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Making stats make money

Local firm draws from founder's curiosity, work in government

By Karen Mitchell, For the Camera

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Did you know that the highest gust ever measured for a local Chinook wind was 141 mph, as clocked by a reading taken from the red roof of the former Dairy Queen near Folsom Street and Arapahoe Avenue in Boulder?

Tom Miller can quote that obscure tidbit.

Then again, he's also a guy who remembers his locker combination from middle school.

Miller, 59, has turned curiosity, and a love of problem-solving, into a successful business with clients around the country and beyond. Miller is president of Boulder's National Research Center, the privately owned, social-science research firm he founded in 1994. The center is a mix of academic and real-world research methods, seeking out what citizens think about local government and a host of other matters.

"What drives me is curiosity about many different things," Miller says. "I love being able to investigate a wide variety of issues, policies and interventions. What attracts me is thinking about how to solve people's organizational problems."

NRC employs 19 people inside its 4,000-square-foot office at 30th Street and Valmont Road. Among its Boulder County not-for-profit clients: the Boulder Valley Women's Health Center and the I Have a Dream Foundation.

About 95 percent of NRC's work, though, is outside of Boulder, for clients such as Dallas, Honolulu, Wichita and San Francisco, and for smaller cities, including Homer, Alaska, Taos, N.M., and Skokie, Ill.

Internationally, NRC conducted a survey for two Indian cities south of Chennai. Miller also traveled to Bangkok to conduct training in public involvement and transparency in local government. In 2004, the mayor of Changmai, Thailand, and other Thai officials came to Boulder to train at NRC and to tour the Front Range with special attention paid to open space and growth issues.

NRC also engages in a variety of evaluations for clients, studying subjects ranging from the effectiveness of programs funded for palliative care, to after-school youth programs for youths, to obesity prevention, to child welfare mediation and others.

That the NRC is in Boulder is serendipitous. Miller, who grew up on Chicago's Southside, graduated with a psychology degree from the University of Wisconsin, then earned a master's degree in philosophical foundations of education at the school. In 1971, he and his future wife, Boulder psychotherapist Barbara Miller, boarded an old Volkswagen van and headed west.

"We wanted to leave Chicago, and Boulder was on the way toward a few places on the West Coast that we were considering," Miller says. "We fell in love with Boulder and found an apartment and got jobs. Mine was teaching at The Evans Learning Center/Evelyn Wood Reading Dynamics."

Miller took a research methods class at the University of Colorado and found his way into an educational research program, where he studied with Professor Gene Glass, who became his mentor. Miller received a doctorate in research and evaluation methods from the Laboratory of Educational Research.

"CU was my inspiration to stay here," he says. "As a grad student, I worked for the state running a program under Gov. Lamm that focused on crime-victim restitution."

From 1979 until 1993, Miller worked in a variety of departments for the city of Boulder, including the research and evaluation



Paul Aiken

Tom Miller, president of the Boulder-based National Research Center, started the business in 1994 after years of work studying and researching various issues for the city of Boulder.

office, the planning department and the city manager's office, where he conducted surveys and managed data.

A one-year hiatus — six months of it spent in Spain with his family — led to the decision to start NRC.

"I left the city liking it and respecting my co-workers," Miller says. "I felt there were other things I wanted to do besides working for the city. It was exciting to start my own business, and there seemed to be so much opportunity in the U.S. compared to what I had seen abroad."

There are lots of market research firms, but the NRC places more emphasis on data quality, Miller says.

"A lot of people in this industry studied business, which is fine, but they don't have my government experience. Some of the reason for our growth is that we emphasize innovation."

Miller, a lecturer in architecture and planning at CU, has been published in numerous journals and books and co-wrote the book, "Citizen Surveys: How to do them, how to use them, what they mean," with NRC Vice President Michelle Kobayashi. The book was published by the International City and County Management Association, or ICMA, in Washington, D.C.

"We've teamed up with ICMA in a product we developed, The National Citizens Survey, which we administer for them in various cities," Miller says. "We also do more customized surveys, helping cities, counties and area agencies learn more about what older adults need, for example. We just finished assessments for the state of Colorado and for (the Denver Regional Council of Governments)."

Sue Bozinovski, director of aging at DRCOG, says Miller has developed and grown an organization that reflects both creativity and relevance.

"The NRC has been selected competitively for a number of our research projects, including a statewide project on the strengths and needs of older adults," she says. "It began as a metro-area, multi-agency project and expanded. Tom was very flexible and accommodating, and the funding doubled, in part because he was willing to work, with grace, with the different agencies given minimal resources. He's willing to bend."

Another reason for the NRC's success, Bozinovski says, is Miller's aptitude for placing his staff in projects appropriate to their specialized knowledge, such as public health statistics or psychology.

"I've been impressed with the NRC people in charge of projects," she says. "And Tom stays in touch with the field, even when there are no active projects. He has found his niche doing policy research that gets implemented, rather than staying on the shelf."

Miller expects the NRC to grow to about 45 staffers by 2011, offering more services to additional levels of government and to the private sector.

The difference between doing research for the private sector and doing government research, he says, is that businesses usually can act on research findings faster than public-sector clients. In government, there are a lot more speed bumps in driving the research by staff, boards and elected officials.

"In general, I think people in local government get an undeserved bad rap," Miller says. "The profligate spending in the private sector makes city spending pale. But there's great opportunity in local government and in my 14 years there, I learned a lot about government and what they need to do better."

The NRC will continue to be selective with clients, working with those in the private sector who will do some good in society, perhaps those with environmental products or products for people with disabilities, he says.

"I love the work I do. I get a chance to come in and think about a new problem to solve and work with people I really like to work with, including my colleagues," Miller says. "When I started the company, the name, NRC, was just a hope. Now it's reality."

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