



Beyond Representation: With New Venture, Annette Miller Turns Diversity Into Productivity

By *David Dahmer* - Sep 14, 2017

Diversity.

Equity.

Inclusion.

In the post-Race to Equity Report era, these are terms that get constantly batted around in Madison like a beach ball at a rock concert. But what do these words really mean?

“This is a technical skill, understanding diversity and culture and how to make it work from a business perspective and also how to make it work from a community perspective, so you need to have smart, strategic people helping you with that,” says Annette Miller. “This isn’t about having representation on your team; this is about how you make your team produce. This is about how you have your customers really understand that you get it and that you are intentional and authentic in how you want to do that.

“That’s what a difference maker does. It’s beyond representation. It’s about the real work, the deep work, in how you include people’s thinking and you include people’s preferences in the services and the policies that you design,” she adds. “When an organization, business, or group is saying, ‘I want to have effective, impactful relationships with a diverse community’ and ‘I want to be diverse’ ... there’s *saying* it and then there’s *doing* it,” Miller adds. “I take the concept and I make it happen. And I make it happen in a real way that can be sustainable. That’s my ultimate goal.”

For almost three decades, Miller has been heavily involved in issues of equity, inclusion, and social justice in Madison. She’s also been a connector, a networker, a problem-solver, and a bridge between community, business, government, and non-profits. Reflecting on her career recently she thought to herself: *I think I can make a career out of this. I have the talents, experience, expertise, and vision to forge my own unique and powerful company. The time is right.*

So this past summer, Miller announced that she was launching a new business – [EQT by Design](#) – strategic advising and planning to help organizations and companies develop and design their engagement and inclusion activities to meet their diversity needs.

It was, by no means, an easy decision to venture out on her own.

“It was quite scary because I am an entrepreneur but I can also be conservative and pragmatic,” Miller tells Madison365. “I think when I said out loud that I want to own my own business and be out on my own, that was a really scary thought because I had been with Madison Gas & Electric for 12 years and it has been an amazing experience. But I felt like I had another good run in me and I felt like if I was going to do it, now is probably the time.

“It was clear to me what my strengths would be and that this would be something that was perfect for me ... but, man, when I actually decided it, my hands started to shake,” she adds. “But at the same time, I was so excited. And, ever since then, it’s been a roller coaster ride. It’s scary and exhilarating all at the same time.”

“I’M JUST HERE TO TAKE WHATEVER YOU’RE TRYING TO DO AROUND EQUITY AND INCLUSION AND WHAT YOU’RE TRYING TO DO INTENTIONALLY AND MAKE IT HAPPEN. TO GO FROM THE IDEA TO THE ACTION. FROM THE PLANNING TO THE IMPLEMENTATION. I THINK THAT WHEN COMPANIES REALLY START TO DO THAT WORK BETTER, NOT ONLY WILL THEIR BUSINESSES BE BETTER IN TERMS OF THEIR PLACE IN THE MARKET, BUT ALSO IN TERMS OF EMPLOYEE RETENTION – NO MATTER WHO THEY ARE HIRING – WILL BE BETTER, TOO.”

EQT by Design works with organizations that want to be more diverse and inclusive and helps them figure out how to do it. This means not only developing partnerships with other organizations but understanding how to connect, interact and relate with different communities.

“I’m very excited about the business. I’m glad I did it. I’m glad I stepped out. Ever since I was really young, I wanted to have my own business and wanted to be a businesswoman,” Miller says.

“I’m just here to take whatever you’re trying to do around equity and inclusion and what you’re trying to do intentionally and make it happen. To go from the idea to the action. From the planning to the implementation,” Miller adds. “I think that when companies really start to do that work better, not only will their businesses be better in terms of their place in the market, but also in terms of employee retention – no matter who they are hiring – will be better, too.”

Miller launched EQT by Design because she wanted to help organizations build sustainable, diverse and inclusive perspectives and relationships to serve the needs of their diverse customers and community. The future, she says, must be different from the past. “I want our young people to be unapologetic for who they are as smart, talented, creative, and beautiful people who also happen to reflect a racial, ethnic, gender non-conforming, speak a language or three, have different abilities, and/or have belief systems different to my own, and yet unequivocally make this community and this region the vibrant place it is today and will be tomorrow,” Miller said in a statement announcing the launch of her new company.

The perfect storm

The idea for EQT for Design started a few years back when Miller was first going back to school to get her master’s degree in social innovation and sustainability leadership at Edgewood College. People from the program asked her what her dream was. “I thought about answering that with something simple or generic, but I went deep with the question,” Miller remembers. “At this point in my life, I felt like it was the perfect storm. I’m not even a stone’s throw from being 50 years old. I’m looking at the millennials out there and I’m looking at the boomers – most of my friends are boomers and I’m seeing them retire. I’m seeing millennials sort of redefine their space in terms of work and I found that to be interesting and exciting. I loved that flexibility and being able to do the work the way I wanted to.

"I really looked at my footprint in terms of the work that I've done in this community," she continues. "You know, we talk a lot about equity and inclusion, I need to not shy away from that. I asked myself if I had the track record to go there. I looked at my track record and I was like, "Yeah, you can go there!"

Miller will be finishing up that master's degree in December and is working on her Capstone Project. "One of the ideas that I have there is talking about making a space where people can have intellectual and personal conversations in a shared space where you can be unafraid to share your opinions and ideas and you can grow. All different kinds of people," Miller says. "That's what is really missing right now. I think we have those conversations separately. But we really need to seek to understand different perspectives. I'd really like to create a space here for people to do that. People from all different backgrounds and conversations coming together in a mutually shared space. I want to see that happen and I'm excited about what that would look like."

Annette Miller (second from right) has conversations about equity and inclusion with community members.

EQT by Design will offer consulting services to help design, grow and build an organization and its ideas to meet the needs a diverse customer and community base, Miller says. There will be engagement activities that draw community members into public activities for diverse, inclusive, and people-centered outcomes.

"It's important for me for equity and inclusion to be people-centered," Miller says. "Not 'I have the resources so I'm going to make the decision about what it's going to look like and how it's going to happen.'"

EQT by Design will work to extend capacity for organizations that need additional hands-on help for their inclusion and diversity activities. It will provide strategic advising to help organizations and companies understand how to develop and design their organizational ideas to ensure their inclusion and equity activities meet diverse customer and community needs.

"I think I'm going at this in a different way because I connect business and community and people and the issue of race and equity – all together. And I think I do it in an empowering way and a way that looks at it not just in black and white, but diversity in how it really is – which is that we are all unique and different," Miller says. "I relate to a lot of different racial, ethnic and linguistic groups being multiracial and multicultural and the places I've lived. Being a military brat. I feel like I can use my personal life and my professional life to take something that is very difficult and challenging – but also has the power to empower people – and really change the conversation and to change the direction we are going as a community and as a society."

The last Friday in September, Miller will be having an open house for EQT by Design at her offices at Synergy co-working space on Madison's west side. How did she come up with the name?

"It's 'equity' without the vowels. I had been playing around with a lot of names. I just started riffing like you do poetry," she says. "I just started thinking about how I want to center the work. I'm not going to shy away from what the work is: it's equity."

Right off the bat, Miller signed a contract agreement with Madison Gas & Electric and the City of Madison.

"Those were two great ones right from the start. From here, I want to make sure that anything I do, I do it thoughtfully and not rush into it," she says.

Miller has had a couple small get-togethers with business community members to give them a pitch and get feedback. "I got some really nice feedback from that and I realized that I created a really nice network of people who are interested in what I do," she says. "I got some really great advice right out the gate because I have really great friends

who are smarter than me, but basically they said, 'Start out simple and really understand the business you want to be in. Know where the walls are and know where the capacity is and could be. Once you understand that, then build from there.'

"I thought that was good advice because my vision is not small. My vision is big," she adds. "But in order to make that vision real, I'm really going to spend the next 18 months understanding what I am in the business of and then from there build and grow from there. I've been in Madison for almost 30 years now. This is my home. I'm going to start here and grow out. I can definitely see this as being regional and national work."

Making connections, building bridges

EQT by Design clients will be mainly governmental and businesses, but will also be individuals and groups.

"From a governmental and business perspective, we have these organizations that have good services and are strong organizations and businesses but if they've been in Madison for a long time, or if they are brand new, how do they connect? How do they create relationships? How do you know what your constituency is trying to relate to you and do they relate to what you are trying to do? And if they don't, how can we make that happen? And if they do, how can we make it better, stronger and more impactful?"

Making connections, building bridges. It's a lot of what Miller had done in her previous jobs for Madison Gas & Electric and for Mayor Dave Cieslewicz. As a mayoral aide in 2003, Miller expedited and advanced community and neighborhood issues and projects on behalf of the mayor. Since 2005, she has been at Madison Gas and Electric Company as the Emerging Markets and Community Development Director.

The experiences and networks from outside of work will be important for what she will be doing at EQT by Design, too. She's been the board president of the Urban League of Greater Madison. She is serving or has served on the board of directors of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County, SSM Healthcare of Wisconsin, Madison Foundation for Madison Public Schools, Sustain Dane, Madison College Foundation Board, and Wisconsin Women's Business Initiative Incorporated (WWBIC) South Central Advisory Board. She is also the founder of the Madison Network of Black Professionals.

"I've always brought my full self to the table. Some people draw lines between work and personal life. Really, for me, it's who I am. I'm very passionate about the community. I think it's because as someone who had to move around from community to community when I was young, that stuck with me," Miller says. "And what stuck with me was feeling like an outsider. So, for me, I always engage because I want to help people not feel that way. I want people to feel like they are included and that they can bring their full selves to the table. I love being part of organizations that are doing that.

"I'm an activist and I think I have some thoughtful ideas on how we create inclusion and how we connect people. What to do, what not to do, what to do better ... what spaces it can happen in. I think that because of my privilege and my opportunity to work with city as a mayoral aide, that really gave me a visibility and a presence that most people don't get and I really used that as an opportunity to help make more happen for everybody."

The conversation around equity and inclusion is changing from "where can we find our token black guy?" to "how can we empower people and bring diverse people to the table from the grassroots level"? That's a conversation Miller wants to have.

"That's the new conversation. When you empower people, you really empower yourself. Because the better people are doing, the better life will be for you, too. That makes better neighborhoods. That makes better schools. That makes a better economy," she says. "When people are feeling like their life is good and they belong and they are included, they are happy. They are not angry.

"People just want to be able to live a good life. If people are really at the table and they feel like they can take care of themselves and their families, they are going to participate in their neighborhoods and this will be better for everybody," she adds. "I just really, really want to be a part of a time and a space – which I feel is right now – to really make that disruption happen where people can be their full selves in this community and not apologize for their presence."

“IT’S IMPORTANT FOR ME FOR EQUITY AND INCLUSION TO BE PEOPLE-CENTERED. NOT ‘I HAVE THE RESOURCES SO I’M GOING TO MAKE THE DECISION ABOUT WHAT IT’S GOING TO LOOK LIKE AND HOW IT’S GOING TO HAPPEN.’”

Miller admits that she feels that sometimes in the past she was making people feel comfortable. “That’s done. I felt like in some ways I was apologizing for my birth ... and I had nothing to do with that,” she laughs. “What I can do is help people see different sides of the conversation. And we need to be having these conversations right now. That’s the only way we can get better.”

Bringing more people to the table and diversifying those important conversations has become increasingly imperative as the United States, Wisconsin, and Madison have become more and more diverse this century. In fact, demographers predict that the U.S. will be majority-minority for the first time by the mid-2040s.

“Even before 2040, we’re going to be a diverse society with no majority. That will actually happen sooner,” Miller says.

“This is not just about me. It’s about how do we do the work that is impactful and real and how can we empower the community to grow into its voice,” Miller adds. “And how do I help organizations and companies and governmental sectors really grow into it as well. My goal is to really be there to bring them together and making that real work happen. It’s about creating an economic reality for all groups and cultures and really talking about how that happens.”

Written by [David Dahmer](#)

A. David Dahmer is Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of Madison365.

