Linda Miller ('70): A trailblazer in the automotive industry

There’s nothing Linda Miller likes better than a good challenge. That’s why after going to work for Ford Motor Company in Detroit, Mich., more than 30 years ago, she could be found dismantling a car engine in her apartment so she could find out for herself how it worked. Moving up through the ranks at Ford, she became manufacturing director of the company’s Powertrain Operations with full responsibility for all of Ford’s engine and casting plants in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. When she retired last December, Miller left a long and distinguished list of accomplishments in her wake.

Working in the automotive industry was a far cry from Miller’s original plans when she started out as a French major at Truman. “When I realized that I was not going to be very good at speaking French—my accent was poor—I switched over to math because it was something I had always found challenging,” says Miller, who in spite of being involved in numerous clubs and activities, managed to earn her undergraduate degree in three years.
It was during her final year at Truman that she took on a challenge that left a lasting mark on the University. Up to that point in time, women had not been allowed to wear slacks on campus, but on one particularly cold day in early 1970, Miller decided it was time to adopt a more practical approach. "I got some of my friends together, and we decided we were going to wear slacks to class, and so we did," says Miller. Shortly thereafter, she was called to the office of Charles McClain, who was president of the University. When questioned about wearing slacks which was against the rules, Miller explained, "It's very cold, you ought to try walking from Baldwin Hall to Violette Hall in a skirt in the cold." Instead of expelling some of the University's best students, McClain decided to change the policy, and from then on, women could wear slacks to class.

After graduating from Truman in 1970 with a bachelor of science degree in mathematics, a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship led Miller to the University of Kansas where she earned a master's degree, and it was on a trip to Detroit with a friend that Miller had a chance encounter with one of Ford's personnel relations people. When the Ford person found out about Miller's background, the meeting promptly led to a job interview, followed by a job offer Miller couldn't refuse. Before long, she had moved to Detroit and was working as a quality control analyst in the automotive industry. She later earned an MBA from the University of Detroit.

For the majority of Miller's career with Ford, each time she advanced to a new position within the company, it was the first time a woman had held that job at Ford. "I do think the world of Ford changed dramatically in the last 33 years, and frankly, it gives me lots of pleasure when I see it recognized as one of the best companies for women," says Miller. "I think most people want others to be successful, and I always found strong backing at Ford."

The year 2004 marked a high point in Miller's career as the Women's Automotive Alliance International presented Miller with the Spirit of Leadership award for her commitment to community service and family values. When she looks back at her accomplishments, Miller remembers her encounter with another challenge shortly after she took over Ford's casting operations. When the American Foundryman's Society invited her to join their organization, she refused to join as long as the organization called themselves the FoundryMAN's Society, and she encouraged other women to do likewise. "It took about a year, but some men got behind it, and they officially changed the name to the American Foundry Society," says Miller, who later received an e-mail from the person who had formerly held her job saying he was embarrassed that they had never thought of making the change before.

The career paths of three Truman alumnæ led each one in a different direction, they all emerged as models of success in the corporate world. Although the biggest changes Miller has seen in the automotive industry is the amount of plastic and aluminum that goes into vehicles today versus steel. A second major change is the significant addition of safety features. "When I went to Ford in 1973, they were just implementing the first bumpers that were more crashworthy, and I have seen it grow through all the various safety items—the passive restraints, the airbags, the sensors that tell you that you're getting too close to something when you back up—even vehicles that will park themselves," says Miller. "In a way, it's analogous to what is happening in the world in general—technology has advanced beyond my wildest dreams of 30 years ago, and the application of that technology giving us the vehicles of tomorrow is very exciting."

"At my retirement party, the thing that struck me the most was when several people spoke about how much it had meant to them that whenever they wanted to talk to me, I would drop whatever I was doing to talk to them and advise them," says Miller. "I turned to my husband and said, 'you know, that is the influence of Truman, because I saw it in action and knew how much it meant to me as a student that the professors always had their doors open so you knew you could basically drop in whenever to talk about things.'" After college, when she became very busy in her own career, Miller says she began to realize what a sacrifice her professors had made. "I think that experience at Truman helped me earn a reputation at Ford of being a good coach and counselor, and in all honesty, that probably means more to me than the fact that I was recognized as an outstanding manufacturing person."
Trudy Cooper ('76): Co-founder of one of the largest casual-dining restaurant companies in the world

Trudy Cooper ('76) had never been on an airplane until she was 22. Yet by the time she was 35, she, along with three other partners, was opening a new Australian-themed restaurant that was the beginning of the Outback Steakhouse empire. Today, Cooper is the senior vice president of Training and Development for OSI Restaurant Partners Inc., a multimillion-dollar business that is the parent company of Outback Steakhouse and seven other popular restaurant chains.

Born in Laughlin Hospital in Kirkville, Mo., Cooper lived on a farm near New Boston, Mo., until her junior year in high school when her parents became concessionaires at Thousand Hills State Park and the family moved to Kirksville. Though she did not realize it at the time, she was unconsciously picking up lessons for her future career even then. “Watching my parents and their sense of hospitality as concessionaires was great,” says Cooper. “Looking back, I saw the courage it must have taken for my parents to step into that role and run a boat dock, a restaurant, cabins—the whole works and having to create it from nothing,” says Cooper.

After high school, she decided to make use of her artistic talents and took art classes as she earned a bachelor of science degree in education at Truman. She then taught art to grades one through 12 in Bucklin, Mo., for a couple of years before deciding that she wanted to go in another direction. “Teaching was a huge learning experience and was great fun,” says Cooper.

On a lark, she and a friend took a road trip to Colorado where Cooper ended up getting a job as a binding technician at the Tamarack Ski Resort, and it was this move that unwittingly propelled Cooper into the world of corporate restaurating. The resort had a dining room, and during the off season, the staff would work banquets and that’s where Cooper got her first taste of working in the restaurant industry. It just so happened that the Colorado resort had a sister resort in Florida called Innisbrook, which Cooper saw as an opportunity for yet another road trip. “We decided it would be fun to drive to Florida for the season,” says Cooper. “I came down intending to stay for three months and never went back.”

In Florida, Cooper began working at a restaurant called Bennigan’s which set the stage for the next phase of her career. When Bennigan’s corporate office found out that Cooper had a degree in education, they offered her a position in corporate training, which she accepted, and it was through her work at Bennigan’s that Cooper became associated with Bob Basham and Chris Sullivan. The three entrepreneurs eventually left Bennigan’s to join forces as joint-venture partners with another restaurant chain called Chili’s.

Outback Steakhouse was born in the 1980s when Cooper, Basham, Sullivan, and Tim Gannon combined their talents to come up with their own concept for a restaurant and hit upon an empty niche in the marketplace. Back then, options for eating out were mostly limited to what Cooper describes as “low-end” eating experiences and “extremely high-end” ones. “With the high-end food experience, you had high-end prices and also had to dress accordingly,” says Cooper. “We wanted to create a restaurant that had more of an upscale service element to it with the kind of food you get in a high-end restaurant, but we wanted the atmosphere to be casual—and do it at a great value to the customer,” says Cooper.

Originally, the four partners planned on opening two or three of their Australian-themed steakhouses locally in Florida. However, they soon found that Outback Steakhouse was exceeding their expectations by leaps and bounds. “After opening the first Outback Steakhouse in 1988, and then the second one a couple of months later, we never looked back,” says Cooper. Her expertise in training and development was a huge benefit when they went from two restaurants to opening 50 restaurants within the first three years, and they still are opening around 20 new restaurants each year.

Today, there are almost 800 Outback Steakhouse restaurants, including around 200 international locations, and Cooper serves as senior vice president of Training and Development for Outback’s parent company which is now known as OSI Restaurant Partners Inc. In addition to Outback Steakhouse, the company has seven other concepts—Carabba’s Italian Grill, Bonefish Grill, Fleming’s Prime Steakhouse, Roy’s, Cheeseburger In Paradise, Lee Roy Selmon’s All American Grill, and Blue Coral Seafood & Spirits—for a total of around 1,200 restaurants.

The same values that Cooper learned from watching her parents in their work as concessionaires—hospitality, sharing, quality, fun, and courage—are the guiding principles for Outback Steakhouse and the other restaurants owned and operated by OSI Restaurant Partners Inc. Cooper says they hit upon another element of phenomenal success when they adopted the concept of giving ownership to their venture partners, something that was not found elsewhere in the industry.

“Our mantra still continues to be it’s all about our people—it’s about drawing the best people, treating them like partners, and letting them run their businesses, as much as we can with 1,200 restaurants,” says Cooper. “I’m not much of a control freak—I think it’s that art background—I don’t try to force my way on people, and it turned out to be a really strong thing for me because it allowed other people to show their strengths.”

Years ago, she says their company realized they were developing their own people and decided that it was the company’s job to train them properly. “They would start as a busser or a cook and end up working in management at a multimillion-dollar business,” says Cooper, who is proud of the way the company takes care of its people, with programs such as their inhouse university program called Better Yourself Through Education (BYTE) and a trust fund program that provides financial assistance to their people in times of need. “For example, if your apartment burns and you need $2,000 to get by, you can get the money by the next day,” says Cooper.

“The restaurant business as a whole has become much more accepted as a true profession,” says Cooper. “People are seeing that there are lifelong careers to be had in the restaurant industry, and that it is a viable, complicated business with careers in commodities, political influence, finance, accounting, marketing, food safety, and customer service which is huge.” One of the messages she tries to get across is that a person’s success is in their own hands. “You can choose to do whatever you want to do because you have what it takes inside you already, and people are there to help open the door for you along the way,” says Cooper. “It’s a very important part of growing.”
Cynthia Brinkley (‘83): A portrait of success in the telecommunications industry

Cynthia Brinkley’s highly successful career with the largest telecommunications provider in the United States took her all around the country before bringing her full circle back to her home state. As she navigated her way up the corporate ladder, her journey took her to Texas; California; Washington, D.C; then Little Rock, Ark.; before finally bringing her back to Missouri. Today, as president of AT&T Missouri, Brinkley is responsible for AT&T’s regulatory, legislative, governmental and external affairs activities for the entire state of Missouri.

Having grown up on a farm near Milan, Mo., Brinkley credits her success with the work ethics and principles she learned from her parents who were small business owners. “My dad owned and operated a farm implement company, and we owned a nursing home which my mother ran,” says Brinkley. “I had very good role models just watching my parents and what they did with the family businesses, and they were also very active and involved in the community.”

Brinkley’s parents encouraged all six of their children to do their best and work hard, and in spite of being involved in lots of extracurricular activities in high school, from serving as president of the student body, to cheerleading, to being voted Homecoming queen, Brinkley was a good student. Following high school, she attended the University of Missouri-Columbia before transferring to Truman State University. “I decided I wanted a change, and my parents were building a new nursing home in Milan, Mo., so I decided to come back to help them with their new business,” says Brinkley, who graduated from Truman in 1983 with a degree in political science.

One of her most vivid memories of transferring from Mizzou to Truman was the transition of going from a class of around 500 students to a class size of 30. “I thought the quality of instruction at Truman was fantastic,” says Brinkley. “And Dr. Candy Young was probably my favorite professor and still is, to this day in terms of what I learned from her…I really learned a lot academically at Truman.” Considering the path her career took, it is not surprising that one of the courses Brinkley found most interesting was called Politics of Government Regulations.

After college, Brinkley gained insight into the world of politics by working on political campaigns in the Missouri Sixth Congressional District, as well as a mayoral race and city council elections in Kansas City, and her experience with the campaigns allowed her to polish her skills in volunteer coordination, media relations and other types of promotion. She then worked for MCI, before going back to the University of Missouri-Columbia to obtain a journalism degree. Shortly thereafter, she joined AT&T, then known as SBC Communications Inc., and has been with the company for the last 21 years.

Her career with the telecommunications company began in Austin, Texas, back in 1986, where she put her political science and journalism degrees to use working as an external affairs liaison to the Texas Public Utility Commission and later as SBC’s media spokesperson for regulatory and legislative activities. In 1993, she moved to the company’s headquarters in San Antonio, Texas, where she was responsible for the development and support of public policy and state legislative activities for SBC and its subsidiaries. Four years later, Brinkley’s career took her to California when she became area vice president for Pacific Bell in Los Angeles. Brinkley then served as executive director of federal relations for SBC before being appointed as president of SBC-Arkansas in 1999.

Since 2002, Brinkley has served as president of AT&T Missouri, and one of the biggest challenges in working for the telecommunications company is keeping up with the dramatic changes in technology that require the company to continuously adapt to meet new needs. “In our business, we have to make sure the company is relevant to all the changes that are going on and just staying up with that is a huge challenge,” says Brinkley, who also has the task of trying to foresee how the government will affect her business. “You have to change internally to meet your external needs, and the company has done a great job of doing that,” says Brinkley.

Following the example set by her parents, Brinkley is highly involved in civic affairs including the St. Louis Civic Progress, the Civic Council of Greater Kansas City, the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, and the Hawthorn Foundation, and she serves on numerous boards. Her professional contributions have resulted in a number of awards, and she was named one of the Most Influential Women in St. Louis in 2003 by the St. Louis Business Journal.

“One of the comments I often get is how can someone from a small town in rural Missouri be so successful in the corporate world,” says Brinkley. “I was fortunate enough to work for a great company after getting out of college, and it was a company that had a lot of opportunities…you just work hard and have good role models and good teachers along the way and life happens.”