

Giving Others HOPE: Zell B. Miller

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On March 23, 2018, former Georgia Governor Zell B. Miller, 86, left this world and stepped into the annals of history, leaving an unforgettable legacy of stories, actions, and outcomes. Beyond his books and political antics and fiery speeches, he likely will be best remembered for his impact on higher education in Georgia, and ultimately nationwide. In the early 1990s, in this Bible Belt state, he fought for and convinced the voters of Georgia to approve a state-wide lottery to provide merit-based scholarships for education. In the early years the scholarship provided full tuition and fees for academically eligible students to attend college. Thousands of students benefited and thus could forego massive loan debt to attend college. Three decades ago gambling was considered a serious vice by the law-abiding, church-going folks of Georgia; and Zell's victory demonstrated his political prowess, his deep commitment to education, and his unwavering determination to make a difference for everyone.

Zell Miller was born in Young Harris, a small town in north Georgia and the site of Young Harris College, a Methodist institution, where both his mother and father taught. When he was 17 days old, his father, a dean at Young Harris College and a one-term state senator, died unexpectedly. This life-changing event left his mother, Birdie, to raise him and his 6-year old sister alone. He would regularly tell the story of how his mother pulled rocks from the creek to build the house where they lived, how they did not have electricity until he was 7, and indoor plumbing even later. His mother served 25 plus years on the city council, and he learned politics and negotiation at the kitchen table. Beginning with his earliest steps, the importance of education, politics, perseverance, and a strong sense of independence (and North Georgia mountain identity) surrounded him. After completing an associate's degree at Young Harris College, Zell moved on to Emory University; but the fit there was not good, and in 1953 at age 21 he dropped out and enlisted in the Marines. Later he wrote passionately about this experience and the resulting discipline that he developed in the book entitled *Corps Values: Everything You Need to Know I Learned in the Marines* (1998). In 1954 he married Shirley Carver; and in 1956 he enrolled at the University of Georgia, earning a bachelor's in political science and a master's in history. With Shirley at his side, he was now prepared for a lifetime of public service.

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By the time Zell won the Governor's Office, he had served as mayor of Young Harris, two terms as a state senator, and 16 years as a lieutenant governor of Georgia. There were other appointments and elections along the way (e.g., executive director of the state Democratic Party); but suffice it to say that through 16 years of presiding over the senate and sparring with Democrats in his own party and Republicans, too, he had fine-tuned his reputation and his political skills. In 1990 Zell was elected governor of the state of Georgia, and he was ready to put his passion into action. During his first term he secured the HOPE (Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally) lottery for education, which later was adapted for use by the federal government during the Clinton era and copied by numerous states nationwide in subsequent years. Following the 1994 re-election, education was again a priority; and educators received four consecutive years of 6% pay raises. He was the "education governor"—never forgetting his roots and educational challenges. His values remained solid, and his actions were aligned with those values. In 1998 he finished his second term with an 85% approval rating—unheard of then and now.

In national service, Zell encountered greater partisanship and experienced high frustration when compared to his service in the State of Georgia. In June 2000 he was appointed to the U.S. Senate to fulfill the unexpired term of Republican Paul Coverdale, who had died unexpectedly while in office. In November, the popular former governor easily won the Senate office and went on to frustrate his fellow Democrats as he reached across the aisle to co-sponsor George W. Bush's large tax cuts and to join the Republicans on issues of homeland security and the Iraq war. However, weary of the Senate and his own party, he did not seek re-election in 2004. Returning home, he wrote *A Deficit of Decency* (2005), which sounds especially timely today.

Discipline and independence are formidable allies and yielded Zell Miller as the only person to ever give keynotes at both the Republican and Democratic political conventions. In 1992 "Give 'Em Hell Zell" placards adorned the Democratic convention as he gave a rousing keynote address that nominated Bill Clinton for President. By 2004 he was giving his endorsement to George W. Bush at the Republican convention and slaying his political "home," the Democratic Party, in oratory and actions. Upon retiring from the Senate in 2005, he returned home to teach. In 2005 the University of Georgia established the Zell Miller Distinguished Professorship, and in 2008 the University dedicated a multi-story advanced technology and innovative student center as the Zell B. Miller Learning Center in honor of his exemplary service to the state.

The HOPE Scholarship legislation passed in 1992, and it had a transformative effect on Georgia and its higher education system. To date more than \$9.4 billion in financial assistance has helped Georgia students attend college to earn degrees, diplomas, and certificates. Several states followed Georgia's lead and now have their own HOPE programs for in-state students. Specifics on the HOPE scholarship and the Zell Miller Scholarship and Grant (2011) may be found at the Georgia Student Finance Commission web site: <https://gsfc.georgia.gov/hope>.

A robust research literature exists on the HOPE and other lottery funded merit-based programs in Georgia and beyond; while thousands of students have benefited from this college support and the academic requirements encourage higher academic performance and progression, the program is not without its critics. For example, need-based aid is woefully deficient for underserved and first-generation students; and, without a HOPE income cap, eligible students with high need and those with low need receive the same benefits. Zell Miller wanted to make a difference in college enrollment in Georgia, and he did. HOPE scholarships and grants are used at technical schools and at two- and four-year public and private institutions.

Following the initiation of the HOPE scholarship program, the state's research institutions attracted even more of the "the best and brightest," offsetting the pull from out-of-state, top-tier research institutions. No doubt, the pros and cons of the Hope and Zell Miller scholarships and grants will continue to be debated; and tinkering will be done.

Why do I tell this story? Zell Miller had a profound impact on higher education in Georgia and beyond. He brought independence and commitment to fulfill his ideals. He would stand outside the circle of comfort. His is the story of what vision, preparation, persistence, and fearless determination can do. It shows that we sometimes must draw outside of the lines. Making a difference, integrity, commitment—these were more important than keeping the peace with quiet acquiescence. HOPE changed institutions and changed the lives for the better for thousands of Georgians. Zell B. Miller was an innovator. It is only fitting that the journal that espouses innovation note his passing.

Lest you are not convinced, three former U.S. presidents—George W. Bush, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton—all attended the memorial service at Peachtree United Methodist Church in Atlanta and paid tribute to the life and legacy of Zell Miller. That is, three former presidents and a host of Democrats, Republicans and Independents. Who can claim anything similar? With humor and with truth, they described the man who had sided with them, against them, and challenged and provoked them. Three presidents clearly admired his determination and his sense of doing the right thing. It prompts the question, how will you or I make a difference? What will our legacy be? Do we dare to ruffle the feathers?

References

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