

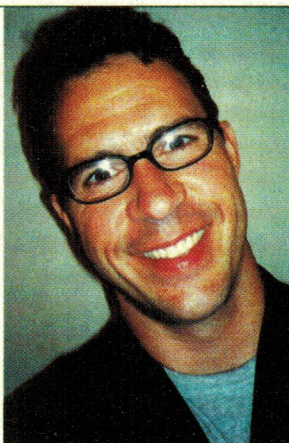
RESOURCES

# One Savvy Guy

Jim Miller is an accidental columnist—a young man who has become an expert on senior issues

By HEATHER WON TESORIERO

AT 39, JIM MILLER is at least 26 years away from getting his senior discount at the movies. And yet he can explain—and enjoys explaining—the minutiae of Social Security survivor benefits and how a senior can take advantage of a national free-eye-exam program. Every day, working as a one-man operation from his home office in Norman, Okla., Miller responds to queries from seniors and their friends and relatives on issues affecting the elderly. Crafting this



discovered there was a real problem with the quality of information available to seniors. “A lot of what’s out there is heavy and complicated, especially when you get into wills and trusts and Medicare,” he says. “My column is not an advice column; it’s an information column. I channel information that’s out there to specifically answer people’s questions.”

Miller suspected that more people could use a simple, direct resource—particularly for answers to such questions as, How does Medicare work?—but he didn’t know how to take the “Savvy Senior” national. Self-syndication is a grueling process, involving a lot of knocking on doors and handshaking. But because nobody outside of Norman knew who he was, Miller had no choice. He doggedly approached publications one at a time, region by region. He eventually sent out 6,200 pitch packets, following up with as many as 3,000 phone calls a month.

Newspapers, mostly town and regional ones, were attracted by the straightforward Q&A format, and they liked the price too. At \$3 to \$5 a week, even small local papers like the Walnut (Ill.) *Leader* (circ. 5,000) could afford it. An editor who recently changed jobs took “Savvy Senior” with

him. “One of the first things I did was to call Jim and say, ‘Hey, I want to get this in our paper too,’” says Wayne Frazer, general manager of the *Spencer County Journal Democrat* in Rockport, Ind. “People feel like they’re getting their information from a friend, as opposed to getting it from a faceless entity.”

When a reader recently wrote to lament her husband’s hearing loss, Miller’s reply began, “WHAT DID YOU SAY???”

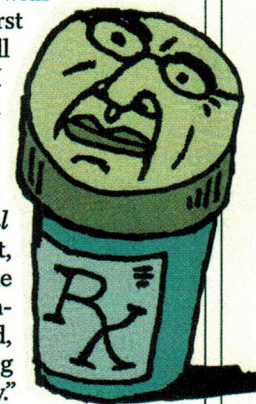
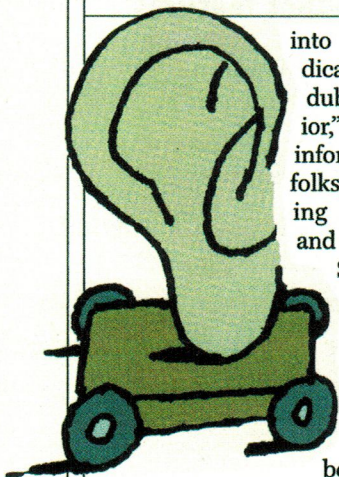
Two-thirds of Miller’s questions come in via e-mail, and the rest arrive the old-fashioned way. He responds to them all, selecting a question each week to feature in his column. “It’s nice to be able to let people know that I’m hearing what they’re saying,” says Miller. “I’m just a regular guy,” he hastens to add. “I’m not a Samaritan.” But there’s no question that this accidental expert is doing good. Not only does his column give seniors help when they need it most, but it has also given Miller an entrée into a world he lost when his parents passed away. ■

into a nationally syndicated column, aptly dubbed “Savvy Senior,” Miller provides information in a fun, folksy manner, sparing readers legalese and ho-hum how-tos. Since its official debut a year ago, the column has appeared in more than 400 newspapers. (“Dear Abby,” which has been around almost 50 years, appears in more than 1,400.) “I thought I had a really good idea, but I didn’t know how it would go over,” says Miller. “I was surprised by its success at first, but then after two months I knew I had something.”

So how does an MTV-generation guy get into the business of dishing out counsel to seniors? Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Miller holds a master’s degree in education from Kansas’ Wichita State, although he never made it past teacher training. He says, half-jokingly, “I found out I hate kids.” He moved to Norman, home of the University of Oklahoma, in 1988 to work in the athletic

department and became a stadium announcer. Then in 1999 things took a jarring turn. Miller’s mother was dying of breast cancer when his father came home from visiting her and suffered a massive heart attack. “He was probably lying on the floor for five minutes before I found him,” recalls Miller. Suddenly, at 37, he found himself parentless. “I was real close to them,” he says. “I was pretty shattered.”

To ease himself out of his grief, Miller began working at a retirement community and writing a question-and-answer column for seniors for the *Norman Transcript*, the town’s newspaper. “I started doing it just for fun, as a little p.r. plug for the retirement community,” says Miller. But when he began doing research, Miller



ILLUSTRATIONS FOR TIME BY SCOTT MENCHIN