

Balancing act

Gillette company makes a name for itself from the ground up

- [By JONATHAN GALLARDO News Record Writer jgallardo@gillettenewsrecord.net](#)
- Apr 1, 2018



News Record Photos/Rhianna Gelhart

Tyler Miller is co-owner of Earth Work Solutions and winner of the 2018 Wyoming Small Business Person of the Year award.

Driving around Gillette, there's a chance you'll see something Tyler Miller had a hand in creating, whether it's the playground at Rotary Point at Dalbey Memorial Park or the clock tower downtown.

And if you find yourself on the runway at LaGuardia Airport in New York or on the Las Vegas Strip, if you look closely you might be able to see the aggregate from Miller's company, Earth Work Solutions.

Miller's life is a balancing act, moving his company forward while giving back to the community, which led him to being named the 2018 Wyoming Small Business Person of the Year.

When Miller found out he'd won this award from the Small Business Administration, he was surprised and flattered.

He was nominated by Jill Kline, the state director of the Wyoming Small Business Development Center. One of the questions on the application was what the person did to support his community, other than running a business, and "(Tyler) immediately came to mind," she said.

She'd heard stories about Miller's exploits, from buying livestock for 4-H kids to helping pay for traveling sports teams to donating a refrigerator to Thunder Basin High School.

"Everywhere you go, people know him, it seems," she said.

From a young age

Miller, who's lived in Gillette since moving here in 1981, was constantly building things as a kid and "always knew" he wanted to work in construction.

He worked in the oil industry beginning in junior high, when he and his friends put up fences in the oil fields for Osborne Brothers Construction, a company he would join years later.

In high school, he got a job with a construction company pouring concrete.

“That’s when I realized that I wanted to be an engineer,” he said. “Because engineers were basically the boss on the job, they were the ones holding the smart end of the tape measure.”

He earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in civil engineering from the University of Wyoming, where he met his wife, Jannie Miller.

He joined Osborne Brothers Construction in 1999, and the next year became a minority shareholder. In 2006, Miller and Tom Miller (no relation) bought the company, and two years later changed the name to Earth Work Solutions.

In his first 10 years with the company, Tyler Miller never saw a downturn.

“Everything was an upturn,” he said. “We were busy in the coal mines, then the coal-bed methane boom hit, and everything was very busy.”

Then in 2009, he said “the work just evaporated” after a severe downturn in the energy sector.

Before, Miller had to turn down jobs because he didn’t have enough resources and manpower to keep up, he said. Now, “we were just struggling to find work to do.”

That year, the company laid off 25 percent of its workforce.

It was then that Earth Work Solutions broadened its horizons. Instead of working exclusively in northeast Wyoming, it offered its services to the entire state, as well as parts of Montana and North Dakota.

“We just had to go where the work was,” Miller said.

They also went into new industries. In the early 2000s, work in the coal industry made up 90 percent of Earth Work’s revenue. Today, it’s about 5 percent. The oil industry makes up

about 50 percent of the company's revenue, while the aggregate business makes up 30 percent.

It's also Earth Work's fastest growing segment, having grown 200 percent since 2015.

If given the opportunity, Miller probably wouldn't relive 2009, but that tough year was instrumental in shaping Earth Work into the company it is today.

"We were really able to clean up and become more efficient, reduce overhead expenses, get down to the bare bones to get the work that we needed to to carry us through," he said.

Because of the first downturn, Earth Work wasn't affected greatly by the most recent downturn, and it even grew during that time thanks to the aggregate, calcined bauxite mined in northeast Wyoming that's applied to slick surfaces to help increase friction and safety.

Since jumping into high-friction road surface treatment in 2015, the product has been approved in about 40 states, including Alaska and Hawaii.

He just renewed a contract with LaGuardia Airport to lay down the aggregate for another year. It's been put on street corners and crosswalks, and Miller wants to expand into other areas that need high-friction surface treatment, such as parking garages and loading docks.

"We never stop trying to diversify," he said.

Life of a volunteer

Miller said he's always enjoyed helping others. Not only does he find volunteer work rewarding, it's also "a change of pace" from work life.

He serves on the Youth Emergency Services Board and he does a lot of work with the Gillette Rotary Club, where he's "gone through all the offices there, including past president."

When he was president, he worked with Gillette Main Street to put up a clock tower on the corner of Fourth Street and Gillette Avenue, a project he's particularly proud of.

"The names of several hundred people are going to be memorialized there forever," he said. "Every town needs a tower clock."

Nate Kintz, Rotary member and owner of Climate Solutions Inc., was the one who suggested the idea in the first place, but Kintz said Miller "brought it to the road," literally and figuratively.

"Just having an idea is something, but to get that all done, that was all him, man," Kintz said. "That took a lot more work than saying, 'Check this out, you've got to put a clock tower down.'"

In 2017, Miller helped the Rotary Club put together a new playground at Rotary Point at Dalbey Memorial Park. Kintz, who was president last year, said he couldn't have done it without Miller, who went to meetings, lined up the concrete, negotiated contracts and got donations. Kintz estimated that he and Miller put in at least 130 hours toward that project.

Busy days

Near the end of 2013, things were so busy in the oil industry that Earth Work didn't have enough trucks to meet demand, so it subcontracted with out-of-county trucking companies to help fill the gap. Then, Miller was hesitant to expand his fleet and ended up not investing in a lot of capital purchases.

He admitted that "it was very tempting" to spend money when the economy was great, but he'd been in the industry long enough to know things were probably going to go down.

"The writing was on the wall," he said. "Oil prices were so high that something was going to have to be corrected, and it plummeted."

Miller said his company's getting into this situation again, with work picking up in the oil fields. And again, he's exercising caution, contracting out trucks and renting equipment instead of increasing his inventory.

"That's just where you have to have good conversations with your clients, know what they have for work, how long they anticipate going to be out there," he said.

A good foundation is vital to any company's success, Miller said.

"Do the groundwork, the legwork before you get started, to make sure it's something you're going to be fully committed to," he said. "There can't be a 'quit' in the equation. You have to do whatever it takes to make it work, make the sacrifices that are needed."

This determination flows over into his volunteer work, Kintz said.

With the playground project, "a lot of people didn't think we could do it," Kintz said. "'No' was never in our vocabulary. We were going to do it. There's no quit, you don't think of those words.

"I told him about the project, and he said, 'Let's do it.'"

Juggling act

Balancing work, family and community service is a juggling act. Kline works with many small businesses on a daily basis, and she said she's "seen folks who were so dedicated to their work and volunteer work that they were neglecting their family life."

Not so with Miller. Kintz said Miller does a great job of keeping those three areas separate, never letting stress in one area affect the other two.

"You'd never know what that guy's going through," said Kintz, marveling at Miller's ability to do that with a company of Earth Works' size. "I deal with six employees. He deals with 60."

He's "always eager to help anybody, he's always willing to listen," Kintz added. "He'll compliment everyone that works for him, and that goes so far."

"It requires not very many full nights of sleep, and that's what it is, is a balancing act. It's a give and take," Miller said. "It definitely takes some sacrifices, because you're not always there, you've got other obligations to meet."

His two kids, Macradee and Mason, won't be following in their dad's footsteps.

"They both want to go into the medical field, and I think part of that is because they've seen the sacrifices that it takes for working this field," he said.

Kintz said the biggest thing Miller's taught him is how to manage time, "how to understand that there's always time for the things that are important to your heart."

No matter what the task may be, whether it's diversification or volunteering on the weekend, Miller has the time.