

Survivorship Runs in the Family

FOR LES MILLER, CANCER FUNDING IS PERSONAL

By Ann Miller Baker

LES MILLER WAS ALREADY A CANCER SURVIVOR BEFORE MOFFITT CANCER CENTER OPENED IN 1986. BUT HE STILL NEEDED MOFFITT MORE THAN HE MIGHT HAVE IMAGINED.

“I’ve been here twice. My daughter’s been here three times, my wife’s been here twice,” the former state legislator and current chair of the Hillsborough County Commission ticks through the list of his family’s Moffitt experiences. “I’ve recommended so many people to Moffitt Cancer Center for treatment of their cancer, and they’re moving on with their lives. That’s the bottom line. It saves lives.”

Miller had plenty to do with keeping Moffitt alive and growing through the 1990s, after founder H. Lee Moffitt left the state Legislature in 1984 to return to practicing law. The two met while Miller was unsuccessfully campaigning for a Florida House seat in 1982, and kept in touch through Moffitt’s epic efforts to establish Florida’s only National Cancer Institute-designated Comprehensive Cancer Center. Once Miller claimed a seat in the House in 1992, the fledgling center had a new ally.

“I’d done some funding work with Lee as this hospital continued to grow,” Miller recalls. “I knew what it had to do, what Lee wanted to have here. And having had had my own bouts with cancer, I wanted to make sure that Moffitt got funding after he left the Legislature. So it became my issue. I was on the Health Care Committee. It became my issue to do whatever I could to get funding for this hospital.”

It wasn’t easy. When Republicans gained control of the Legislature in 1996, Miller says partisan politics and priorities threatened to derail momentum for the center named after a former House Speaker and Democrat.

“SO IT BECAME A BATTLE OF, ‘DO YOU ALL KNOW WHAT’S DOWN THERE? DO YOU HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT THEY’RE DOING? DO YOU REALIZE HOW FAR PEOPLE COME TO GET SERVICES AT MOFFITT CANCER CENTER?’

I invited some of the legislators to visit the hospital. Once they came down, it was an easier task to sell them on funding for the hospital.” That included a measure Miller authored to earmark a small percentage of Florida’s tobacco sales taxes for Moffitt research and patient care. “It was a battle. But we were able to accomplish it.”

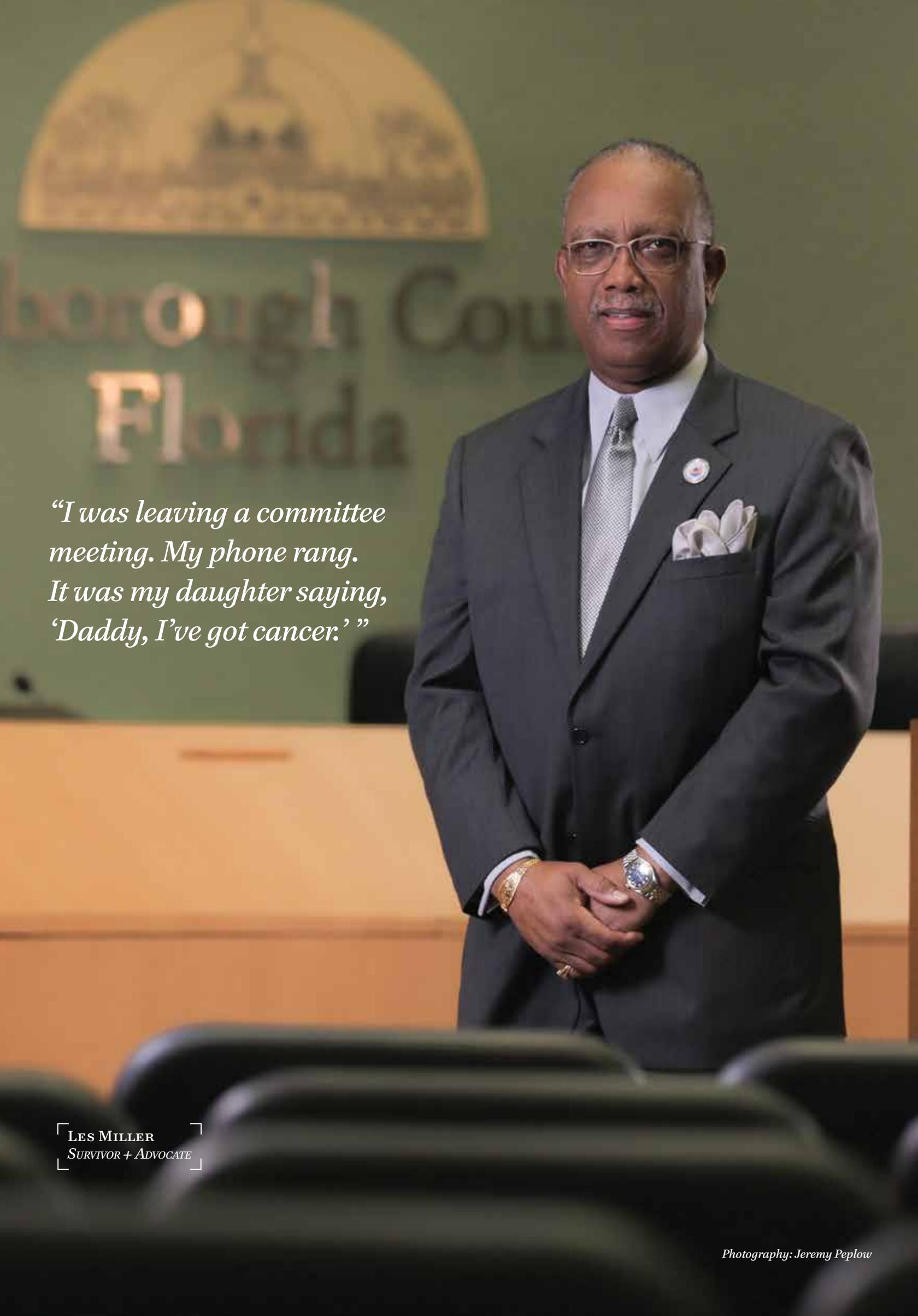
CANCER CENTER IS AN ECONOMIC BENEFIT AND MORE

Miller says Tampa and Hillsborough County are better for it. “A lot of people — more than 5,000 — work here. Economically, it’s an engine; employment wise, it’s an engine. Research wise, it keeps dollars coming in. It’s an economic boon for Hillsborough County.”

A few years later, in 2001, Miller would get an all-too-personal reminder of Moffitt’s importance. “I was leaving a committee meeting. My phone rang. It was my daughter saying, ‘Daddy, I’ve got cancer.’” The memory still shakes Miller. “It was a difficult time. She was 29 years old. Her mother, my first wife, died of breast cancer.”

Between the double mastectomy, chemo and radiation, Miller says, his daughter LeJeane had days when she just wanted to give up. “I told her, ‘You can’t do it. You’re 29 years old. You can overcome this thing.’ And there were many days I would say that, turn around and walk out and cry. But she overcame it and she did well.

“Two years later, my wife came down with breast cancer. No one in her family had ever had breast cancer,” Miller adds, recounting his daughter’s subsequent battle with ovarian cancer and his wife Gwen’s breast cancer recurrence without skipping a beat. “Believe me, from the first time my daughter had breast cancer to the last time my wife had it, astronomical research had gone into the way they did surgeries and treatments. It’s different. So every day, there are clinical trials or research going on at Moffitt that make a difference.”

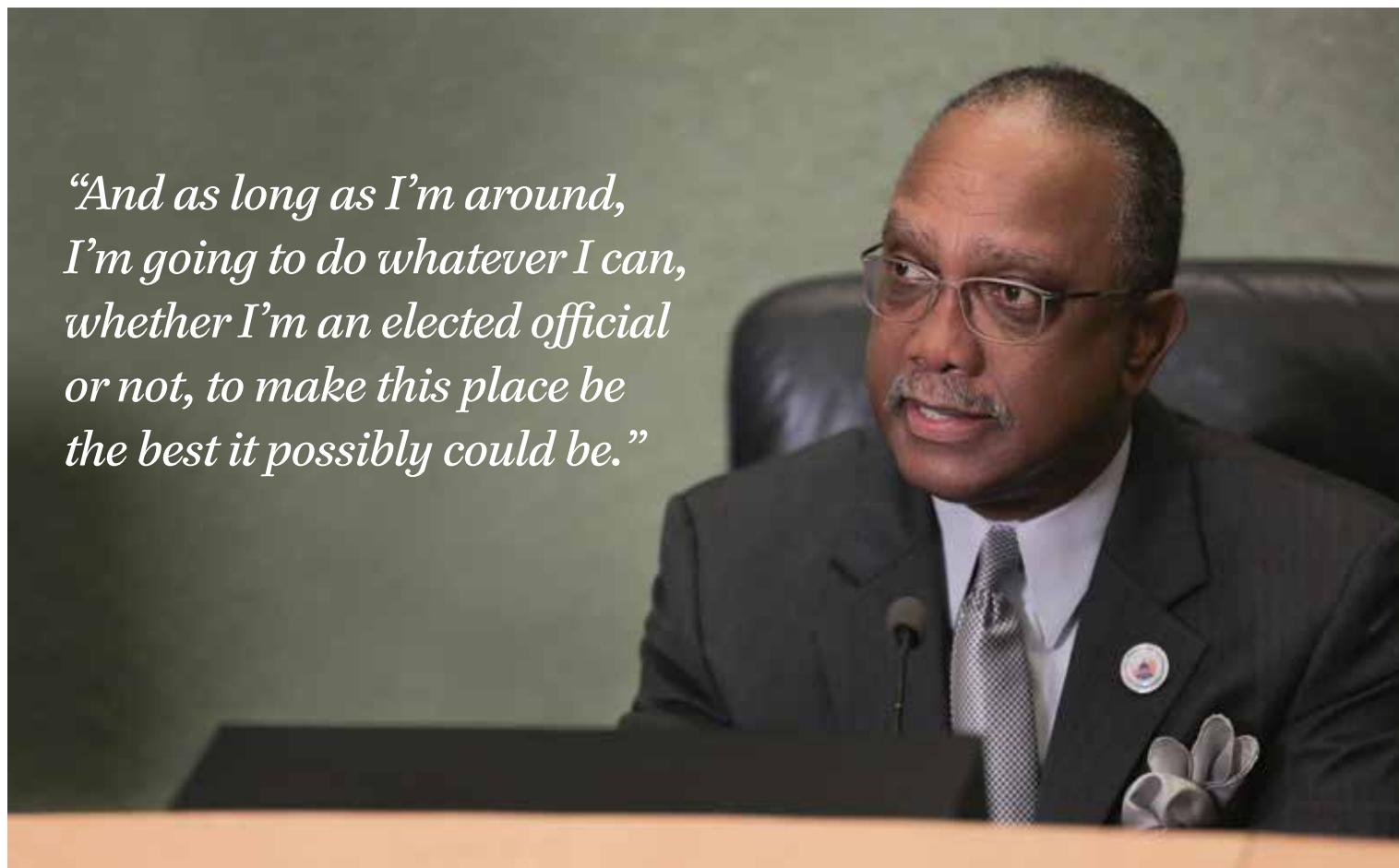


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LES MILLER
SURVIVOR + ADVOCATE

Photography: Jeremy Peplow

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MEN’S FORUM OFFERS VALUABLE HELP

Another way Moffitt and Miller make a difference is through the annual Men’s Health Forum. “Men can be dumb,” Miller chuckles, “macho, don’t want to go to the doctor to get yourself checked out. And in some instances in these tough times, they don’t have insurance. They can’t afford to go get a PSA test or get their prostate checked. For Moffitt to have that Men’s Forum so that men can come in regardless of who you are, regardless of how much money you have or what race or religion you may be, you can get information and guidance to resources. That’s important. A lot of communities and people focus on the breast cancer side. We understand that, but men have their issues also.”

For Miller, the issue became kidney cancer. In 2005, he turned to Moffitt surgeon Dr. Julio Pow-Sang for help. After an eight-hour surgery that included removal of a rib to access the diseased kidney, Miller developed ileus, the temporary absence of normal contractile movements of the intestinal wall. It’s an expected consequence of abdominal surgery that usually resolves within two to three days. But for Miller, it persisted for two weeks.

“I thought I was a goner,” Miller recalls. “And my wife Gwen is a person that a lot of things don’t bother. Even when she went through cancer, she would come to Moffitt for treatment and go right back to chair a Tampa City Council meeting the next day.”

The look on her face told me I was in deep trouble. But the doctors, the nurses and medical staff did everything they could to take care of me. They worked on me. Thirteen days later, I came out of it and was able to go home. It was tough. But I’m alive today because of Moffitt Cancer Center.”

“And as long as I’m around, I’m going to do whatever I can, whether I’m an elected official or not, to make this place be the best it possibly could be.”

Clearly, Miller has adopted the philosophy of Moffitt’s founder: one person can make a difference.

“Well, Lee was one person who had an idea. One person took that leap and achieved it and got it done. So anyone, any one person, whether it’s funding, whether it’s volunteering out here, whatever it is, that one person can make a difference to save the lives of thousands. Thousands.

“Thirty years from now, we probably won’t recognize this place. Moffitt will probably have satellite locations, offices throughout the county, maybe outside of Hillsborough County that people can go to. And that’s going to take funding, that’s going to take a lot of hard work. That’s why I hope the Legislature continues to do what they’re doing, the federal government, our members of Congress continue to do what they’re doing, to make sure that one day we get a cure. And Moffitt’s the place to do it.” 