

Chautauqua Giants and Greek Heroes:

Exploring the Impacts of Individuals on a Broader Community

It is widely disputed whether *The Iliad* is based on real-life events. Homer's war epic is undeniably a tale as old as time, but is it just a tale? Even excluding the supernatural interferences, it seems unlikely that these larger-than-life characters could co-exist with our world. In *The Iliad*, individual characters change the course of events with a single action, shaping the fates of those around them. Arrogant men like Agamemnon and Achilles cause their company to suffer, while selfless men like Patroclus sacrifice their lives for the sake of others. Although it may seem like actions this influential could only take place in fiction, modern-day individuals can still impact their communities greatly, as illustrated by the life of Richard "Dick" Miller.

In *The Iliad*, the first conflict starts when Agamemnon takes the priest Chryses's daughter Chryseis as a war prize. Achilles demands that Agamemnon give up Chryseis, as the priest has called upon Apollo to punish the Argives. Agamemnon refuses to relinquish his war prize and a plague is brought upon the Argives, killing hundreds of his men. Eventually, Agamemnon returns Chryseis, but not before the irreparable damage is done. As he no longer has his prize, Agamemnon steals Achilles' war prize Briseis. In his rage, Achilles retaliates against Agamemnon's thievery by refusing to go to battle against the Trojans. Achilles points out that, for ten years, he has been fighting for Agamemnon, but Agamemnon always ends up with the "lion's share" of the plunder¹. Achilles's pride is wounded, and he rashly calls upon his mother to turn the battle in the Trojan's favor. Like Agamemnon, Achilles' actions lead to the demise of

¹ Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin Books, 1998.

many Greek soldiers. Both Agamemnon and Achilles negatively impact their communities as their actions cause harm to the Argives.

However, Achilles's closest friend Patroclus has the opposite effect on his community. When Patroclus sees that Achilles, blinded by his anger against Agamemnon, will not return to the fight, he proposes that he go to battle instead of Achilles, holding the Trojans off and protecting his fellow men. This proposal is ill-advised, but Patroclus demonstrates his selflessness and compassion by putting his life in danger. Patroclus enters battle disguised as Achilles, knowing he will be the most sought-after target on the battlefield. However, he views his actions as necessary to prevent the deaths of more Argives. After a long battle, the Trojan Hector kills Patroclus, but his death is not in vain. His sacrifice spurs Achilles to return to the battle, setting his pride aside to fight alongside the Argives. Patroclus dies nobly, striving to do the right thing.

Like Patroclus, Dick Miller was a man who was willing to sacrifice for the right thing. Miller was a member of the Board of Trustees at the Chautauqua Institution, a quasi-educational non-profit founded by Methodist ministers for Sunday school teachers to gain community experience. Over the years, Chautauqua transformed into a religious educational institution providing programs for community enrichment, hosting non-denomination services for over 9,000 residents per week.

For Miller, working for Chautauqua was not a planned career move. After earning an undergraduate degree at Yale and a Juris Doctor from Harvard, Miller joined the Milwaukee law firm Foley & Lardner, retiring in 1993 to focus on leading in his church and his community². Due to his extensive background in corporate finance law, Miller was brought onto the

² Admin. "Richard." *Legacy.Com*, 4 Oct. 2021, www.legacy.com/obituaries/name/richard-dick-miller-obituary?pid=200220343.

Chautauqua board to advise the organization in a time of financial struggle: “He was involved in helping with fundraising and determined how [Chautauqua] would invest their funds³,” recalled Becky Howell, Miller’s stepdaughter, in a personal interview. In our interview, Howell spoke highly of her stepfather: “He was a very moral person. He just stood up for what he thought was right⁴,”

Although Miller impacted his community in many ways, Howell highlighted one example of his wisdom guiding the Chautauqua Institution. When Miller first joined the board, a pyramid scheme was going around where scammers would convince boards to give their money to hold for a little while. The scammers claimed to double the board's investments, but they would run away with the invested money instead. When this scheme was presented to the Chautauqua board, almost every member was ready to accept the offer. As a newly appointed trustee, Miller didn’t have a strong standing with the rest of the board. However, he stood up for what he believed was right, working to safeguard Chautauqua. Like Patroclus in the *Iliad*, his gamble could’ve ended badly. He could’ve been taken off the board for his refusal to cooperate with the popular vote. Luckily, although the board was initially reluctant to refuse such an offer due to their severe financial vulnerability, they eventually declined at Miller’s behest. In the long run, Miller’s actions benefited the Chautauqua Institution: “Because of the way he stood up to [the board], they weren't touched by it,” said Howell, “All over the country, major groups were taken in by this and lost millions⁵”.

Beyond protecting Chautauqua from financial scams, Miller was also responsible for the institution's financial renaissance. Miller’s efforts to ensure the survival of the Chautauqua

³ Howell, Becky. Personal Interview. 23 July 2024

⁴ Howell, Becky. Personal Interview. 23 July 2024

⁵ Howell, Becky. Personal Interview. 23 July 2024

Institution “resulted in five successful major [fundraising] campaigns⁶”. To this day, the Chautauqua Institution is alive and well, largely thanks to the actions of Dick Miller, and although he passed away in 2021, his impact is still felt by the current Chautauqua administration. Miller will go down in history as the man who saved Chautauqua by standing firmly on what he knew to be right.

In conclusion, while characters like Achilles, Agamemnon, and Patroclus are mostly fictional, the indelible impacts they left on their communities can be replicated in real life. Instead of Achilles and Agamemnon blinded by their greed and pride creating harmful situations for their armies, selfless true heroes like Patroclus are the ones we should set as an example. Stalwart giants like Dick Miller are the role models we should remember, as they remind us that we too can spark positive change in our communities.

⁶ Borgstrom, Megan. “Remembering Dick Miller, a Chautauqua Giant.” *Chautauqua Institution*, 1 Oct. 2021, www.chq.org/announcements/remembering-dick-miller-a-chautauqua-giant/.