



Things You May Not Know about Nick Miller

by Nancy Miller May 13, 2011

Even though Nick has been at UMBC for 40 years, I suspect that most of his colleagues do not know a lot about him—his family background, personal history, and some quirks. This is because he is not a blabbermouth, except when lecturing, and it is possible to know him for a long time without knowing him very well at all.

First, he is not really Nick. His birth certificate says “Nicholas Rowsell Miller” but he was universally known as “Nicho” by family, friends, and teachers until he came east for college, when he simply allowed people to call him the more standard “Nick”. Nowadays his siblings, children, and people who have known him since childhood call him “Nicho” and everyone else calls him “Nick.” Only I am allowed to call him “Nicky,” which I do sparingly.

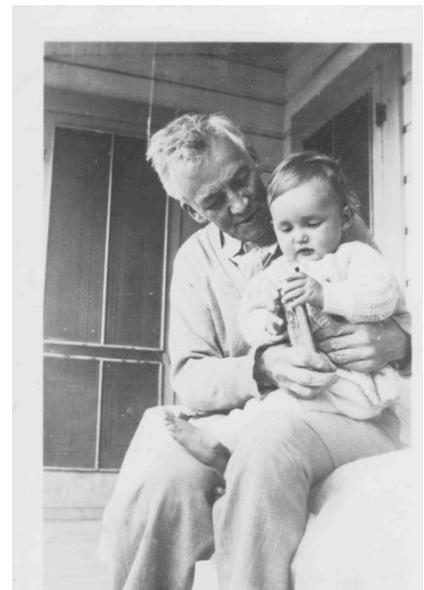
Born in 1941, Remembers Banging Trash Can on V-J Day!

Nicho was born in a log cabin—actually, the Monterey Peninsula Hospital--in Carmel, California to an American mother and an English father. His mother Valentine (or Val) graduated from Radcliffe and his father Alastair attended Oxford University. Although living in California, they were married by a justice of the peace in Towson while visiting a cousin attending medical school at Johns Hopkins. If Nicho’s life were a novel, this would have been obvious foreshadowing of his later connection to this region.

Nicho was the oldest of four and doted on not only by his parents but also by his domineering English grandmother, who sometimes referred to him as “the eldest son of the eldest son.” Nicho’s father taught Latin, ancient history, and classical literature in various private schools and published poetry and a children’s book during his career. Nicho’s mother was a very well-educated homemaker until later in life when she worked as a local journalist for the Monterey Peninsula Herald and administrator of the Carmel Bach Festival.

Growing up in Santa Barbara

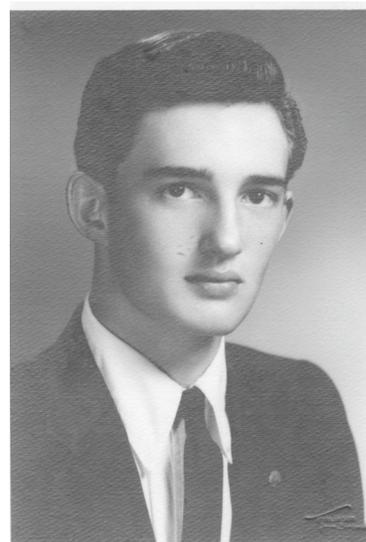
When he was born, Nicho’s family lived on Forty Acres Ranch in a remote part of Santa Barbara County. The family also lived there for several years in his early childhood, and he has many fond memories of it. He has been back to visit the ranch many times over the years. For most of his childhood, Nicho lived in a really funky house (no building codes!) in the chaparral zone of the mountain foothills behind Santa Barbara. One of his most vivid memories is tripping over a broken down lawn chair and being face-to-face with a rattlesnake coiled under the chair about two feet away. Nicho’s father shot the snake. That house, and pretty much the whole neighborhood, was destroyed in a major wildfire in 2008.



Nicho attended Laguna Blanca School in Santa Barbara from the third through twelfth grades, with his father teaching there most of that time. It was a small, coeducational, independent school with a picturesque location but a very simple campus. For someone as shy and socially unforthcoming as he was, this was a wonderfully nurturing environment. He knew everyone and everyone knew him. He played sports because everyone did and he particularly enjoyed soccer and baseball.

At age ten, Nicho spent an entire summer traveling in England, Scotland, and Wales. Nicho's Scottish grandfather, a Glaswegian, was apprenticed at age 12, subsequently joined the Guild of Handicraft in Chipping Campden, England, and became a successful sculptor in wood and stone. After the war he and Nicho's grandmother sold their house in Camden, but due to postwar currency controls, could spend the proceeds only in the UK. So they took Nicho, his father Alastair, and his cousin Oliver on a grand tour of Britain. Nicho has many recollections, grainy black and white photos, and souvenirs from that trip.

When his parents separated (and then divorced) Nicho was about 15. He stayed in Santa Barbara with his father and grandparents while his mother and three younger siblings moved permanently to her hometown of Carmel. This allowed Nicho to attend Laguna Blanca through high school graduation. He was an academic star, heading off to Harvard with an \$1800 scholarship that covered all tuition and half of room and board. Two of his best friends headed to Princeton and Yale, respectively, which is not bad for a graduating class of 17 students.



Off to Harvard, Crossing the Country by Train

At Harvard, Nicho discovered that the world wanted to call him "Nick". He also discovered that he was not as good at soccer or physics as he thought he was. He had orthodox Jewish roommates in Winthrop House who relied on him to turn off lights on the Sabbath. He gravitated toward a concentration in Government (as it is called at Harvard) and attended large lecture classes taught by notables including Carl Friedrich, Samuel Beer, Stanley Hoffman, and Henry Kissinger. He joined the Young Democrats and made two trips to Washington, where he met a number of important Democratic figures and shook hands with Bobby Kennedy in the Attorney-General's office. Nick saw JFK several times in Cambridge during his years as President.

He missed the California climate and his tiny school, but stayed East during vacations, cleaning bathrooms to earn money. Harvard was not his cup of tea, but he stayed the course and graduated *magna cum laude* in 1963, heading immediately back to California. He never went back for a nostalgic visit despite the avalanche of mail Harvard sends to alumni.

Back to California for Grad School

He spent eight years working on his M.A and Ph.D. at UC Berkeley, during which time he changed his focus from strategic studies (including a course with Albert Wohlsetter during his first year) and international relations to American political institutions, political behavior, and ultimately to social choice theory. Nelson Polsby and Aaron Wildavsky were major figures during that era at Berkeley. Nick worked as a teaching assistant and later as a research assistant for a

young Robert Axelrod to support himself. He lived in a tiny apartment that used to be a beauty parlor and had pink shampoo sinks. Kitchen facilities were shared. He reconnected with his family during weekends spent at his mother's house on the Pacific coast in Carmel. While he was at Berkeley, his sister Alison and brother Andrew came to study there as undergrads.

When he started looking for an academic job, it was not a propitious time in the job market, nor was marketing himself anything that came naturally to the introverted Nick. He did not have a close mentor figure to help him gain entrée to the profession. He was largely self-made as a social choice theorist, not having any senior faculty at Berkeley working actively in the field. His first job offer came early from Western Washington State, but he turned it down. In 1971 he interviewed at two of the social choice meccas—the University of Rochester and Virginia Polytechnic – and also at UMBC. Initially he did not get the UMBC job (he still has the rejection letter) but later in the spring another line opened up and he was offered and accepted that position. Nick drove across the country in his dark blue VW beetle with nearly all his wordly possessions to start his job at UMBC in September 1971. He immediately found the climate oppressive and soon moved into an apartment with no furniture, but air conditioning.

In 1970-71 the Political Science Department had four regular faculty members (including Harold Levy). In Fall 1971, it doubled in size, as Nick, Ken Allen (from Harvard) Ken Bowler (from Wisconsin and a former Congressional Fellow) and Steve Boyan (who had been teaching at Penn State) arrived. Ken, Ken and Nick were all ABDs and moved in parallel to finish their dissertations, working long and odd hours on the 6th floor of the Administration Building. By the summer of 1973, all three were PhDs. The two Kens left UMBC for non-academic positions in the mid-1970s but, forty years later, Nick is still here, retiring from the Department.

Nick had an offer from Lexington Books to publish a tightened up version of his voluminous dissertation, the subject of which I would not dare to paraphrase. However, when he returned early from a trip to California to start his revisions, he found a letter rescinding the offer. He weathered the disappointment and moved on to survive first contract renewal and then tenure review. It was harrowing. I personally remember it vividly because by the time he was up for tenure, he and I were married.

Nick Marries a Student--Me



I was a Political Science major at UMBC in the early 1970's and Ken, Ken, and Nick were my professors, as were Harold Levy and George LaNoue. I was a department groupie and worked for several professors as a research assistant, including Ken Bowler and Lewis Anthony Dexter. I co-authored an article with George. As a senior, I took a special topics course in Democratic Theory taught by Nick Miller. There were only four students regularly attending the class, so it was very much a seminar. Nick became one of my mentor figures and helped me figure out where to attend graduate school.

Just as I was graduating in May 1974, Nick invited me to accompany him to a Sunday afternoon Political Science gathering at Fred Wirt's house. This was shocking! But I went. It was fun to observe the reactions. That summer I visited his family in California and got to know him much better. By the end of the summer, it was definitely a romance and in June 1975 we were married.

Career Momentum and Raising Children in the 1980's and 1990's

After surmounting the tenure hurdle in 1979, Nick's career picked up steam. During his tenure review, the *American Journal of Political Science* accepted his paper on the "uncovered set" --- a social choice concept, which has become quite well known. Then on his first day back to UMBC after the birth of Douglas in 1983, he found an acceptance letter from the *American Political Science Review* for his article "Pluralism and Social Choice." As far as I know, he is the only UMBC political scientist who has published in the flagship journal of the discipline. It was an impressive piece of scholarship, linking some of the key ideas from formal political theory to some of the key ideas of pluralism in mainstream political science. It has been much cited in the ensuing years. Also during this era Nick co-taught a graduate course in Social Choice Theory at College Park with Mancur Olson.



Throughout the 1980's and 1990's Nick remained tireless as a teaching faculty member, an active scholar with a growing reputation, and someone who held campus-wide positions including Chair of the Faculty Affairs Committee, the Undergraduate Council, and the University Faculty Review Committee. He was Political Science Department Chair from 1985-1991. His commitment to UMBC was amazing given the demands of family life. During a time when I was working in challenging roles at the Social Security Administration and the Health Care Financing Administration, he was cooking, tending

children, driving carpools, doing laundry, carving Halloween pumpkins, attending PTA meetings, getting cars repaired, and all the other many things that kept the household running. Looking back, it is hard to believe all that he did during that period, especially since he was in his 40's and 50's while we were raising children.

Nick as Elder Statesman

When Doug and Diana moved into high school, and then college, the domestic burdens lightened. During this era Nick became the receiving editor of the *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, succeeding Elinor Ostrom, who had just been selected APSA president and later won a Nobel Prize. This was a huge job that he embraced with his characteristic diligence. In fall 2004, Diana entered Carnegie Mellon, Doug was living on campus at UMBC, and Nick and I found ourselves in a very quiet house. To be honest, it was a shock and a huge adjustment for both of us. In some ways, we are still adjusting.

Nick had evolved into an elder statesman of the Political Science Department—former Chair, one of the most senior members, and someone with an encyclopedic memory about how things were done. He became the mentor. In 2005 I came to work full time at UMBC, having taken an "early out" retirement from my Federal career. It was interesting having both of us involved in the UMBC dramas, exchanging intelligence and news from our different vantage points on campus.

For several years, Nick, Doug, and I were all at UMBC, Doug as Editor of the Retriever Weekly, and all three of us exchanging UMBC gossip! Doug graduated in 2006 with a B.A. in Sociology.

More recently, Nick's many years of active participation in the Public Choice Society resulted in an offer for him to serve as President, which he did from 2008 through 2010. He organized last year's conference held in Monterey, California. His youngest sister, Janie, was able to attend the luncheon at which he gave his Presidential Address. Given that the previous Presidents of the society include James Coleman, Elinor Ostrom, and both James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, this Presidential role was a very big honor. It felt like a capstone on his career.



In 2008 Nick was invited to speak about the U.S. Electoral College as part of a public lecture at the London School of Economics. Our daughter Diana, who had just completed her study abroad semester in Rome, met us in London and attended the event with me. LSE put the three of us up in a fancy townhouse hotel with tall windows and wrought iron balconies. The lecture itself was well attended by Brits and other Europeans who found the Electoral College an unfathomable quirky feature of U.S. politics. The voting power group at LSE later invited Nick to participate in a small funded conference held in Normandy, France, last July.

2011: Transition Year

This brings us up to recent months, when Nick had an unexpected fainting episode, a fall, and spent a week at Howard County General, during which he discovered some cardiovascular anomalies, began taking several new medicines to regulate heart rate and blood pressure, along with some other issues. Last week, an ablation procedure using a cardiac catheter that corrected "atrial flutter" also had the paradoxical effect of slowing his heart rate to a dangerous level, resulting in the emergency installation of a pacemaker. Happily, his heart rate is now solid as a rock and regular, but it will take somewhat longer for his confidence to bounce back.

As he approaches his 40-year mark at UMBC and his 70th birthday (July 13), Nick has every intention of remaining an active scholar. In fact, he feels liberated from the constraints of teaching and truly able to focus on projects that have languished. For a long time he has resisted using the "r" word, but now that he begins collecting his pension and Social Security, it feels like a natural transition to a new stage in his work life. He hopes to hold the title "Research Professor" and plans to be in his office most of the time, when not traveling to conferences, to his beloved California, or to the U.K. to visit our daughter Diana who is living in Edinburgh. Those of you who have observed his passion for his work will find this not the least bit surprising.

With Laguna Blanca
Alums in Santa Barbara



POSTSCRIPT: Additional Little-Known Facts about Nick Miller

Although a voracious reader, Nick does not read fiction and has not done so since required to by schools. The literature gene, which runs strong in his family, seems to have skipped him.

Just before heading off to Harvard, Nick climbed Mt. Whitney in California, the highest peak in the lower forty-eight states.

Nick has driven across the United States (often solo) more than 20 times and once across Canada. He is a long distance driver.

Joan Baez sang at Nick's 21st birthday party in Carmel (July 1962). She was a neighbor and friend of his mother's and in the process of becoming a mega-celebrity.

Nick does not reveal his political preferences to his students, and not often to his colleagues, but he is a strong Democratic identifier dating back to 1956. He shook hands with Adlai Stevenson at a campaign event prior to the California presidential primary.

As a boy, Nick posed in costume as a Roman soldier for his grandfather the sculptor, who was often commissioned to do carvings for churches.

The most common student comments about Nick are: "Speaks in a monotone," "Brilliant man who knows everything," and "Strict but fair grading."

Nick and John Jeffries are both 1963 graduates of Harvard College, but they did not meet until the 1970's at UMBC.

Nick pronounces "saucepan," "garage," "record," and some other words British-style as a vestige of his childhood when reared by a British father and grandparents. He also calls his "bathrobe" a "dressing gown."

