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Blues legend returns to the Heights

James Henke

Musician Bill Miller, who recently moved back to Cleveland Heights, is better known to most people as Mr. Stress. Now 71 years old, and a member of the Cleveland Blues Hall of Fame, Miller has been a major figure on the Cleveland music scene since 1966, when he formed the Mr. Stress Blues Band.

As a member of that group, Miller played at virtually every major Cleveland rock venue, including the Agora, La Cave and the Euclid Tavern. The band released three albums, "Live at the Euclid Tavern," "Stress Formula" and "Killer Stress," and opened shows for such artists as Cream, Three Dog Night, Steppenwolf and the MC5. Singer, songwriter Chrissie Hynde even references Miller in the Pretenders' song "Precious."

Born on Jan. 1, 1943, Miller was the first baby born in Cleveland that year. "They ran my photo in the *Plain Dealer*," he said.

He grew up in predominantly black



Musician Bill Miller (right) with friend Colin Dussault at Miller's Musicians Tower apartment.

neighborhoods in Cleveland, and became fascinated by jazz and blues as a result of hearing the music his neighbors

would play on the radio and on their record players. He started out playing

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Community loses beloved teacher

Angee Shaker

On Monday, April 7, the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District lost Kate Smoker, a cherished friend, colleague and music teacher. Smoker was only 35 when she died, leaving behind her husband and two young children.

"Smoker was renowned for her drive and passion. She worked tirelessly to positively impact her students and ensure their success, both in and outside of the classroom," stated Superintendent Nylajeane R. McDaniel.

"Kate always recognized the very best qualities in her students and worked hard to get them to recognize their own gifts," said colleague Ida Bergson, an art teacher who often collaborated with Smoker.

Julie Lustic, the physical education teacher at Canterbury, said, "As an integral member of the Creative Arts Team at Canterbury, [Smoker] was always up



Kate Smoker

for a challenge. She brought her enthusiasm, creative spirit, and willingness to embrace projects outside her area of expertise to all our collaborations. We will miss her not only as a colleague but

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Anthony J. Farris is new CH law director

Deanna Bremer Fisher

At its April 23 meeting, Cleveland Heights City Council voted to approve the appointment of Anthony J. Farris as the city's first full-time law director. City manager Tanisha Briley selected Farris as law director, but his appointment became effective only with the approval of a majority of city council, in accordance with the CH City Charter.

Farris, a graduate of Case Western Reserve University School of Law, spent the majority of his career in municipal law with the City of Youngstown, holding several positions including chief assistant prosecutor, deputy law director and law director.

In an April 11 press release, Briley said the city decided to make the position of law director a full-time one, in order "to maximize accessibility, efficiency and consistency for the city." Briley said, "We took our time to find the right candidate and were impressed with the depth and range of legal and community issues that Mr. Farris has been involved in during his career."

After he was approved by council, Farris thanked members of council and the city manager saying that he was impressed with the operations of the city. "The general reputation of the city and its government are highly thought of," he said. "I can't wait to be part of this organization, the city and community."

Deanna Bremer Fisher is executive director of FutureHeights and publisher of the Heights Observer.

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CH-UH school district names Talisa Dixon new superintendent

Kim Sergio Inglis

On April 21, the Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School district announced that the board of education (BOE) had selected Talisa Dixon to become its next superintendent. Dixon is currently deputy superintendent: teaching and learning for the Saginaw (Mich.) Public School District. She will take over the CH-UH superintendent position from Nylajeane McDaniel, who will retire on July 31.

At the time of the district's announcement, terms of Dixon's contract

were being negotiated. The BOE is expected to vote on her contract during its May 6 regular board meeting. According to



Talisa Dixon

Angee Shaker, director of communications for the CH-UH district, the board anticipates that there will be a transition period during which Dixon will work with McDaniel, but a start date for

Dixon has not yet been determined.

"We were very fortunate to have a selection of extremely qualified candidates, but in the end, Dr. Dixon was the

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Cleveland Heights City Council

Meeting highlights



MARCH 17, 2014

All council members were present.

Public comments

Emergency legislation: Resident Diane Hallum criticized council for having so many agenda items slated for action "as an emergency." Mayor Dennis Wilcox explained that most of the legislation was for a first reading.

Toxic chemicals: Resident Joan Spoerl, a member of Beyond Pesticides Ohio, pointed out that the crumb rubber infill at Denison Field has toxic chemicals. She asked that council have a third party test the grass and crumb fill for chemical content, warn families how to reduce exposure to the chemicals, and start a plan for the disposal of these materials if they are found to have unacceptable levels of toxic chemicals.

Fair housing audits

Council approved a contract with the Heights Community Congress to conduct fair housing audits with \$8,500 in Community Development Block Grant funds.

Housing council appointments

Council appointed residents Amanda Schaffer and Ben Hoen to three-year terms on the Community Reinvestment Housing Council, beginning March 20. Mayor Wilcox announced the appointment of Council Members Mary Dunbar and Cheryl Stephens to the housing council for three-year terms ending April 1, 2017.

Nuisance bar

Council declared a bar at 2230 Noble Road a

nuisance following more than 78 police department visits since January 2012. The owner was arrested for drug trafficking. As part of the nuisance declaration, council called for revocation of the business occupancy permit.

Fair Housing Month

Council declared April to be Fair Housing Month, reaffirming Cleveland Heights's commitment to open housing. This is the 46th year since passage of national fair housing legislation. The resolution recognized the city's nine-point plan, approved in 1976, to make the city a full service inclusive community.

Capital improvements

The city will undertake nearly \$3.3 million in capital improvements with funds raised by issuing bonds later this spring. Eleven pieces of legislation, each identifying a specific bond amount for a specific capital expenditure, were presented on first reading. Council action on these will take place at a later meeting [see April 7 notes below].

LWV Observer: Susie Kaeser.

APRIL 7, 2014

Council Members Mary Dunbar and Jason S. Stein were absent.

Nuisance properties

Council declared four properties to be nuisances and authorized abatement (razing, cleanup and asbestos survey) at a cost of \$15,500 each. The properties are:

- 991 Elbon Road
- 1039 Nelaview Road
- 3540 Nordway Road
- 3452 Silsby Road

Parks and recreation appointment

Council approved the appointment of Peter Titus to the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board to fill a vacancy and begin a four-year term, effective March 31, 2014.

Recycling news

Residents may now include telephone books with other recyclables for pick up on their regular collection day.

In a few weeks, a container will be placed in the Community Center parking lot for the collection of Styrofoam containers. Only expanded polystyrene (EPS 6) Styrofoam will be permitted. Also, Styrofoam contaminated with food or beverages cannot be accepted. The container will list this information.

Bonds for city expenditures

Council approved the issuance and sale of bonds to pay for city equipment and improvements throughout the city. The purpose and amounts of the bonds to be issued are:

- Motor vehicle purchase for the public works department, \$950,000.
- Improvements to the Cedar Lee and Cedar Fairmount districts, replacing sidewalks, curbs, stormwater management, landscaping and other streetscape amenities, \$595,000.
- Resurfacing city surface parking areas,

\$600,000.

- Acquire and install computer hardware and software needed for city management and administrative functions, \$255,000.
- Acquire motor vehicles needed for the police department, \$220,000.
- Install traffic signals and security cameras, \$175,000.
- Construct and install new HVAC systems in the city's fire stations, \$130,000.
- Acquire equipment for the city's recreation facilities, \$150,000.
- Improve the Lennox/Surrey parking deck, \$105,000.
- Improvements at city hall, \$95,000.
- Renovate and improve the city's solid waste transfer station, \$55,000.

State Issue 1 for infrastructure funding

Council declared its support for State Issue 1, which will be on the May 6 primary election ballot. The measure is important to cities throughout the state and, if passed, would obligate the Ohio General Assembly to keep budgeting for infrastructure projects.

LWV Observer: Katherine Solender.

Look for earlier and often expanded postings of meeting summaries online at www.heightsobserver.org. See disclaimer on page 7.

MR. STRESS continued from page 1

clarinet, but found it was a hard instrument to master. "Every time I touched it, it spoke," recalled Miller. "It said, 'Take your crummy hands off me!'"

In 1965, Miller heard the Paul Butterfield Blues Band's first album, and

decided to start playing harmonica. "That album practically made me cry," he said. "I would sit in my room and play harmonica along to Dixieland jazz records." The following year, he answered a musicians-wanted ad in

the *Plain Dealer* and joined a band called the River Rats. The group played Dixieland in various Cleveland venues, including Fagan's in the Flats. The following year, the group became the Mr. Stress Blues Band, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Miller has had more than his share of health issues. He had a heart attack when he was 51, and in 2001 he started losing his eyesight as a result of macular degeneration.

Last December, as Miller was being interviewed by phone for a radio show, some listeners realized he wasn't making sense and was slurring his words. One listener called 911, and emergency and paramedic crews went to his apartment, then on Madison Avenue in Lakewood.

"If someone hadn't called 911," Miller said. "I probably would have died." In fact, Miller was having a stroke, and he was taken to Lakewood Hospital, where he remained for about five days, before being transferred to a nursing home in Lakewood.

Meanwhile, it turned out that the owners of his Lakewood apartment had been trying to evict him. Miller had dropped a lit cigarette on the floor of his apartment and burned a hole in the carpet, and the owners wanted him out of the building. They were threatening to empty the apartment and place all of his possessions on the street.

Colin Dussault, who himself fronts a Cleveland blues band and whose family owns a moving company, heard about Miller's plight through friends, and came to the older musician's rescue.

He brought a truck to Miller's apartment and packed, moved and stored all of Miller's belongings. A few weeks later, Miller was fully recovered from the stroke and given the green

light to leave the nursing home.

In the meantime, Dussault, had managed to get him an apartment in the Musicians Towers apartment building on Lancashire Road, just off Coventry Road, and Miller moved in on Jan. 14.

Dussault then set up the Bill Miller Relief Fund and started getting the word out that Miller needed help. Donations began coming in, and Dussault then had another idea: he would create a CD to help raise money for his friend. Called "Stress Relief," the album is a four-disc set of songs by virtually every major Cleveland rock and blues artist, including Michael Stanley, Alex Bevan and Robert Lockwood Jr. (courtesy of his widow, Mary). It also features songs by such contemporary artists as Kristine Jackson, Hillbilly Idol, Cats on Holiday, Blue Lunch and many more. The CD is available at www.mrstress.net. Dussault is also planning a tribute concert sometime in the next few months.

Miller said he is happy to be back on the East Side. He and his first wife lived on Cadwell Avenue off Euclid Heights Boulevard many years ago, and he remembers hanging out on Coventry back in the 1960s and '70s.

"I spent so much time over here that I can remember when Tommy [Fello, owner of Tommy's Restaurant on Coventry] was working at a drug store," Miller said. "And I went to his restaurant so much that they named a sandwich after me." Indeed, Tommy's menu includes the "Mr. Stress," a BLT with peanut butter, mayonnaise and American cheese.

James Henke, a Cleveland Heights resident, was a writer and editor at Rolling Stone magazine for 15 years. He is also the author of several books, including biographies of Jim Morrison, John Lennon and Bob Marley.

cinco 2014

if you are able to read this note
you are either planning your ensemble for cinco de mayo, or
recovering and trying to remember where you left your car.
oh, the grace you displayed was memorable and rare.
so, you're wondering why its been so long
since you last attempted a sober celebration at 44118's
most daring, creative, and successful food joint.

how many years have passed since you were so
entertaining, clever and adoring?
how did you get to this?
maybe age, maybe loves lost.
maybe new interests.
maybe it was because you never wanted to see or be seen
by that schmegegge ever again.
or, maybe any other kind of stupid excuse.

the truth is – lopez IS a lot of fun!
the attention to detail: how they remember when you
last enjoyed scallops at that particular table.
oh, did i mention something about the great food – yada, yada.

but you might have only about forty good years left.
don't deprive yourself.
every moment is an opportunity to make a memory –
(some might even be worth remembering)
lopez is 36 years and still going strong –
better than ever. really.

love and passion – craig and staff

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