

## 'She always found ways to help'

January 22, 2009

Sue Miller loves to talk about her work, her passion. As executive director of Family Building Blocks, which provides intervention services to high-risk children and families, she gets to make a difference.

But try to get her to talk about herself, her personal accomplishments, and she all but cringes.

Like this week, for example, when she received the ATHENA Award for professional excellence, community service and leadership. She was chosen from among 10 nominees, all women with impressive credentials.

"This is somewhere between humbling and embarrassing," Sue told me when I first congratulated her by phone.

Expecting just that kind of reaction, I turned to those closest to her for insight into one of the most revered leaders in this community, and that meant tracking down her children, from the jungles of Peru to the halls of South Salem High School, from a private equity firm in San Francisco to the Bureau of Transportation in Portland.

The four of them are so proud that their mom is being recognized, but know how awkward it always is for her to accept individual accolades.

"She'll just use it as a chance to expand the reach of Family Building Blocks," said son Chris Harris, who works for a private equity firm in San Francisco.

Sue founded the nonprofit Family Building Blocks in 1997, which today serves more than 600 children a year through its therapeutic classrooms and outreach programs.

"I think we all dream about finding a job where we feel as fulfilled and dedicated and really good about our life as she has found," said daughter Clay Veka, a transportation planner in Portland. "It's pretty fun watching her do it."

The kids wonder, at times, how she manages to excel at work and at home.

Their mom is, after all, considered the go-to girl when it comes to serving the most vulnerable children in our community, those who are neglected, abused and forgotten.

She is the one who engages state, business, civic and philanthropic leaders and galvanizes them to care and to act, according to her ATHENA nomination from Marion County Circuit Court Judge Pamela Abernethy.

She is the one who will be front and center during this legislative session, telling all those who will listen how important the work of Family Building Blocks and other organizations on the front lines of child is, and how they deserve the state's continued support.



**Special to the Statesman Journal**  
Sue Miller (second from left in front) enjoys a trip to New Zealand with her family last summer to celebrate her 60th birthday. Back row: Son Chris Harris (left) and son-in-law Endre Veka. Front row: Daughter-in-law Jamie Harris, Sue Miller, daughter Clay Veka, daughter Sarah Miller, husband John Miller and daughter Jennifer Harris.

"She's very busy, but finds an incredible amount of time to spend with us kids," said her youngest, Sarah Miller, a junior at South Salem. "Her balancing skills are incredible. She definitely makes me feel like I'm a priority over her work. It never feels like she is there instead of home."

It was more of the same when the three older children were in the house.

"She almost never missed a basketball or volleyball game for any of us kids," Clay said. "She was there for every parent-teacher conference, she volunteered in the classroom, she'd go on field trips, she coached my softball team. Somehow, she's always done a remarkable job at being an amazing leader and executive director in her professional life, and also really being there for her kids."

"I would love to learn her secret, honestly."

Chris figures it's simply how his mom is wired. To be tireless, even if it means late-night grant writing from home. And to be selfless, always reaching out to serve others, setting a wonderful example for her children to follow.

"She always found ways to help people, including people she had never met before," oldest daughter Jennifer Harris wrote in an e-mail from the jungles of eastern Peru, where she is co-pastor of a church. "Opening the door for an older man, helping a woman put her groceries in the car, buying clothes for a child, tutoring a teenager, or just listening to someone share his/her struggles in life."

Sue credits her parents for instilling that compassion in her, a quality that is rare among many leaders.

"Others probably have the same level of energy mom has," Clay said. "But she's really excited about what she's doing and that's absolutely contagious to those around her. It's a very genuine way to lead."

If Sue sounds too good to be true, you're not the only one. Even her kids find themselves doing a double-take.

"A lot of people that are in positions like my mom, men and women, I always look at kind of skeptically and think, 'Oh, they're probably putting on a facade, this just isn't real, they can't be doing it all with a smile, there's got to be something fake,'" Chris said. "But there's just nothing fake there. It's totally genuine. That's pretty striking to me."

Sue's passion for her work inspires everyone around her. A staff member at Family Building Blocks wrote this for her ATHENA nomination: "Sue has proven that it is possible to balance both a leadership role in the community and the most important role as a mother."

Each April, during Child Abuse Prevention Month, the former mayor of Salem leads the crusade to raise local awareness. But the crusade truly is year-round for Sue, and her many connections make her the consummate catalyst of action, to borrow words from Abernethy's nomination.

"The four of us siblings tease mom that we can't go anywhere in town without her running into someone she knows — and talking for an hour," Jennifer said.

Sue's popularity is widespread, apparently among all ages.

"She's the mom all my friends love to be around," 16-year-old Sarah said.

When asked if her mom was strict, Sarah said "motivating" would be the better word to use.

Sue no doubt has motivated her adult children to strive for excellence in their respective careers.

"When you've got a parent who's that passionate about what they do," Chris said, "it's kind of a high bar for what you do in life."

Jennifer first went to Peru 11 years ago as a missionary and has been there ever since.

"I have been greatly inspired by my mom to live life not for myself, but for the Lord and for others," she said.

One thing people might be surprised to learn about Sue is that she has a bit of a wild side when it comes to traveling.

She's made trips to visit Jennifer in Peru, which involves long bus rides on bumpy dirt roads and four-hour canoe rides upriver. When Clay was in the Peace Corps in Honduras, Sue visited near the end of Clay's tour and when their ride to the airport never showed, the two of them wound up hiking some 20 miles through the night and torrential downpours to reach their destination.

"I think leading a life in Salem, as an executive director and kind of always pretty put together, I guess people may not realize that she has quite an adventurous side," Clay said.

Sue recently began a new chapter in her life, as grandmother. Clay and her husband Endre have a 5-month-old daughter, Maren, and Chris and his wife Jamie are expecting their first child in June.

"The blessings just keep coming," Sue said.

Starting next week, she plans to head north every Thursday to watch little Maren while Clay is at work.

"It certainly instigated her hiring an associate director," Clay said. "She's certainly not ready to retire anytime soon — she loves what she's doing too much — but she's ready to have some more free time."

Sue, who turned 60 last summer, confirmed that retirement is a long way off. She knows there's more work to do, breaking the cycle of abuse and neglect.

"Forward This" appears Mondays and Thursdays and highlights the people, places and organizations of the Mid-Willamette Valley. To share a story, contact Capi Lynn at [clynn@StatesmanJournal.com](mailto:clynn@StatesmanJournal.com) or (503) 399-6710.

**Watch the ATHENA Award ceremony**