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'Pulling the string' keeps attorney on track ethically

By Judy Wells

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When Carla Miller wants to look into something, when she suspects status quo is status so-so and needs to be shaken up, she says she is "pulling the string."

Join her on a board, committee or commission, and you will hear it frequently. "Pulling the string" translates to unraveling procedures, opening up discussion and tweaking practices until problems are eliminated and the public is better served.

"It always means more work for somebody," said John Rutherford, chairman of the Department of Children and Families' Human Rights Advocacy Committee for Mental Health.

Rutherford explained that Miller is a questioner who sees status quo as a starting point, not the final answer.

Miller was chairman of the Human Rights Advocacy Committee when Rutherford, director of corrections for the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, became a member and began working with her. "She kept us on track; she's quite a taskmaster. Carla was always well prepared and certainly knew how to use the assets around the table."

Miller had her group set specific goals. They standardized monitoring procedures for assisted-living facilities. After cursory visits to each facility in Baker, Clay, Duval, Nassau and St. Johns counties, the committee instituted full-scale, in-depth checks and evaluation forms, ensuring that all sites were inspected and treated equally.

"The clients who were living in those assisted living facilities were the recipients of some improved care, from living accommodations to administration of medicines," said Rutherford. "On top of that, with her leadership, she got the Human Rights Advocacy Committee involved in the discharge of children from crisis stabilization units."

In many cases, children were being detained in short-term mental health treatment facilities longer than advisable. The Human Rights Advocacy Committee changed that, developing a protocol for admissions and releases that is being copied statewide.

"They're now being moved out in a judicious fashion and getting the treatment they need," Rutherford said. "Her leadership through that whole process was impressive."

Impressive, too, are what strings this indefatigable volunteer has pulled to develop an ethics policy not just for Jacksonville city officials and employees but for businesses that deal with the city.

Having been elected with a campaign promise to reform ethics in government, Mayor John Delaney assigned his then chief of staff, now general counsel for the city, Richard Mullaney, the task of putting together a team to do it. Members from the mayor's staff and general counsel's office were joined by one volunteer, Miller. Mullaney had known her for 22 years, since their law school days.

"Through her days at the U.S. attorney's office and as a very successful private attorney, in her heart she's always wanted to work on behalf of the public," Mullaney said. "She spent the next four years of her life doing it."

After years spent rewriting the ethics code, Miller became the commission's chairman and worked to get the new code approved by city council. Then she was asked to be the city's first ethics officer and accepted, as a volunteer. She has trained all elected officials on ethics and organized training in values and ethics for several thousand city employees. Now she is expanding the ethics program to include companies doing business with the city. She is on the Chamber of Commerce task force to develop ethics programs for small businesses.

"The whole idea here is to raise aspirational goals," said Mullaney, "to aspire to be honest, to do right for the public. Ethics is more than 'avoid a conflict of interest and don't take gifts from lobbyists.' "

It was, says Howard Skinner, right down Miller's alley.

"She's always pursued altruistic ends," said her partner in Miller & Skinner, P.A. "Just the pursuit of a good living has never been her highest motivator."

But she still loves to shop. And Skinner should know. Not only was Miller his wife for 15 years, but Skinner said she is still his best friend.

"Generally speaking, Carla is an idea person," he said. "She works in spurts and loves to create new projects. She is capable of achieving anything she puts her mind to."

She expects those with whom she works as a volunteer to be capable, too.

According to Rutherford, once the string has been pulled, Miller has another catchphrase, "Don't tell me what you're going to do. Do it."