

A LEGACY IN LECTURES

Inside the bustling office of Iowa State's busiest program director

BY TRAER SCHON DESIGN MACKENZIE GEARY PHOTO QUYNH DANG

“Why are they so quiet?” she says, looking at the students filing into neatly organized chairs before a town hall-style lecture. She glances out the window, notices the rain, and throws her hands in the air dramatically. “Oh, because they nearly drowned on the way here. This is the sound of near death.”

This woman keeping careful watch over the crowd is Iowa State Lectures Program Director Pat Miller. Each year, excited at the prospect of earning extra credit, seeing a famous personality in the flesh or just learning something new, thousands of people flock to the Memorial Union to attend the approximately 120 events hosted by the Iowa State Lectures Program. What they might not realize is that behind those interesting talks and ISU card swipes for five extra points can be days — or even years — of dedicated work.

A lot happens before the speaker takes the stage. Behind all of these great lectures, communicating with potential lecturers every day in a cluttered office tucked away on the second floor of the Memorial Union, is Miller. Along with three other staff members, she helps the program run smoothly and brings a wide range of speakers to campus — from former president of Ireland Mary Robinson to everyone's favorite mid-90s television scientist, Bill Nye (of “Science Guy” fame).

The Lectures Program at Iowa State operates differently from most universities, with a heavy emphasis on student involvement. Since its founder James Lowrie approached the student government with the unique idea in 1966, it's been a

collaboration between the students and the university — with funding support from Student Government as well as more than 200 co-sponsors, hosting departments and colleges each year.

Turning that funding into celebrities, authors, poets and performers is where Miller and the Lectures Program staff come in. This April, Miller marked her 35th year as the Lectures Program director.

Fondly described by students as quick-witted, hard working and “kick-ass,” meeting Miller is a memorable experience for even the most esteemed speakers. She speaks carefully, focusing intently on the task at hand but willing to completely divert her attention in a moment's notice if something more pressing comes her way.

“When I first met Pat she scared me,” says former lectures planning committee member Elaine Godfrey. “But I learned that's just her style — she's very abrupt. She'll talk to you about what she needs to and then walk away to get back to work.”

Miller says her “hyperactivity” allows her to do well in her busy job, where she's had as many as seven lectures in one day. Commemorative mugs from the Peace Corp and the Voodoo Spiritual Temple sit on a shelf above her desk, just above lighting



instructions for the Great Hall that have been written out carefully on a piece of weathered stationary. While most of her job is sitting here, tracking down and scheduling lecturers, her duties at a lecture include escorting speakers onstage, crowd control and making sure things run on time.

Miller typically starts working from home around 5:30 every morning — she says that if she came in before 9:30 a.m., she'd never get anything done. "But I try not to send emails until after six... it freaks people out," she laughs.

While she finds her job to be a perfect fit, she does acknowledge the uniqueness of her position.

"I woke up when I was three and said, 'When I grow up, I want to be a lectures program director,'" she jokes.

Over the years she has certainly mastered the process of attracting speakers to Iowa State, often made difficult because of inaccessibility to Ames, or simply disinterest in the area.

"We're in the middle of the 'flyover zone,' as many people who aren't running for president think," she explains. "So we try to find a really good reason that they should come, and a personal connection if possible."

While it doesn't always work, this formula — with a bit of creativity — has frequently paid off for Miller over the years. Sitting in her office chair amidst a mountain of sticky notes, promotional posters and bookshelves overflowing with titles ranging from "The Good Girls Revolt" to "America, You Sexy Bitch," she pours over a database of past lectures, making quips about each one, until she lands on the 2010 lecture she was looking for.

That speaker is Yvon Chouinard, the founder of high-end outdoor clothing company Patagonia, who she remembers as particularly difficult to land. After months of trying to contact him (at the insistence of students), Miller did a Google search of Chouinard, and found that he had received an environmental award from the Malibu Surfing Association. Sensing a possible back door to contacting him, she reached out to them, and they happily shared his contact information. Sure enough, Chouinard came to campus a few months later. She later found out from someone on his staff that he usually only gives one speech a year.

"It was a huge deal — we got emails and calls from all over, trying to figure out how we got him," she says.

She used a similar process to land FiveThirtyEight creator and well-known statistician Nate Silver. After a bit of browsing around, she learned that his dad was a political science professor at Michigan State. Using the family connection, she was able to send the otherwise hard-to-reach Silver an invitation, and he gladly agreed to speak. Miller says that their constant tracking of speakers and flexibility (compared to other universities) on the dates of lectures helps them reel in more speakers. Student connections also play a big role: One student helped bring in Holocaust survivor Marion Blumenthal Lazan this February after meeting her on a shared flight.

Miller says part of their success has been their persistence in trying to draw in speakers. "We're constantly checking to see 'if the door is open this time,'" she explains. And, as if on cue, a senior student pokes his head in the door of Miller's office.

"We finally got Mary Robinson?" he says excitedly. "I was a freshman when we first started trying to get her!"

Miller says her favorite part of the job is finding lecturers and helping find students' perfect speaker — no matter how challenging it is. President Robinson was someone who fell into the "challenging" category, as she was busy working with the United Nations and was often not in the country. Still, after three years of persistence, Miller managed to find an open date this spring, when she came for under half of her typical speaking fee.

"They know we keep trying," she says. "We do all this for the students."

And students who know the behind-the-scenes process don't take that for granted.

"[The Lectures Program] gives students the opportunity to get to know people who are shaping the country and our world on a weekly basis...students should know that almost no matter where their interests lie, there are lectures relevant to them," says Greer Brown, a member of the lectures planning committee.

In searching for speakers, Miller says they often find surprising personal connections to Iowa State. Once, during a

World Affairs Series planning committee, Miller asked if anyone had any ideas for a well-known speaker to finish the year, and one graduate student quietly chimed in, "Well, my sister is on SNL."

"We make sure they are not left standing in an open corn field."

That student was Stephen Gasteyer, whose sister Ana was indeed a cast member on "Saturday Night Live" at the time. She ended up speaking at Iowa State twice.

Miller has become an expert at finding the "hook" to attract big, internationally recognized names to the humble confines of the Memorial Union's Great Hall, which usually involves finding a date they are in the area and using some Iowa State charm to lure them here.

"She knows all the agents and which prominent figures have even the vaguest connections to Ames or Iowa State and uses that to bring them in for often half of their typical speaking fee," says Brown. "She also has a crazy knowledge of which international speakers will be in the U.S. and when, and uses that to our advantage."

Even with the busy schedules of high-profile speakers, cancellations and postponements are rare — with the notable exception of Judy Smith last year, whose career is the basis for the character Olivia Pope on the ABC show Scandal. She had to reschedule twice: once because of inclement weather, and another time because her client CeeLo Green got in legal trouble and she had to fly out to Los Angeles on short notice.

With more than 100 speakers every year, Miller's time as the director has led to her rubbing shoulders with interesting, impactful people day in and day out.

Her interesting encounters with speakers could fill Parks Library to the brim if all converted to book form, but one particularly bizarre experience she recalls was with comedian and author David Sedaris. Although the lectures committee members normally take speakers out to dinner at the sophisticated Aunt Maude's in downtown Ames, Sedaris' agent requested a late dinner at Applebee's.



Lectures Director Pat Miller speaks with students after a lecture in the Great Hall.

Miller says the students were sitting at the table in nervous silence, and in an attempt to stir up conversation, she mentioned Sedaris' impressive stamina at signing around 400 books both before and after his lecture.

"I just threw out, 'How do you get your arm in shape for a two week tour of book signing?'" Miller recalls. "He said, 'Well, I start masturbating twice a day, four weeks before I leave, and then I'm in great shape.'"

She says all of the students inhaled, not sure how to respond, until she quipped, "Oh my, that's the first time we've ever discussed masturbation with a speaker over dinner."

Sedaris' comment was still in her mind when she was trying to convince his sister, Amy, to come to Iowa State at the annual book expo she attends. She quickly found out he leaves his mark wherever he goes.

"I said, 'We'd love to have you come to Iowa State, and don't believe anything your brother said about his visit,'" Miller recalls. "Without missing a beat, [Amy] leaned down and said 'Oh, were you involved with the monkeys?'"

Her brother must have had good things to say, though — Amy Sedaris ended up giving two lectures at Iowa State in four years.

Miller never fails to give the speakers a memorable visit, as Megan Frisvold, a rookie member of the lecture planning committees, knows firsthand from dinner with former United States Chief Information and Microsoft senior director Steven VanRoekel.

"We were at dinner and he was showing us pictures of his kids...Pat insisted her grandkids were cuter!" she says.

Though it can be tough to attract people to Iowa State, Miller says once they come, they're usually so impressed that they don't hesitate to come back.

"We take good care of them," she says. "We make sure they are not left standing in an open corn field."

Miller says the most important lesson she learned almost immediately on the job was that people often forget that the successful speakers who come here are people too. She specifically remembers one very public official who had problems with his flight, and seemed to be stressed out. After checking in with him to see how he was doing and how his dinner was, she says he completely relaxed and opened up, seemingly comforted to know that someone cared.

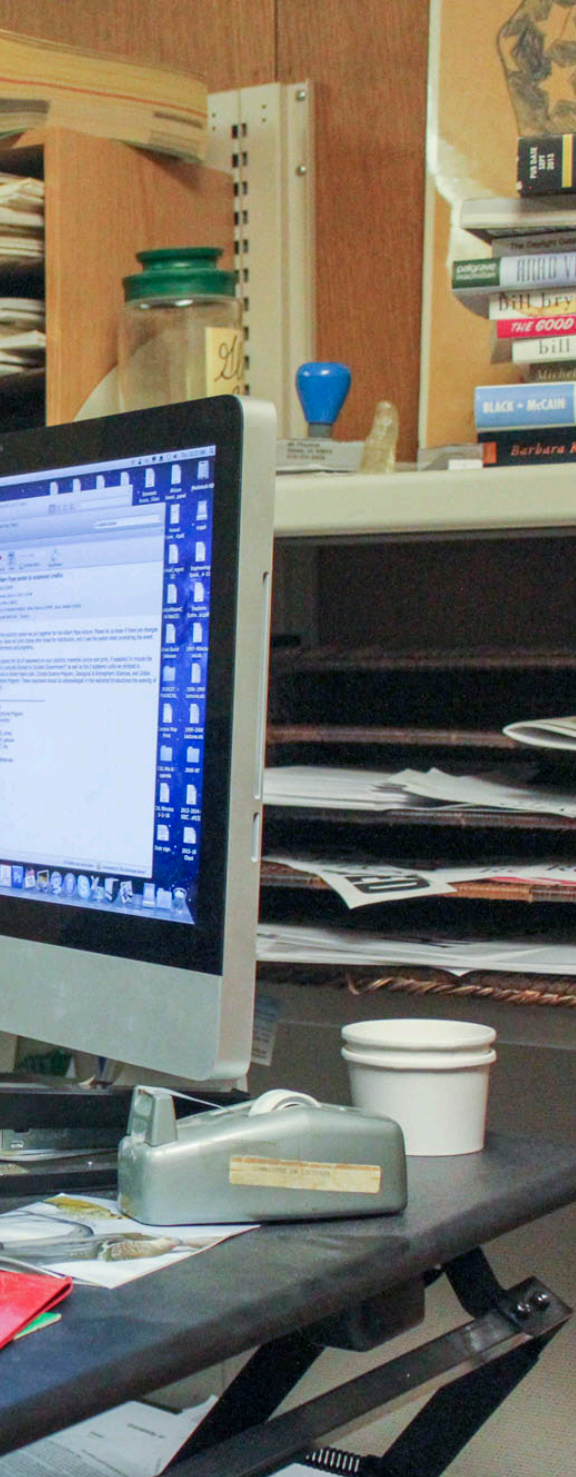
Miller says people often take notice of how involved our students are in the process — they even give the welcome and introduction at most big lectures.

"Our students are well-known for their hospitality and care of speakers. I love the social exchange and making people feel welcome here," she says. "We're able to showcase the students of Iowa State, and they're always impressed."

She says one thing she's constantly reminded of is how we take our surroundings for granted. When poet Adrienne Rich came in 2008, just a few years before she died,



“We have very polite and energetic audiences,” she says. “We have so many speakers with various perspectives and opposing views that everyone is respectful because they want their speaker to be respected.”



Miller approached her as she was sitting on the stage after her reading and signing.

"I said, 'Are you ready to go now?' and she said 'I'm just sitting here for a moment, absorbing this beautiful room.'"

In addition to the unique structure and busy schedule of Iowa State's Lectures Program, it also differs from many universities in its willingness to host very opinionated speakers — recently, hot-button topics have included GMOs, religion and politics in general. Last year, Miller came under fire for having the controversial journalist Katie Pavlich come speak about a "conservative perspective" to sexual assault on college campuses, but she shakes off the criticism.

"What people don't realize about speakers of opposing views is that you can come and learn what they are saying, and be better prepared to defend your position," she says, pausing a moment before adding the cherry on top, "Without having to pay anything."

Frisvold says she's learned to appreciate ISU's outstanding lectures program.

"Especially after becoming so involved with the program this year, I realize how invaluable Iowa State's lecture program really is," she says. "We get so many inspiring and amazing speakers to come talk, for free, to us as students. Why waste that opportunity?"

Although there are a few eccentric community members who regularly attend lectures, Miller says for the most part it's a very welcoming and inclusive environment with loyal attendees that have far-ranging interests.

"We have very polite and energetic audiences," she says. "We have so many speakers with various perspectives and opposing views that everyone is respectful because they want their speaker to be respected."

She tells students that hearing information from all sides and sorting it out for yourself is part of adult life, and the lectures program offers a "marketplace of ideas" to do just that.

"Students come here to learn to think critically, and how better to do that than listening to a range of views from people who have evidence to back it up?"

This approach to on-campus lectures has gained notice from colleges across the country. Most recently, the University of Colorado wanted to reference Iowa State's thorough guidelines for its Presidential Caucus Series as they were developing their own.

"People have a tendency to shy away from political events, but we get a handle on them because it's an incredible opportunity that we don't want to pass it up," Miller says.

An incredible opportunity for students, certainly, but one that results in an incredible workload for the Lectures Program staff. According to Miller, this year was "particularly a zoo," as they worked with all 21 campaigns, and had six candidates appear on campus as part of the series. She says working with campaigns can be difficult, with changing schedules and them wanting to schedule events at odd times.

"We had one candidate this year ask for a 2 p.m. slot on the first day back to classes in January, to which I said, 'Would you like people in the room to hear him speak?'"

After 35 years at the helm of the program, it's impossible to talk about lectures without mentioning Miller, who is still quick to remember minor details from seemingly every speaker. She never fails to surprise with a new story — recently, it was about her 1992 trip with the Entomology Club to appear on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno." Miller waited backstage while two club members introduced Leno to hissing cockroaches and several insect-based delicacies. Unfazed by the Hollywood glitz and glamor, she even offered a chocolate-covered cricket to legendary singer Tony Bennett in the green room before the show. He politely declined.

Even after all these years, Miller doesn't appear to be stopping any time soon.

"I'm going to be buried in the Great Hall, to the right of the stage — they have to leave room for me there," she says with a laugh. "That way I can keep up my work in the afterlife." ☺