

Mac Miller's 2004 Retirement Roast: My speech

By Mitchell L. Silverman, BA ([New College of Florida](#) '91-'94), JD, MS
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(Photo by author, 2003-02-03)

The first time I heard of Mac Miller, he made an impression on me. I was a student in the Honors Institute at Broward Community College, in Ft. Lauderdale, and I was sure that New College was the place for me. I told Mary Jo Carl, the director of the Honors Institute. She said “ There’s a professor there you should talk to, a Dr. Miller. One of our graduates went there and worked with him.” Then Dr. Carl, a very proper, Southern lady, very genteel, paused. Her face screwed up like she’d been force-fed a lemon tree. “She... became *involved* with him.”

I got the impression that this did not endear Mac to her.

Nonetheless, when I entered New College in February 1991 (after the independent study project I did before I got admitted – but I digress) and looked at the catalog and mini-classes, Mac was teaching two module classes I liked the sound of: one on Gulf War I, then raging, and “Avatars of Alice.” The Gulf War class: well, I’d always been interested in warfare, and it sounded like a good excuse to read *Catch-22*. And Alice – ditto.

In the Gulf War class one day, Mac is showing us slides of what he did on vacation – blow up unfriendly dangerous things in the sky with friendly dangerous things. Air Defense Artillery, in other words. He changed slides, and I saw a half-familiar picture. “That’s a Nike-Ajax!” – a nuclear-tipped anti-missile missile. Mac looked at me and blinked. I think that was when he

realized we had common interests.

Then he distributed the syllabus for “Alice.” As a ticket of admission, you had to watch a video version of *Alice in Wonderland*, and write a review. The syllabus mentioned several he had that were on reserve at the media center. At the bottom, it said “I also have a pornographic Alice – see me if you’re sick enough to want to watch it.” How could I resist? So another student and I – accompanied by five or six similarly debauched others, not in “Alice” – watched it in the media lab. Ah, my New College education.

I could go on with anecdotes about my experiences with Mac. Thesis lunches with Mac at Captain Bryan’s, the fish place right by the airport on US 41. Mac’s “shit or get off the pot” – I won’t work with you past next semester, and I don’t think you should even remain enrolled – evaluation of my next-to-last thesis tutorial. Mac’s visible enthusiasm that I had finally, as he had told me, “written from the heart, and used both hands,” when I gave him a 6,600 word narrative chunk of my thesis I free-wrote in an all-nighter that last semester. My baccalaureate – no, wait, that I *don’t* remember – it’s a blur. My wife and I going to see “Hedwig and the Angry Inch” in 2001 with Mac, Melanie, and Claire at the Tampa Theatre, with Melanie and Claire dressed to show their “inner Hedwig” (the dress I tried on at Goodwill didn’t fit), and Mac dressed up as a Lutheran Lake Wobegon minister shocked, just *shocked*, at the depravity on display. (He put a label on the back of his jacket for anyone who didn’t get such a conceptual costume.) Mac, Melanie – and when babysitting arrangements fell through, *Kylie* – at my wedding, Mac resplendent – at my request – in his snow-white tropical mess dress uniform. (Why wear a tux when you can make a real impression?)



(Photo by Steve Waldman (NC 1988–1994), 2000-11-25. Used by permission)

Even Mac's concern last weekend – my wife and I took Mac, Melanie, and Kylie out to lunch at Mr. Bones when I thought I wouldn't be here tonight – when I told him my father-in-law has pancreatic cancer. Mac realized, as I did when I found out, that I've been down this road before.

Allow me to explain: one of the biggest things Mac did for me was to sponsor my thesis. The title: "*Anything but Herpes I can Cure*": a *Hypertext Thanatography*. My father died of lung cancer, secondary to AIDS. He was a urologist. The quote in the title was something he said to me in his office one day – that's how a urologist talks to his son about the birds and the bees.

What I did not know then was that my father was already HIV-positive. He didn't tell me until about three months before he died, even though I knew something was wrong. I even asked him if he had HIV – I don't remember, but I told someone – and he denied it. He'd gotten a bad blood transfusion after some surgery, surgery that was necessary because of an infection he got in a hospital. Doctors do a procedure, cause a complication, then do another procedure, as Samuel Shem's novel about medical training, *The House of God*, says. I'm already experiencing that with my father-in-law.

So Mac, and my thesis, helped me work out some of the anger, pain, and depression I experienced over my father's death.

But Mac did more for me than that. I am certain, beyond a peradventure of a doubt, that I would not have graduated from New College without Mac. Before I went back to school I had a technical McJob in a software store: not much money, no enjoyment, no future. Then New College – on a trivia scholarship! – then law school (feh), and then on with life. Before, I was unhappy. These days, most of the time, even with my latest bad news, I am happy. I give Mac credit, not for my change itself, but for being there for me, helping me, critiquing my work, supporting me, mentoring me, even standing in as a father figure, as I procrastinated my way through New College. (Do you think that thesis tutorial evaluation had anything to do with my finishing my thesis?)

In conclusion, I say this: I owe Lieutenant Colonel Arthur McA. Miller, United States Army Reserve (retired), Ph.D., more than I can ever repay. I'm just glad I got this opportunity to express my gratitude, appreciation, and thanks. Thanks, Mac. Thank you for everything.