

E. Ethelbert Miller

By Raven Padgett

E. Ethelbert Miller (B.A. '72) is a man in perpetual motion. And conversations with him, which sometimes feel like a stream of consciousness, often reflect his movements through time. At one point, you find yourself transported back to 1968, when the South Bronx native first arrives on Howard's campus to "find a wife." Next, you're walking in step with him as he protests to urge the administration to establish the University's first Department of Afro-American Studies. Then you're in a New York apartment chatting with him, Alice Walker and the late June Jordan, or you're at a poetry reading at Busboys and Poets on U Street. As Miller fills you up with his reflections on history, your senses are piqued with possibility and an overwhelming desire to take action.

"We have to understand that we are all making history," he says.

Miller has been writing his own brand of history throughout the years. The director of Howard's African-American Resource Center since 1974, Miller is a renowned poet, scholar, archivist and literary activist. His candid reflections on life, love and literature are tempered with a desire to build a global network of people who shun the "bystander" tag. In an age in which technology often trumps the personal touch, Miller has made lasting connections with a cadre of writers, activists and teachers, many of whom he has mentored along their creative paths.

"One of the most important things he's taught me is to 'think global,'" says Grace Aneiza Ali, founder and editorial director for *of note* magazine. "He's never been too fond of boundaries or borders. He has always understood on a very profound level that the core of activism is about bringing people together. I think of him as the nucleus of that kind of bringing together."

Miller relishes his role of mentor, because he appreciates those who did the same for him. "I would not be a writer without people like Haki Madhubuti and [former Howard professors] Stephen Henderson, Jennifer Jordan and Sterling A. Brown," he says.

What he's learned from all of them, he says, is to never stop moving, writing and creating. In the past three decades, he has published 11 books and edited several poetry anthologies. He is the co-editor of *Poet Lore*, the oldest continuously published poetry magazine in the U.S., and two of his poems are etched on public sculptures at the Dupont Circle and Georgia Ave.—Petworth Metro stations. One of his recent projects—the E-Channel—includes daily blog posts based on interviews he conducts with author Charles Johnson. Miller's work has also been included in countless anthologies, including the poem "Intersections: Crossing the District Line," which was published this summer in the *Literary Capital: A Washington Reader*.

"Ethelbert is able to capture character in an instant; he writes with a keen ear for language, and he's witty and funny, sophisti-



One of Miller's poems is etched on a bronze sculpture by Lisa Scheer at the Georgia Ave.—Petworth Metro station.

cated and smart," says Christopher Sten, professor of English at George Washington University and editor of the book. "I couldn't have done a book like [this] and not include a vivid example of [his] writing. He's one of the essentials."

Miller continues to influence history by challenging injustice around the world. He chairs the board of the Institute for Policy Studies—a progressive think tank that encourages activism at the local, national and global levels—and is the founder and former chair of the Humanities Council of Washington, D.C.

But, he says, "One thing I've learned over the years is to never confuse influence and power, but always remember that during times of crisis, influence becomes power."

He is also helping to foster a new generation of students who take up the mantle of activism. "We produce some really good young people who love this institution," Miller says. "We have to challenge them, and challenge our graduates to make an even greater commitment to get involved in their *alma mater*."

Fast-forward from those early days and, indeed, Miller did find a wife at Howard. Or, rather, she found him when she stopped by his office to ask him to critique one of her poems. He and Denise King-Miller (M.Div. '95) have been married now for more than 30 years and have two children, Jasmine-Simone and Nyere-Gibran. ■IU

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