



By Jonathan Gramling

While the historic vision of the American civil rights movement has been as an advocacy organization demanding rights from outside of the system. However, the generations coming after the Baby Boom generation are redefining what the civil rights movement is — expanding the concept to include the rights of LGBT individuals, for example — and how those rights are attained.

Annette Miller, the 2016 James C. Wright Human Rights Award recipient, is one of those people leading the charge from within the system, trying to change the system from within to make it relevant to the needs of all people, whether they are inside or out.

One of Miller's driving forces is to make the world and its systems more inclusive.

"I feel like the work that I do, the focus, is on inclusion," Miller said as we sit near the State Capitol on a sunny Saturday morning. "The focus is on making people who have felt like they were not included, whether it was language, their status, their ethnicity, their race or their identity, my work is to help us feel included and part of society and have an equal space and an equal voice with all of the others who speak about their beloved community as well."

Miller is used to making systems inclusive. As a self-described military brat, Miller lived in places like Panama, German and the Old South before ending up in Minnesota where she graduated from high school. During each episode of her life, Miller would begin as an outsider at the school she was enrolled in and would end as an insider before being forced to begin the process all over again. It was good training for Miller's future work.

Miller moved to Madison to go to college and through school and WABPSE — the Wisconsin Association of Black Public Sector Employees — Miller met some pretty influential people in her life like Bob Cocroft, Chuck McDowell and the late LaMarr Billups.

"It was their premise to think about equity and equality for African Americans," Miller said. "That's where it started and I met so many people who were more seasoned than myself and had this passion and belief about equal rights and equal opportunity and wanting a voice and establishing a voice about what our needs and concerns were. And that's where it grew from. And then I was very fortunate to just have one-on-one mentoring with many, many men and women who invested in me. And that was a seed that just continued to blossom with time."

Miller's determination has also come from her heritage.

"My father is African American and my mother is German," Miller said. "She came as an immigrant and became a U.S. citizen. The way I grew up was I was raised by a parent who had European ideas about life. From my father, I received the Southern African American experience. He also served in the military. You couple all of that into this thing you call life having my own personal experiences. Being mixed, I did truly at the time that I was coming up feel like I was not Black enough for Black people and not white enough for white people. Even though that was painful growing up, I've used that as a positive in my adult life because I carry that with me and I try to be really empathetic to other people's life situations and use it for good."



*Top: Annette Miller  
Above: Annette Miller (l) receives the  
James C. Wright Human Rights Award from  
Mayor Paul Soglin on June 21st*

As a mayoral aide for Madison Mayor Dave Cieslewicz, Miller was the liaison to many of Madison's economically-challenged neighborhoods and met many actors with the African American and other communities of color. This experience helped her see the need for other African Americans to feel included and a part of the greater Madison area. Miller and others would create community where none had existed before.

"I did a lot of networking and connecting and working in the community and I was meeting all of these really interesting people from so many backgrounds," Miller recalled. "And I said to myself, 'I can't believe this creative and rich resource of human individuals who are so diverse in language and identity and perspective and type of work that they do that we don't know each other. And so, Henry and Dawn Crim and many others, we all got together and put this list together and said that these are some really interesting people. Let's start with them and see what happens. And then from there, we just continued to develop and build it. I'm quite proud to say that the organization still exists today. But that is an example of where there was a disconnect and wanted to create a connection and worked with other people in a collaborative way to make that happen. And then the people who are a part of it have seen the benefit of it too and are keeping it strong and are keeping it moving and growing it and seeing the value. As the saying goes, 'If one fails, we all fail' as a community. And I feel like the Madison Network of Black Professionals really worked to help us all succeed."

As Miller has advanced in her career, she could have taken the narrow view and used the opportunity that was given to her for her own familial and personal advantage. But that drive for inclusivity has allowed her to work from inside the system to get it to change and include more people.

"I've come to my own understanding about myself and I realized that I really do get systems and I do get structure and I do get people inside of systems," Miller said. "You need people on the outside who are pushing the systems, the structure and the people, but you also need people on the inside who understand those very same systems and can work on the inside doing the very same work, but in a different way. I have a thinking and a way of doing that makes it very effective. I learned that because I was able to work for state government for almost 12 years and then for city government and now I am in the private sector. And the place where I work now is not unlike where I've been in the past and I see an order of things and I see pathways and I see how I can make an impact, but working inside systems. And I take that knowledge and I build bridges with the community and the outside needs. Again, I take these two pieces that seem like they are not connected and I bring them together and I connect them. And what I really try to do is create a win-win impact so that the structures within feel good about what is happening and the community and the people on the outside feel good about it too."

And people feel good about the outcome — but feel uncomfortable oftentimes during the process — because Miller works to make it work for everyone, the people who were there before and the new entrants into the "system."

"One of the things that I do believe in strongly is equity and not just for one group of people," Miller emphasized. "It needs to be equitable for everyone. I know that there is a mismatch in terms of which groups and which neighborhoods and issues are inequitable. I understand that. And so, that is my first step. I look to try to create that balance, to bring that balance back in by focusing on those issues. But I just as much believe that we need to include everyone. Just because there have been groups that have had the privilege of having resources and decision making doesn't mean that they deserve less. Again, I feel that everyone should have it. And what I try to do is see how we can make it work and intertwine it together so that people feel like it is equitable. And the pain of that change will be there, but maybe less painful because there is an understanding of why and there is a good process management around the change to make it happen. It is something that is just innate within myself where I walk that line where I want it to be win-win. I want it to be equitable for everyone. And I believe in that fairness. It's just there. And I would be remiss if I didn't say that a lot of it has to do with God. He has given me an opportunity to do something important and powerful. And I think that is important for human existence. And I have it within me."

Miller is also cognizant that she is not in this alone, that her efforts are dependent upon the support and collaboration of other actors both within and outside the system. Miller is very much a "we" kind of person.

"I really try to build relationships and networks that help me reach into those spaces and places that I myself can't personally get to," Miller said. "But with good connections and intentional thinking about where are the gaps, I can create relationships that enable me to bring that out. That's what is so special about receiving the Reverend Wright Award. In order to do this work, it really is about being connected with other people. You really cannot do this work alone and I have never done this work alone. To me, receiving this award means that I've done the work of really connecting with other people and trying to bring their voices, perspectives and lived experience to the forefront and really try to make change and impact. I'm just a conduit for that. And I am proud to receive the award, but I'm very conscious that it wouldn't happen if other people wouldn't give me the support and the resources and the opportunity to lead to make it happen."

