

DR. EMMETT MILLER
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MAGICIAN

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Emmett Miller's life became magical the moment his grandfather wrapped a handkerchief around a toothpick, handed it to him, and asked him to break it.

Obediently, the young boy snapped the toothpick in two and placed it on the table. His grandfather passed his hands over the handkerchief a few times, unfolded it, and revealed an unbroken toothpick.

Eager to learn how to perform such amazing feats himself, he got his first magic kit from a cereal company by sending in the required number of box tops. By the age of 13, he performed his first professional magic show at a local club.

For the last five years, Miller, 46, of Bolingbrook, has worked as a full-time magician. He is known as the Windy City Wizard. Although he refers to himself as "the best magician you never heard of," he still has become an increasingly familiar presence in Naperville, having performed such events as Last Fling, the Harry Potter Party and Naper Settlement's Civil War Days and All Hallows Eve.

Halloween is a special time of year for Miller, whose repertoire includes séances and a visit to Dracula's House. Last week he welcomed Naper Settlement visitors to the infamous vampire's household, took them on a grave walk and staged a recreation of the Davenport Brothers' Spirit Chamber Illusion. The latter is based on William and Ira Davenport who, billed as spiritualists, traveled the country in the mid-19th century, invoking the spirit of a man named John King.

Miller was born in Talladega, Ala., and moved to Bolingbrook when he was about 8 years old. After graduating from Bolingbrook High School in 1980, he earned a degree in psychology from Illinois Benedictine College, now Benedictine University.

Before magic became his sole occupation, Miller held a variety of jobs. He was once a social worker, an assistant director of a crisis hot line and a trainer of volunteers for the American Red Cross. He also worked in the electronics industry for several years.

But it was creating illusions and entertaining people that held the most magic for him. He now performs in shows around the world as well as for private and corporate parties, Renaissance fairs and community events.

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Miller said he has numerous other interests as well. He is a second-degree black belt in Toshindo, a Middle Ages re-enactor, a blacksmith and silversmith, a kayaker and scuba diver. He also enjoys motorcycles, archery, hang gliding, biking and spending time with his wife, Karen, and two children, Kera, 21, and Lee, 13.

1. How would you describe yourself?

Interesting. I have been described as being energetic. I've been described as almost always being in a good mood. I've been described as being a wild man. I've been described as being very calm. Different people who will meet me will meet me inside that context. It's quite common for the people that I work with in the dojo to have no idea I perform magic. There are people I work with in the silversmithing community that have no idea that I do martial arts. There are people who I know from the diving community that have no idea about my medieval re-enactment and the weapons combat stuff that I do there.

2. What is it about magic that intrigues you?

Red Skelton was my favorite performer. Red Skelton used to end his shows by saying 'if sometime in the future you are feeling down or you're feeling blue, if any funny or silly little thing I've done should bring a smile to your face, I know my purpose under heaven has been served.' I've followed his example. He's told all of us, as entertainers, what we should be doing. My goal as a magician and entertainer is to create an experience that you can remember later on that will make you smile when life isn't easy to smile at.

3. Is Halloween one of your favorite times of year?

Halloween has always been one of my favorite times of year. Halloween is the time where people start to shed some of those inhibitions and they look specifically to have fun. Halloween has no other function in our society except to allow you to dress up and have fun. It is the sole purpose of that holiday. For the Fourth of July we celebrate our nation's independence, as well we should. Our focus is on patriotism. For each of us who comes from a religious background, Christmas has different meanings to us, or Hanukkah. ... Halloween is a time to dress up. It gives even adults a chance to return to children if they want to. It's the only time of year where everyone else gets to act like I do.

4. Do you personally believe you can speak to spirits through séances?

I think that what I believe is far less important than for people to weigh evidence and make a decision on their own. I think that debate has been raging for centuries and I don't think there's anything I can say that's going to put a rest to that.

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5. Do people ever think they are going to be able to talk to their Uncle Harry during your séances?

We don't ever, in any situation, put anyone in the position where they're going to think they're going to really be talking to Uncle Harry. We are very specific about who it is we are attempting to identify. Now, in this séance, we're attempting to contact Mr. John King. John King was the hardest working spirit in show business. Every medium and their brother was contacting John King. He is the James Brown of the spirit world.

If there is someone you would like to see featured in 5 Questions, contact Kathy Millen at kmillen@scn1.com or 630-416-5204.

Caption: Magician Emmett Miller, left, unties assistant Heather Rocchi, right, after completing an illusion at All Hallows Eve - A 19th Century Halloween at Naper Settlement Friday. Kate Szrom / Staff photographer

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