. Bunch also said the number of passengers he gives rides to recently decreased and that he is unsure of what will happen to his business if gas prices continue to rise.

J.B. Lorey, manager at Ice House No. 1, said business has remained stable since prices went up.

"It's about the same drill," he said. "Everyone is cussing and damning the prices, but everyone knows they got to have it. It's just one of them do-or-die situations."

He said customers' most common concern is whether the prices will continue going up even more.

Lorey said his usual response is to tell people he can't do anything about the prices because he's just a store manager.

"You're congenial with them, and they know — they like to rash you and tease you, but they know I don't have any control over it," he said. "... I don't own the company."

Billy Payton, station master for the La Plata Amtrak station, said there has been a noticeable increase in passengers since fuel prices went up. He added that previously, only about eight people used to ride the train in the morning, but that number is now up to 15 to 30.

He said many people have told him they would just rather leave their cars behind while traveling.

"I've heard that about Chicago quite a bit," he said.

Sophomore Laura Hill said the current fuel prices don't have a direct effect on her because she currently does not have a car of her own.

She added, however, that the prices have had an impact on her family's summer travel plans because her family usually drives to its vacation destinations. This year her family will stay in Missouri to reduce the cost of driving, Hill said.

"We'll probably just end up going to the Lake of the Ozarks or someplace like that," she said.

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