

Wayshower Values in Unlikely Places

by Janie Creecy



On a recent trip to Indianapolis my husband and I planned a side trip to a small city, of which we had never heard prior to reading about it in the AAA guide.

It described Columbus, Indiana as a gem and not to be missed. This small city south of Indianapolis is unique, for it has over 60 buildings which have been designed by noted architects. Since the late 40's this town has had public buildings designed and built by the likes of I. M. Pei, Eliel Saarinen, Eero Saarinen, and Harry Weese. Churches, fire stations, schools, retirement centers, adult education facilities, the community hospital, city hall, and banks were commissioned thanks to the vision and values of J. Irwin Miller. Just how did this come to be?

Enter one Clessie Cummins, genius, inventor, founder of Cummins Engine in Columbus, Indiana. Born in 1888, Clessie built an engine in his teens and established Cummins Engine at the age of 31 in 1919. Along the way he was the chauffeur for the Miller family, the son of whom was J. Irwin Miller. The Miller family was very protective of their son and restricted his contacts with children in the community of Columbus. Mr. Cummins, being the family chauffeur was deemed suitable as a friend to the young Miller. Even with twenty years age difference a close friendship developed between the two.

Mr. Miller went on to be educated at Yale and Oxford, returning home and eventually took the reigns of his friend's company in 1947. The Miller family's deeply ingrained sense of social responsibility was not lost on Mr. Miller. He made it company policy to set aside 5% pre-tax profits for charity. He made it clear that Cummins employees were expected to pass the transparency test in their conduct of company business. He wanted whatever the company and its employees did to be so transparent they would not be ashamed of telling anyone what they had done.

He was a social activist. Cummins turned down a contract to build a plant in South Africa. The company already had a 20% market share in diesel engines sold there, and being able to make the engines locally would have guaranteed huge profits. But when the South African government refused Cummins' requirement of an integrated

work force the company said no. As a result all their business in South Africa was lost. It was reported the Cummins board took less than five minutes to make the decision to pull out of South Africa. Mr. Miller was an advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. He made it a point to hire returning Viet Nam vets, even accepting conscientious objectors. He won an eleven year contract with the diesel workers union, an unbelievable feat in the business world. The line union worker respected him and trusted him.

J. Irwin Miller was the first lay person to chair the National Council of Churches. He was true to his values and gave back to his community and country; in the process Cummins became a Fortune 500 company with over 26,000 employees world-wide. The relationship between the genius chauffeur and the ethical capitalist is a captivating story, one I wanted to share with you. The success of Cummins shows high moral values and spiritual principles can be found in the market place, even in a setting so concrete and removed from the esoteric world as a diesel engine company. The impact of one man who was true to his high principles and values was immense. Mr. Miller embodied his religious and spiritual convictions, in a self-effacing and modest way, never seeking the limelight. He manifested abstract spiritual values by bringing them into his company and his community. The story of J. Irwin Miller's life is the story of a master teacher, even though he probably would not have accepted that distinction. But he taught by example as well as by words, and I think his legacy is remarkable in that he brought high level spiritual principles into the corporate environment and made them an integral part of his daily life. He was a Wayshower in the very best sense of the word.

If you are interested in learning more about this incredible story I recommend three books: *My Life With Diesel*, by Clessie Cummins; *The Engine That Could*, by Jeffrey L. Cruikshank and David B. Sicilia; and *The Diesel Odyssey of Clessie Cummins*, by Lyle Cummins.