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Paul Miller: A Profile in Courage

Joseph M. Sellers*

I met Paul in 1993 when he was working in the White House on personnel matters for President Clinton. When we first met, this impeccably dressed, bow-tied man with a beaming smile extended his hand and, with a gleam in his eye, introduced himself: “Hi, I’m Paul Miller, the dwarf from L.A.” That began a wonderful friendship, both personal and professional, as we shared a common interest in civil rights, genetics, politics, and people, among other things.

Paul had many wonderful qualities. It surprised me to learn that one of them was understatement. While Paul and I worked together on an Obama transition team, he stayed with us once in a while. One day, he mentioned he had been offered a post in the Office of Presidential Personnel and asked if he could stay with us “for a few days.” He returned to Seattle nine months later, after living with us daily for most of that period. During that time, he became a fixture in our lives, a regular at our dinner table and a wise and supremely entertaining presence in our daily lives.

Just before Paul came to stay with us, he learned the cancer in his left arm had returned. Every couple weeks, Paul returned to Seattle to see Jenni, Naomi, and Delia (his wife and two daughters) and to receive chemotherapy. These treatments lasted months. Other than shaving his head to anticipate the loss of hair, Paul acted like nothing had happened. He worked twelve to fourteen hour days, had his same wry humor, and virtually never spoke about his medical needs, other than the need for emergency care if his body temperature spiked. Paul had worried that our children might be scared to know of his cancer. Instead, here was a man who had a life-threatening disease and endured punishing medical treatments but who nonetheless had a terrific sense of humor, who worked longer hours than did we who were healthy, who was actively engaged in discussions about our kids’ homework, and who performed chores and did his own laundry.

Then Paul lost his left arm to cancer. He compressed his rehabilitation into a few weeks and returned to Washington three weeks later, ready for work at the same hectic pace. Other than being driven to work rather than driving himself, and having his shoes and bow-tie tied, nothing

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seemed to change in his daily routine. My morning challenge became tying his bow-tie to his satisfaction. Often, two or three attempts were needed and I knew by his facial expression when he thought I needed to try again. Rather than a cancer victim, we saw a profile in courage.

Paul's stay with us for a few days lasted nine months and what began as a good and longstanding friendship became a life-changing privilege for my family and me. While Paul began his sojourn with us as a house guest, he became a new and treasured member of our family.