

first person

with **Joe Miller Sr.**

photo by Raymond Stewart

For Joe Miller Sr., local baseball has been a lasting personal investment. He coached South Lake Charles Little League kids for four decades, then helped McNeese build the field of its dreams.

Local baseball has had perhaps no bigger advocate, as countless Little League alumni and college baseball would attest.

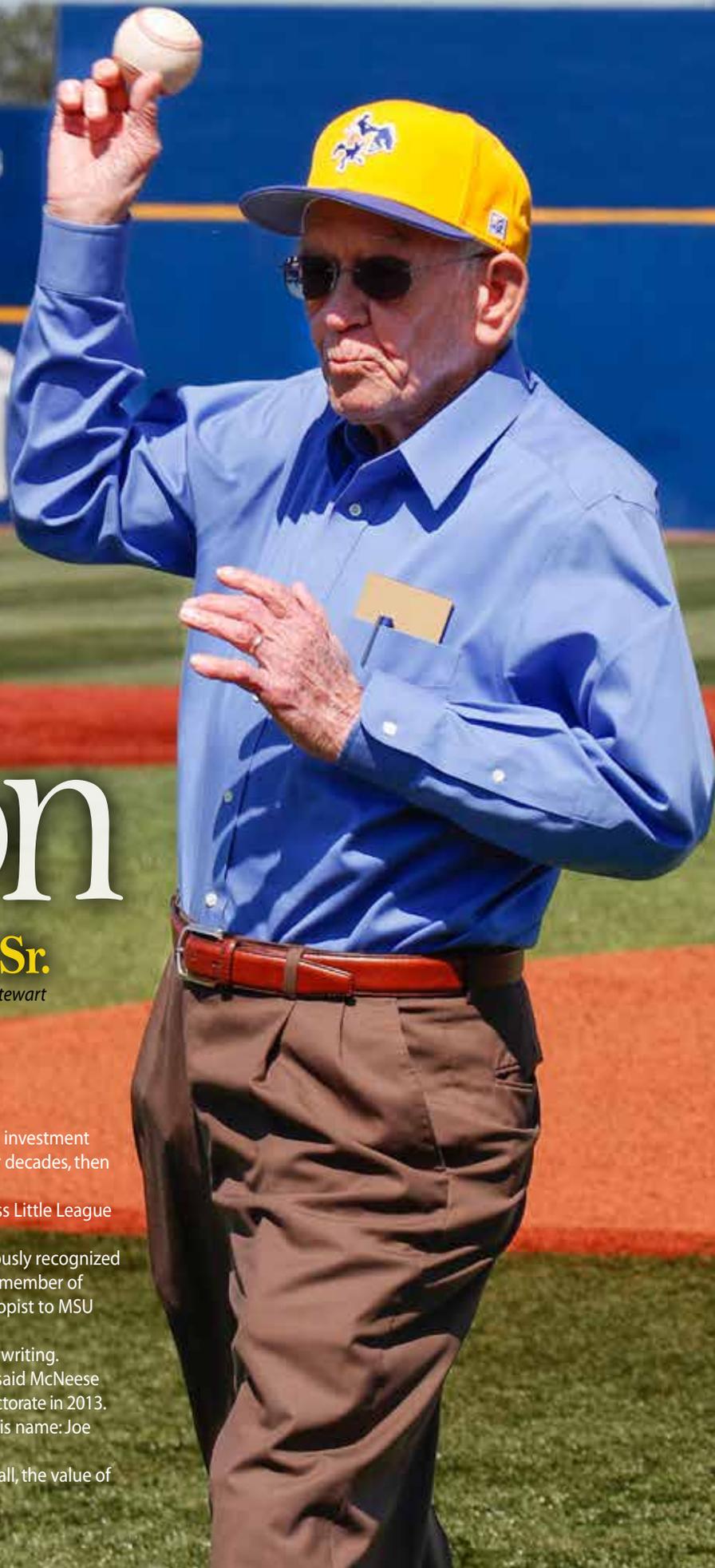
The retired F. Miller and Sons Construction Co. president is variously recognized as a successful business executive, a civic leader, a longtime board member of Foreman-Reynaud Recreation Center and a seven-figure philanthropist to MSU and all corners of Lake Charles.

Baseball, though, has had a special place for his time and underwriting.

"There are truly no boundaries to his generosity and support," said McNeese President Dr. Phillip Williams when he awarded Miller an honorary doctorate in 2013.

Now 89, Miller can go enjoy a game at the ballpark that bears his name: Joe Miller Ballpark, or "The Jeux," on the McNeese campus.

He spoke to *Thrive* contributor Brett Downer about local baseball, the value of civic commitment and his city.



How did you get involved in coaching Little League?

(Laughing). We had five girls, then finally had a boy. The Little League had the dads come watch, and the coach needed a helper. After the first year, coach moved on, so I took over. It was 41 years before I left.

How did you go about it?

I wasn't a big athlete myself, but I read all the things I could to coach better ways to throw a ball and pitch a ball and catch a ball — to try to get them to do better. I really had a different atmosphere than some other coaches — I tried to keep the kids happy instead of hollering at them all the time.

Why'd you coach for so long?

I liked it. I just loved the game.

What did you get out of it?

A lot of fun and pleasure, working with all those kids. I just enjoyed working with them. Even talking to you right now, it makes me happy just to think back about it.

Has youth baseball changed over the years?

When I first got in, it didn't go below 8 years old. Now, you have organizations starting younger and younger.

Now they're starting them at 4 years old — and talking about teams playing in state championships. Then by the time the kids are 12,

they hardly have any teams left. Kids get worn out, or tired of it — I don't know what happens.

For 10-, 11-, and 12-year-olds, it's become a money game instead of a fun thing. They have daddies putting together coaches and players in these leagues where you have to pay to play. Instead of letting kids play just Little League ball, daddies decided they wanted to put them on teams where they play in these tournaments all year long. Then the daddies started to put together these championship teams so their kids can go to the World Series when they're 6 years old.

This gets the daddies all excited. I've had people tell me, "Man, my boy is 4 years and you can tell he's got it in him — he's gonna be a major leaguer player someday." When they're 4 years old! And then they're worn out and don't want to play anymore by the time they're 6.

Back then, all you had to do was buy the shoes and pants and you could play ball. The league furnished your shirt and your cap. For the 12-year-olds, we even furnished the pants.

We had some who couldn't afford much of anything. And we had kids out there who were 8 years old and kind of clumsy — but they turned out to be all-star players,

even up through high school.

Those kids aren't getting a chance now. The daddies are picking out the best players and putting them on these traveling teams. That's sad, really. Kids had fun with the game, and some don't have that anymore.

So what kind of ballplayer were you?

They didn't have have organized ball. The *American Press* had a small league when we were in fourth or fifth grade. I played catcher a little bit. But I was little old skinny kid. I only weighed 96 pounds going into Lake Charles High. But I tried out for football. (Laughing.) Can you imagine when I went out for the football team? They put me against a big guard. They wanted me to realize I was too small, I think.





photo by Raymond Stewart

Mike Danahay, Mayor Randy Roach, Joe Miller, Sr and MSU President Williams stand at Joe Miller Stadium.



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What's your favorite baseball team?

Oh, McNeese. I just love McNeese. My involvement with the university was before baseball. When I got on the McNeese Foundation Board, they had \$300,000. It's going on \$70 million now. (Miller joined the board 44 years ago. He has given about \$2 million to the university outside of baseball.)

How did your support for the McNeese baseball program come about?

Several years ago, Coach Mike Bianco came to see me because of my involvement with Little League and all. He wanted to talk about how to get attendance up. So it was decided that they'd start having bat girls. He asked me if I'd sponsor them by paying for their uniforms. That's how I got involved with McNeese baseball — bat girls! (Laughing.)

When Chad Clement was coach, Hurricane Rita hit and blew down the fences. I went out and talked to him, and they didn't have any money, so I gave them some to rebuild them. Then I got involved with Coach Terry Burrows. We were planning the improvements to the stadium — ones like what we're having now. Then Coach Justin Hill came to see me and got me involved with sponsoring some other things with the team.

A couple of years ago, the new athletic director, Bruce Hemphill, and Coach Hill came to see me about putting turf in for \$300,000. So I paid for that. Now there are other new things. (This year, he gave the program another \$700,000.) New scoreboard, some renovations to the office, box seats in front of the stadium and an entrance that's nicer — a better place to walk through.

The former Cowboy Diamond is Joe Miller Ballpark now.

They had asked me about renaming it, but I told them no. Two times, actually. But they went a different route where it didn't require my approval.

They give you free passes to your own ballpark?

I've got four gold tickets in the reserved-seat area that are eternal. As long as I live. (Laughing.) They didn't mind doing that because they know I'm getting old.

What's your message about civic commitment — whether it's youth coaching, civic service, or contributions?

I don't mean this in a bad way, Brett, but a lot of people get into something and stay there three or four years, but then they move on to something else. I stick. I've been on the McNeese Foundation, I think, 44 years now. I went on the Foreman-Reynaud board over on the north side of town years ago, too. Once I got on the board, I had no reason to get off. I'm just that way with everything. The same with Associated General Contractors.

Why should people volunteer and what is the value of civic involvement?

Oh, when you love your town and want it to be better for future generations, you've got to work to do it. You can't just depend on everybody else. I've been involved in a lot of things and I'd like to be involved in many more. Just haven't gotten around to them.

The Lake Charles area has lots of new people here — and more people will be thinking about coming here in the time ahead. What's your message to them about what the area is like?

I've traveled to a lot of other cities, and frankly, I don't think there any better place to live than Lake Charles. We've got everything you could want right here under our nose. It's just a town that I think has a brilliant future ahead of it. If you think you should get involved and help make it happen.

