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WKU mourns death of poet laureate, longest-serving professor

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Mary Ellen Miller

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After more than 50 years teaching at Western Kentucky University, Mary Ellen Miller has left behind a lifetime of memories with the colleagues she worked with and the young writers she inspired.

Miller, the university's poet laureate and longest-serving faculty member, passed away Saturday. She was 83 years old.

"She loved very deeply and she was deeply loved," said Robert Hale, the head of WKU's English Department.

For Hale, Miller will go down as WKU's greatest champion. He remembers her sense of humor, the way she listened to her students and as a poet who was deeply human.

"They'll never be another one like her," he said.

WKU President Timothy Caboni said in a tweet Sunday that he was saddened by Miller's death.

"(I'm) saddened to learn that Professor Mary Ellen Miller passed away last night. I am thankful for having had the opportunity to get to know her as our University Poet Laureate. Her student focus and creative talents will be missed – a tremendous loss for the WKU community," he said.

Miller began her teaching career at Western Kentucky University in the fall of 1963. She moved to Bowling Green with her husband, Jim Wayne Miller, who taught German at WKU before his death in 1996.

Like his wife, Jim Wayne Miller became an eminent Kentucky poet and writer. He was named a state poet laureate in 1986, according to the Kentucky Arts Council.

Following her husband's death, Miller created an annual Celebration of Writing in his name.

Through the event, renowned Kentucky writers such as Silas House, Sallie Bingham and others have offered lectures and creative writing workshops for WKU students.

After being named WKU's poet laureate last year by then-president Gary Ransdell, Miller told the Daily News it was "one of the most thrilling moments of my life."

"I was totally, totally surprised," she said at the time.

Few are likely more worthy of that honor than Miller. Among her accomplishments are co-founding the Center for Robert Penn Warren Studies at WKU. Founded in 1987, the center commemorates the legacy of the Kentucky native and the first poet laureate of the United States.

Miller is also known for her work to democratize poetry. She developed the university's Winter Workshop, which brings celebrated writers to work with regional poets, according to a WKU news release announcing her designation as WKU poet laureate. She

also wrote the film “Poetry: A Beginner’s Guide.”

One of Provost David Lee’s fondest memories of Miller is a dinner for students with former U.S. poet laureate Billy Collins. He remembers the conversation between them as witty and lively.



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“It’s the kind of thing that makes an undergraduate experience special,” Lee said.

Frank Steele, a retired English professor and longtime friend to Miller, remembers her as a “pioneering presence.”

“She was always on the cutting edge whatever was developing,” he said.

Without her, Steele said, WKU’s creative writing program would not be what it is today.

When asked about her love of poetry last year, Miller told the Daily News she sees it as “lifesaving.”

“I think it’s lifesaving,” she said at the time. “I think it’s the richest intellectual experience a person can have. ... I do think poetry is, for me, absolutely central to my happiness.”

Funeral arrangements were still being prepared Monday afternoon, according to Hale.

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Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.