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[REDACTED]

Notes from editor (not for publication):

Hi, Wendy — This is a beautiful interview. I'd love to use it this week. —Jeff

[REDACTED]

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

#####BEGIN HED#####

1 'I have to come forth and acknowledge what the
2 community has offered'

#####END HED#####

#####BEGIN SUBHED#####

3 Dummerston farmer Read Miller reflects on the
4 catastrophic \$2 million fire and the subsequent outpouring of
5 moral, practical, and financial support from the community his
6 family has called home since 1792

#####END SUBHED#####

7 TEXT BODY:

#####BEGIN TEXT#####

8 WITH US TODAY is Read Miller of Dwight Miller and Sons
9 Orchard on Miller Road in East Dummerston. The farm goes back
10 eight generations to 1792 — Millers all the way.

11 Read studied at the Stockbridge School of Agriculture at
12 the University of Massachusetts, where he had the good fortune
13 to meet his future wife, Malah. Together, they have three children
14 and now one grandson, and they continue to work the farm with
15 their son Will, another generation.

16 Many of you are aware of the devastating fire this
17 summer that took the Millers' packing house, which is the farm's
18 main operations building. Their loss has brought them
19 tremendous community support.

20 Full disclosure: My husband and I lived on Miller Road
21 for 17 years, next door to Read and Malah and next to Dwight's
22 sister. (Now, "next door" on Miller Road is an acre or two, at
23 least, right?) So we saw a lot of Read and Malah going down the
24 road to one thing or another. Those were really good years.

25 * * *

26 **Wendy O'Connell:** So, Read, you grew up on the farm.
27 You not only did you grow up on the farm, but as I said, going
28 back generations and generations of that land, that piece of land.

29 **Read Miller:** I was very, very fortunate to be born into
30 that opportunity. And for me, that's what I have always identified
31 our farm as — an opportunity. It was an opportunity to learn, to
32 watch, to build, to take in things.

33 And part of what is really important to me is to be able to
34 return that opportunity to my children. I have an obligation to
35 carry on, to give forth the same thing that I was given, which is
36 that opportunity

37 **W.O.:** And you and your three sisters all worked on the
38 farm?

39 **R.M.:** Everybody has worked there. My kids have worked
40 there. My siblings have, my parents both, my cousins have
41 worked there. Most of them, they've either helped build or
42 they've done various farming projects.

43 I've heard these stories from a cousin that I never knew
44 who was in his 70s or so: "I helped your dad," "I helped your
45 grandfather," "I knew your grandfather."

46 **W.O.: I always thought of you and your father, Dwight,**
47 **as being philosophers of sorts. I think you have to be**
48 **philosophic a bit to be in the farming business, for one thing.**
49 **I'm going to leave this open for you.**

50 **R.M.: When I was a little kid, I asked my grandfather,**
51 **"What's retirement?" And he looked at me and he said, "Read,**
52 **'retirement' is a young man's word." And now that I'm my age**
53 **and most of my youth is gone, I can feel what he meant in the**
54 **sense that I am not retiring.**

55 When we talk about those sorts of things, it's what a
56 younger person would think of. Now that I'm approaching
57 slowing down, am slowing down, I'm going to do what I want as
58 I can. But I will be here always.

59 **W.O.: I don't think farmers ever really retire.**

60 **R.M.: But I chose it. And that's one thing that is really**
61 **important for me — and for those who are immediate to me —**
62 **to understand when things get unpleasant, difficult, unexpected.**

63 I chose to be here. I am constantly reminding myself that
64 this is a choice that I made. I choose to not do other things. I
65 wanted to do this. I still want to do this, and that's the platform
66 that I approach what I'm doing now. I want to rebuild this.

67 My first priority, Wendy, is I have a family. The first thing
68 we need to do is to make sure that this family is together and that
69 we're not putting undue pressure onto each other, that we're not
70 having false expectations, and that we all respect and appreciate
71 what is coming to our plate that needs to be addressed, and not
72 to set our expectations above what can be done. It is about how
73 we as family come together and move forward.

74 And the other thing that I know is at my age is that it's
75 not my turn. It is. Not. My. Turn.

76 The building [that was destroyed in the fire] was my
77 property. The insurance policy is [on] my property. There are
78 certain things that I have to do because there are certain large
79 responsibilities in regards to the fire that are on my shoulders and
80 no one else's. But as we look forward, past the things that have to

81 be done — because they have to be done — it's not my turn, and
82 the kids will be — are — involved in this.

83 **W.O.: And that's Will and Ruth and Martha and your**
84 **grandson.**

85 **R.M.: And extended family. It's not just three kids.**
86 **There's three marriages there. I mentioned needing to listen [to]**
87 **everyone tell their story. In order for them to hear me, then I**
88 **need to listen to what they want, too.**

89 **W.O.: What's amazing to me is how many family farms**
90 **there are in the area, how many people who've been working**
91 **the land for a long time, like the Darrows and Lilac Ridge, the**
92 **Robb Farm, Gaines Farm, Walker Farm.**

93 These are all families, and I can see where — obviously
94 — it's more than a job. It's your life.

95 **R.M.: It is. We've had catastrophes in the past. We've**
96 **had crop losses, we've had a whole lot of other things. We've**
97 **lost family members.**

98 But when you have gone through a catastrophe —
99 whether it's financial, whether it's emotional — and you have
100 been able to come through again, to [rebuild] knowing that that
101 pain can be moved through and around, it's easier to go through
102 problems like what we have now. Because we have done this.

103 I'm not going to suggest that catastrophes are any way
104 removed or softened. But when you feel in your heart that this is
105 another problem that we can address, it's easier to approach it
106 that way. You feel like there is another side. That might be
107 different, but there is another side.

108 **W.O.: I was thinking about that kind of thing in terms of**
109 **just simply the weather, right?**

110 **R.M.: My family are weather junkies, and the weather is**
111 **new, because of our climate change, etc. I grew up in a family**
112 **that had been doing things outside of the box weather-wise**
113 **forever. You know, we were [growing] peaches and strawberries**
114 **back before Civil War.**

115 And so when I listened to my father, we were watching
116 the weather as it related in wintertime to peaches.

117 The nicest gift that I ever gave to my father was when I
118 was in high school, I gave him a recording thermometer. And it
119 was his religion. You know — “Did you change the paper?” “I’m
120 going on vacation — could you look after the thermometer?”

121 Something as simple as “what was the high and low of
122 Feb. 25?” doesn’t mean much to most, but we can pull those out.
123 Not only do we have diaries from generations, but that just gives
124 you an example of how we looked at our farming practices.

125 It wasn’t just, “OK, we’re growing strawberries and
126 apples, is it going to frost tonight?” It was how we lived and died
127 by small minutia with Mother Nature and how we tried to find
128 ways to push back on some of the risk.

129 **W.O.: Have you noticed a big change in the weather
130 over the years, just in your lifetime?**

131 **R.M.: There’s 45 minutes right there! We’ve done
132 climate-change sugaring, which has involved actually making
133 syrup from the same tap hole two years in a row. I have actually
134 picked strawberries and made syrup on Thanksgiving. I have
135 picked strawberries and made syrup on Christmas.**

136 A lot of the work that I did in the early 2000s is actually
137 no longer relevant, because the weather has changed so much in
138 that in the last 10, 15 years.

139 **W.O.: Really?**

140 **R.M.: Yeah.**

141 **W.O.: Wow.**

142 One short little story that I think is relevant, is, we used
143 to live across from the peach orchard, and one night, there was a
144 frost coming. The peach blossoms were blooming. And we
145 looked out at what looked like a Civil War camp, with all of these
146 boxes of fires.

147 I ran up to Dwight the next day, and I said, “Hey, we saw
148 it.” He said, “Yeah, we have these. You know, all of our wood

149 goes into these boxes, and you know, it helps, it helps keep the
150 blossoms from freezing."

151 He said, "In the old days, we used tires."

152 **R.M.: The old days — that was in the '60s, before things**
153 **changed in the '70s. Yeah, things are a little different now.**

154 **W.O.: Did you ever think at all, Read, of doing**
155 **something different when you were younger? Or now?**

156 **R.M.: That's not really quite a fair question, because in**
157 **the sense of fairness, I do things differently all the time. I have**
158 **an interest in biology and science. I get to explore that all the**
159 **time. One of the things that I am keenly aware of in my later**
160 **years is relationships, and I enjoy them, and I make it a point to**
161 **continue to build and improve.**

162 Probably Mahla helped in the sense that she told me
163 years ago, "Read, everybody has a story. And if you want yours
164 heard, maybe you should be listening to theirs, too." So whether
165 it's science, whether it's everyday life, or whether it's finances, it's
166 always there, and there's always an opportunity.

167 I think in some ways, my family might get upset with me
168 a little bit because I do what I want. And I hear about it.

169 **W.O.: Your family has been public in a lot of ways —**
170 **not only things from like your mother Gladys and the**
171 **Dummerston Apple Pie Festival and all of the preserves and**
172 **things that she put up. And then Mahla, of course, doing that as**
173 **well. Also, Dwight acted a bit in some local productions ...**

174 **R.M.: *The Equivalent Lands*, written by Joe Greenhoe.**

175 **W.O.: And you also were one of the first farms on board**
176 **with the Brattleboro Farmers' Market.**

177 **R.M.: The Brattleboro Farmers' Market celebrated our**
178 **50th anniversary this summer. Actually, last year was the 50th,**
179 **and I personally was at the very first farmers' market. My father**
180 **was one of the founders, [along with] Howard Prussack [and] a**
181 **few others.**

182 It's been a pleasure to see the community and the market
183 build together and to be supportive and helpful with each other

184 and provide an opportunity for a lot of small farms to start.
185 People don't realize how important that can be, that sometimes
186 everybody needs an opportunity. And the farmers' market can be
187 an opportunity for people to start up.

188 **W.O.: Very much so.**

189 There are so many younger people going into farming,
190 which kind of blows my mind a bit.

191 **R.M.: It's good. Yeah. It's different.**

192 **W.O.: Different kinds of farming?**

193 **R.M.: No, no — it's different in the sense that when I**
194 **was a kid, I was a “dumb farmer.” In the '60s and '70s, I was a**
195 **farm kid, and farmers at that time had the stigma of “you're a**
196 **dumb farmer.” Then in the '70s, and as the '70s gave off to the**
197 **'80s, it was, “You're cool.”**

198 And so the generation that is coming up now in their
199 youth have the opportunity to be cool. My peers were not. But
200 we're doing the same things.

201 So I think it's great that our society has changed and is
202 inviting the next generation to try and to be involved in providing
203 their good food.

204 **W.O.: Right down the road you've got Bunker Farm**
205 **kids. (They're not kids, but to us, they're kids.) And Full Plate is**
206 **nearby. Rebop Farm, which is doing an interesting amalgamation**
207 **of different things, including meat and raw milk and that kind of**
208 **thing. So I found it very heartening just looking at it from the**
209 **outside — younger people are really stepping and being**
210 **involved with the community.**

211 **R.M.: And those farms, I know them all, and they're all**
212 **welcomed. It's nice to see youthful energy. And every so often I**
213 **see that they go through the some of the same things that I have**
214 **gone through.**

215 **W.O.: And their lens is different, too. Of course,**
216 **they've grown up with climate change from the get go, so that's**
217 **something that's built into how they farm.**

218 **R.M.: When I went to school I studied business, too, and**
219 **law as well. And when [I studied] agricultural finances, [I**
220 **learned] some pretty simple formulas.**

221 But in the formulas that we looked at, nobody ever put in
222 risk.

223 It is a number that exists in reality. It's never taught to you
224 by a banker; it's not taught in school, to my knowledge.

225 I would encourage any young farmer or someone starting
226 out to be aware that the simple math that you did on the napkin
227 to get a loan or to go through this — you can take a number or
228 two, and you can add the risk factor in there, which you probably
229 are not even aware of. That might be an emotional number as
230 well. And ask: "Do I have the finances to pay for the risk? Can I
231 emotionally support myself and my family through that risk?"

232 Those are things that are. Not. Taught.

233 **W.O.: And gosh, a farmer's life is filled with risk. You've**
234 **seen fire, you've seen rain, you've seen early melts, you've seen**
235 **maple syrup that isn't running, you've seen the equipment — the**
236 **whole equipment piece of it now is different than you were a**
237 **kid, too, right?**

238 **R.M.: And it does not come when you might be ready**
239 **for it, or when you're expecting it, and you might have three or**
240 **four [catastrophes] in a row, and you're saying to myself, "This is**
241 **not fair." And one of the first lessons that I learned when I was**
242 **12, 13 years old is that life is not fair.**

243 So [you just need] to set that aside and move through the
244 equation that is your life.

245 When we're kids, we're worried about, Do I have a
246 girlfriend? What's my school like? Do I have a job? What's my
247 work going to be like? Now that I'm retirement age, I think about
248 the aging process.

249 But every one of those aspects is an equation that needs
250 to be understood and worked through to make myself and my
251 family happy. And so the reason I keep coming back to all these

252 little things which are part of life — this fire that we're talking
253 about is part of life.

254 When the fire was still fully involved and my family was
255 there, we were getting offers of support. And Martha or Will
256 would come to me and say, "You know, Dad, how do you feel
257 about this [offer of support]?" And I would say, "I can't deal with
258 it. You take care of it. I'm comfortable with you following through
259 on how you want to approach that." Which they did, and I
260 trusted what they did.

261 And very clearly, the community reached out and said,
262 "We support you. Now."

263 One of the things that I did while we were still hot is
264 thank the fire service. I used to be an EMT/fire guy, and there's
265 always a point in someone's life when there will be a need. You
266 may not have gotten there yet. But whether you're doing hospice,
267 whether you have a new baby, whether you're having, struggling
268 with school, there can be someone there to support you, to help
269 you.

270 So to the community and the fire service [and everyone],
271 I want you to know how important what you have given to me
272 was. We will all need that at some point, and you need to be
273 aware that you are appreciated for what you have given.

274 **W.O.: Well, you just did a really good definition of what
275 community is and can be, right?**

276 Looking back at the farm, you've grown a lot of
277 diversified crops, right? Strawberries, peaches, you've got a maple
278 sugarbush that's going on, apples, pears, blueberries, raw honey,
279 of course, maple syrup. But you also had some animals for a
280 time.

281 **R.M.: Well, the you lived on the road for a minute or
282 two, and there are four or five barns that were affiliated with
283 the family. My father was a big sheep guy. He was the national
284 president of the Southdown Breeders Association, so he was
285 nationally renowned for sheep.**

286 Originally, our farm was a dairy farm, primarily. That
287 farm was then taken by Arthur Lyman Miller out to West
288 Brattleboro, who then took it to Vernon. And so [his descendants]
289 Peter Miller and Arthur Miller are in the dairy trade in Vernon,
290 which originated on Miller Road [in Dummerston].

291 I do farming. Have done farming. I am not a look-at-me
292 person. I will be at home trying to crack a case, trying to
293 engineer, trying to figure out something that seems to me doable.
294 Consequently, I'm not around a lot to talk about Miller things,
295 farming things. I don't do that. I'm not afraid of it — it's not me.

296 We have a lot of interests, and we just do them. It's not
297 like, "OK, this is what I used to do, and I got to tell you about it."
298 It's like, "I have another idea. Let's see what that is. I have an
299 interest in this other idea."

300 The only reason that we stopped raising animals was
301 because when Covid came through, we couldn't get slaughter
302 time. Covid interrupted everything normal.

303 **You know, Covid was an odd thing. I sold — sell — a lot**
304 **of maple syrup commercially in the Boston area. I also sell a lot**
305 **of cider vinegar. You heard about the size of the loss in the fire,**
306 **which was 30,000 gallons of vinegar.**

307 So at the time of Covid, I was selling maple syrup into a
308 chain of restaurants, and my buyer calls me up and says, "I'm
309 canceling all my orders because the restaurants are shutting
310 down."

311 A day later, my cider vinegar sales go through the roof
312 because now I'm selling a healthful tonic.

313 So I'm not saying that it averaged out, but I'm saying you
314 just don't know. And all of this happened within a week of each
315 other. When we went from 0 to where-are-we-going-to-buy-the-
316 bottles-to-package-all-that-vinegar?

317 **W.O.: It's like the weather, right? It's changing all the**
318 **time. That's interesting, though — I didn't even think of Covid in**
319 **terms of how it affected you guys.**

320 **R.M.: It's [also] a family thing. I enjoy animals. I**
321 **consider myself a livestock person as much as anything. But my**
322 **kids aren't.**

323 I like to do veg as well. When my son came home from
324 school, I tried to get involved in that, and he was doing all of the
325 apples primarily. And I said, "You know, let's plant more of
326 something." And he said, "Dad, I'm not interested."

327 And at that time, finances are well enough around fruit.
328 So we stopped doing acres and acres and acres [of vegetables]
329 and processing and going to the big guys. You know, it's listening
330 to what someone likes to do, and the chances are, if you like it,
331 you're going to be good at it.

332 You know, one of the things that Will really likes is bees.
333 My grandfather had bees, my dad had bees, I had bees, and Will
334 is a beekeeper. And of all the things that we've ever done, bees
335 are the one thing that we've never made money on.

336 I know I can go down through the list and say, "Oh, yes,
337 at one point, that was good" or "Oh, but we had a bad crop." I
338 had a break-even year on bees and honey, that was a good thing.

339 **W.O.: Yeah, but they're out there pollinating.**

340 **R.M.: They're doing it. And Will, to his credit, has been**
341 **asking to get a license for the farm to make mead. He's made**
342 **some. It's a great interest of his, and so we're not pushing**
343 **[beekeeping] back.**

344 **W.O.: Well, it's interesting, because everybody does**
345 **have their own interests, and being able to accommodate that is**
346 **really a wonderful thing.**

347 **R.M.: You know, I have the utmost respect for my**
348 **second cousins down on the Vernon farm, where they're**
349 **marketing their milk, etc. My family has been marketing and**
350 **selling for generations. You know, I used to peddle with my**
351 **father, my grandfather. We grew up growing and selling.**

352 With all the things that are going on with the weather,
353 etc., one of the things you don't want to do is have the crop

354 noose around your neck and either have no margin, or make sure
355 you can sell it for a profit.

356 As the kids were growing up, there's certain things that
357 Martha was tired of me [saying]. She said, "Don't say that again,
358 Dad." One was "opportunity cost," and the other was "I don't
359 care whether your neighbor has green equipment or blue
360 equipment. If you're going to do it, you start with margin because
361 I can't work harder than my neighbor. I'm not smarter than my
362 neighbor."

363 It's like I need to know where I have that margin to offset
364 that risk factor.

365 **W.O.: You've got to be pragmatic.**

366 **R.M.: I guess so.**

367 **W.O.: And nimble enough to be able to weather the risks**
368 as well. And again, it sort of goes back to family. It goes back to
369 community. And I know that the fire....

370 **R.M.: At the time of the fire, we had just come back**
371 **from farmers' market, and we were successful that particular**
372 **day because we had no perishables put back in the cooler, so we**
373 **didn't go to the building.**

374 We got a call from one of the neighbors saying, "You
375 know, your building's on fire." I actually said to whoever called,
376 "Call it in," and I dropped the phone. And Malah and I were up
377 the road. I was up there half dressed all day and all evening.

378 This fire does not define us. Does *not* define us. It's
379 tragic, it's there, it's happening now, but it *does not define us*.

380 **W.O.: And at the same time, you've got the family that**
381 **defines you and the family that's there for support, and that's the**
382 **main thing. The community really stepped up.**

383 **R.M.: They did. It was a \$2 million fire. [We had]**
384 **insurance, [from] which there is some, but not nearly enough.**

385 The community — approximately 650 people — came
386 through with donations that were over \$100,000.

387 There's a reason why I'm talking to you today. How many
388 times have you asked me [to come on the show], Wendy?

389 **W.O.: Many times.**

390 **R.M.: I have said no to you half a dozen times because**
391 **it's not my personality. But this is a moment where it's — I**
392 **cannot be me right now. I cannot be the guy that sits over there**
393 **and problem-solves and rebuilds.**

394 I have to come forth and acknowledge what the
395 community has offered. Thank you for the offer, and it will be
396 employed and reciprocated.

397 We all have a need at some point, and I would
398 encourage young people to come forth and volunteer, to do those
399 sorts of things. You know, I grew up in a volunteering family —
400 that's what we did, that's what I was shown.

401 And so this offer of thanks and gratitude is in part to say:
402 Please continue [volunteering] if you haven't. If you're not sure
403 how to be part of your community, come forth and do something
404 to help someone else.

405 **W.O.: Now you are moving forward, and you've got a**
406 **whole support system in the farm.**

407 **R.M.: If you drive by the site, you would say it's not**
408 **moving forward. But we're opportunists — [that's how] one of**
409 **my farming neighbors (Don Hazleton) referred to me.**

410 We bought a sawmill — a full-blown, get-out-of-our-
411 way-we're-sawing-production-lumber sawmill.

412 The reason is that we need hundreds of thousands of feet
413 [of wood] to rebuild that building. We have a lot of stumps.

414 But it's also an opportunity down the road. If Will, or my
415 son in law, or some other member of the family wants to be in
416 production retail sales of lumber, it is a value added. There's
417 stumps over there, there's a mill there in the middle, make
418 something for cash flow. The [wood used in the] building that
419 burned all came from the farm. I worked with a lot of mills, and
420 had mills on the farm as well.

421 I bought this mill thinking, "It's not for me." I'm older. I
422 don't need to have a sawmill. But it fit, and I am very pleased the

423 way that the family has stepped in, and now it's their mill. It is
424 their mill. It's their machinery. It's their opportunity.

425 **W.O.: Yeah, it's another asset in the farm.**

426 **R.M.: So if we were to say that is a bright spot, you**
427 **wouldn't know it when you drive by the building. But it's going**
428 **on right now. It is an opportunity that we have worked towards**
429 **capturing.**

430 **W.O.: I think that, as you've seen and what we talked**
431 **about with younger farmers, there's a much greater appreciation**
432 **from where our food comes from, and we live in a place where**
433 **we can actually go and visit people who are growing our food.**

434 And therefore it's that wonderful circular thing of
435 supporting each other.

#####END TEXT#####

BIO/COATTAIL:

#####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL#####

436 **WENDY O'CONNELL** hosts the award-winning series
437 [Here We Are: Brattleboro's Community Talk Show](#), which airs
438 weekly on Brattleboro Community Television and features
439 conversations with a very wide variety of local people of all ages.

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