

In Moppin' Floors to CEO, Dennis mixes together the right ingredients for an engaging, illuminating and compelling autobiography; a gut-honest recount of his highly eventful life; lots of engaging stories and valuable life lessons.

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- David Williams. President and CEO, (retired) Make-A-Wish America

DENNIS C. MILLER

Moppin' Floors to CEO:

From Hopelessness and Failure to Happiness and Success By Dennis C. Miller

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Moppin' Floors to CEO

An Autobiography

From Hopelessness and Failure to Happiness and Success

"A book for everyone who seeks to clear a path of serenity and joy through the debris of life's challenges and missteps."

> David Williams, President and CEO, (retired) Make-A-Wish America

DENNIS C. MILLER

If you see a personal autobiography titled "Moppin' Floors to CEO" you already know this will be a story of courageous "overcoming". And since we all are faced with life's sideways blows, Dennis's story is one of hope triumphing over seemingly impossible challenges. I know Dennis and greatly admire how he created a life of peace and joy from the rubble of depression and abuse. This is a book for everyone who seeks to clear a path of serenity and joy through the debris of life's challenges and missteps.

David Williams President & Chief Executive Officer Make-A-Wish America

In his powerful autobiography, Dennis C. Miller describes his personal journey, overcoming childhood adversity and ultimately his path to realizing his own dreams and hopes. An honest account of how he continued to have hope throughout life's emotional, personal and professional challenges.

Anne Marie Dougherty Executive Director Bob Woodruff Foundation

Dennis provides the reader with an inspirational modern-day story of how one man turned his life around and more so, offers that same invitation to others, providing hope and a path toward transformation. The reader first stands up and cheers as Dennis recounts how he was able to undergo the metamorphosis of his spirit, soul and life and then concludes that the same can be achieved by everyone.

> Debra L. Wentz, Ph.D. President and Chief Executive Officer New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc.

The book is his inspirational story of hope despite an early life filled with hurt and the causal factors for self-doubt and depression. Dennis reveals private matters that the reader knows are most often kept secret. The success of the man is remarkable and his willingness to share the truth of his tale with us is a statement of caring for others. At the end we are led by Dennis as teacher and coach to know that You Can Do It Too.

Gerald Schatz Founder, Chairman and President Wordsworth, Wyncote Academy and Play and Learn Centers

Dennis C. Miller' autobiography shares with us a vivid account of the obstacles he faced as a young man; the challenges he met, and the inspiration he is to all of us. It is a story worth reading and a lesson well-learned. Hard work and perseverance mixed with love and hope will get you to your goals.

John B. Wilson President Independent College Fund of New Jersey

Dennis, I hope you know that from the very start of our relationship I have been a fan and admirer of yours. Your insight coupled with your endearing manner makes you a very special individual. Those genuine feelings on my part were formed before I read Moppin' Floors to CEO. Now there are no bounds to my admiration and respect for your well-deserved success and status as a thought leader in our industry and related fields. Your story is nothing short of unbelievable, your strength and perseverance incredible.

Congratulations on the book and thank you for sharing a story that I believe can help so many people with their struggles.

Be well and warmest regards always.

Barry H. Ostrowsky | President and Chief Executive Officer | RWJ Barnabas Health

Dennis, I took your new book *Moppin' Floors to CEO: From Hopelessness and Failure to Happiness and Success* up to our cabin in the Catskills this weekend. I started reading it at about 10 am and got almost halfway through by 2 pm when we left for home. I picked it up a few hours ago back and just finished it. What an amazing story. You are one impressive guy – not because of what you've accomplished (which is humbling) but because of the totally honest and from the heart way in which you've let me (and others) into your personal life's journey.

I know now why people I admire think so highly of you and are your friends as well. I laughed a few times as well by the many funny stories you told. My life is richer knowing you... and this day was VERY well spent reading your book. I need to start reading more, but I'm starting with putting some of the CAPITALIZED admonitions and reflections throughout the book under the glass on my desk.

Thanks, my friend. And your wife, Gladys, must be one heck of a woman!

Douglas A. Struyk, CPA LNHA President and CEO Christian Health Care Center Copyright © 2021 Dennis C. Miller

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MOPPIN' FLOORS TO CEO:

From Hopelessness and Failure to Happiness and Success

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xxi
INTRODUCTION	
PART ONE	5
Chapter 1: Fair Oaks Psychiatric Hospital	
Chapter 2: Father Donald M. Gantley	
Chapter 3: Raritan Bay Mental Health Center	
Chapter 4: Nowhere Man	
Chapter 5: My Thirst and Quest for Learning	
Chapter 6: Living at the YMCA	
Chapter 7: Going Back to School	
PART TWO	
Chapter 8: My Birthplace	
Chapter 9: Home of the Carteret Ramblers	
Chapter 10: St. Joseph's Grammar School	46
Chapter 11: Abraham Lincoln Grammar School	
Chapter 12: Meet My Parents	
PART THREE	
Chapter 13: St. Joseph's High School	
Chapter 14: Carteret High School	
Chapter 15: Middlesex County College	
Chapter 16: After County College	
PART FOUR	
Chapter 17: Getting My Undergraduate Degree	
Chapter 18: Completing My Graduate Degree	
PART FIVE	123
Chapter 19: Meeting the Love of My Life	
Chapter 20: Getting Married and Starting a New Life	
Chapter 21: The Money Pit	
Chapter 22: The Birth of My Son David	
Chapter 23: Becoming a CFO	
1	

Chapter 24: Bergen Pines Hospital	
Chapter 25: The Birth of Douglas and the Championship Game	
PART SIX	
Chapter 26: Holy Name Hospital	
Chapter 27: My Career as a Corporate Executive	
Chapter 28: Moving on With My Life	
Chapter 29: Dr. Freud, Meet Mr. Miller	
Chapter 30: It's Time to Stop the Stigma	211
PART SEVEN	215
Chapter 31: Exciting New Career Challenge	
Chapter 32: A Challenged Man Is a Happy Man	
Chapter 33: Change Is Blowin' in the Wind	
Chapter 34: Good Morning, Mr. President	
Chapter 35: Dialogue with the President	
Chapter 36: Celebrating Our 100th Anniversary	
Chapter 37: The Medical Center's Growth and Expansion	
Chapter 38: Health Challenges	
Chapter 39: Dealing with Government Bureaucracy	
PART EIGHT	253
Chapter 40: Unexplained Deaths	
Chapter 41: Charles Cullen	
Chapter 42: National TV Appearances	
Chapter 43: Dark Clouds on the Horizon	
Chapter 44: Knowing Who Your Real Friends Are	
Chapter 45: The Closing of Somerset Medical Center – Ten Years Later	
PART NINE	
Chapter 46: Starting My New Journey	
Chapter 47: Dr. John Cisco	
Chapter 48: My Clients Were Like Family	
Chapter 49: The Center for Excellence at FDU	
Chapter 50: Grandparents Club	306
UPDATE: FIVE YEARS LATER	
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	

"But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated"

Ernest Hemingway

PART ONE

Chapter 1: Fair Oaks Psychiatric Hospital

I remember it as if it were yesterday. It was a very cold, clear night on Friday, January 29, 1971, when I asked my parents to drive me to Fair Oaks Psychiatric Hospital in Summit, New Jersey to be voluntarily admitted. I screamed out loud for my parents to "take me" because I could no longer cope with my depression, anxiety and stress. Having recently quit working full-time during the day in a warehouse and having recently dropped out of attending college in the evening, I was fast falling into despair. As a twenty-year-old man, I felt that my life was spinning out of control in a state of hopelessness and helplessness. I was scared shitless.

My despair felt like I was carrying a thousand pounds of mental stress on my head while riding on a roller-coaster that was only going down the tracks and never up. There was no relief at any time further sending me into the darkness. I felt so depressed, tired, and discouraged. I couldn't find a way to get out of this feeling of hopelessness. I could no longer cope with my life. Fair Oaks (now called Summit Oaks Hospital) is a private hospital for drug and alcohol rehab and psychiatric services. Fair Oaks had a highly regarded adolescent unit that I would eventually be admitted to after my initial weekend. Summit, New Jersey is an affluent suburban community in Union County with nearly twenty percent of residents working in finance and real estate, especially bankers, traders and money managers. New York City is about twenty miles away and Summit has a main train station for commuters taking the thirtyminute ride into the financial district.

Upon arriving at the hospital, two males in white uniforms came out to the car and walked me into the hospital, just like they did in those old movies. I do not remember much, but I do remember being escorted to a locked patient unit and having a nurse ask me several questions about my medical and family history. My private room had a window looking out at the back of the hospital with a bed and drawers. Any objects like my belt, razor, lighter, etc., were taken away before I entered the locked unit. I smoked Camels then and the unit had a lighter on the wall that you could press to light your cigarette. I began to wonder how my life was going to be when I left this place.

I woke up on Saturday morning and sat in the TV room most of the day. Whatever medication they had given me was having the effect of making me drowsy. No one else appeared to be on the unit except an older skinny woman who sat at the end of the hallway screaming out loud while she was lifting her dress to expose her underpants. I remember thinking "at least someone is worse off than me." By Sunday, I began to feel isolated and alone, as if I were in jail or being punished. There weren't any bars on the windows, but the windows and doors were locked up with strong metal mesh screenings.

I did not see a doctor or any other professional until Monday morning. The psychiatrist, Dr. Alvarez, whom I had visited a month before being admitted, came to the locked unit to visit with me. I remember saying to him, "Are you trying to scare me by putting me in this unit?" I remember him chuckling and saying with a smile, "Yeah, something like that." While Dr. Alvarez didn't know I was admitting myself, I later found out that this locked unit was where they put patients first to make sure they were not suicidal.

But despite my sense of despondency and hopelessness, I never, ever thought of giving up. Not once. I knew that the gift of life was precious, that I wanted to make something of my life. I was not going to give up. I was determined to get the help I needed, whatever it was. I cared too much to quit. No matter how messed up my life was, I wanted to make something of my life and have a positive impact on others. Even when I was having so many problems, I wanted to be helping others.

Though I was about to turn twenty-one years old in a few weeks, I was admitted to the Adolescent Unit. This building and unit had recently been built and had bright colors and comfortable furniture. Though I had a private room, there were many young men and women on the unit who shared their units. I got to make a few friends quickly. Amy's room was next door. She was very attractive, and we became friends, but she did tell me that she had a boyfriend. Sara had the reddest, curliest hair I had ever seen. Though quiet, she was extremely bright and enjoyed painting watercolors in her room.

I recall going to a few group sessions, meeting with my psychiatrist and interacting with the staff on the unit. I was able to go to an art and wood workshop to make various things. To this day, I keep all my important documents in a wooden treasure chest that I made while at the hospital. It has a great deal of importance to me. The small chest has a lock with a key that has long been lost and has a picture of fruit, drinking mugs and wicker baskets that I was able to paste on the top.

One day I did not get up in the morning and go to the art and wood workshop with the others and my privileges of walking around outside the hospital were taken away. The next day I got up and cooperated to make sure my walking privileges were restored. I learned quickly how to get what I wanted by obeying their rules. I also began to enjoy reading books. I read Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream* which I was able to "rent" from the library in town.

It was the first time that I really enjoyed reading. It took my mind off "me" and allowed me to "get out of myself" for a while. It would become a lifelong passion of mine to read books. I never remember enjoying books as a kid because either I could not focus on what I was reading or the book reading was forced upon me by a person in authority, like a teacher. However, my trip to the Summit Library was the beginning of a very healthy habit for decades to come.

On another day, I remember being led to a room by a nurse's aide with a massive amount of equipment and lights. The room smelled like rubbing alcohol. This was where I was given electric shock therapy (ECT). I was asked to breathe into a mask and bite on a large mouthpiece. I didn't know at the time of the risks involved with this procedure or the anesthesia. ECT is a procedure in which electric currents are passed through the brain to intentionally trigger a brief seizure to cause changes in brain chemistry that can quickly reverse symptoms of depression and other mental illnesses. I have no idea what effects it had on me, positive or negative.

My mother and father came to visit me after my initial two weeks in the hospital. It was a hospital rule that all family members had to wait for two weeks before visiting. I remember my father bringing me a brand-new stereo set and a few of my favorite rock 'n' roll albums. Elton John's first album released in the United States was *Elton John* with the breakthrough hit "Your Song" and his other new album at the time was Tumbleweed Connection. My favorite songs were "Ballad of a Well-Known Gun," "Amoreena," "Burn Down the Mission" and "Where to Now St. Peter." Jethro Tull's album Aqualung and the Moody Blues' Days of Future Past, which included their big hit "Nights in White Satin," were part of my collection. James Taylor's "Fire and Rain" was also one of my favorites.

I was allowed a weekend home visit after about three weeks. It was good to leave the hospital, but my home life was also an emotional hell hole. It also felt weird. I would have to return to Fair Oaks late on Sunday night. Dr. Alvarez discharged me after about six weeks after I told him "everything was going well." He asked me what my plans were, and I told him I was "going to get a job" and hang out with my girlfriend.

He thought that sounded like a reasonable plan and allowed my parents to pick me up. I did not have a girlfriend at the time, but I told him what I thought he wanted to hear. Basically, I was going "stir crazy" and wanted to move on with my life. I left the hospital at the age of twenty-one in March 1971 with no discharge plan for any follow-up care. There was no support system set up, no group meetings, no medication monitoring- nothing. I just went home to figure out my life and my future by myself.

Chapter 2: Father Donald M. Gantley

One person who could visit me during my first two weeks in the hospital was our local pastor from St. Joseph's Church in Carteret, New Jersey where I lived. Father Donald Gantley would become the most significant person in my life for the next few years. I learned that my mother asked him to visit me. I don't remember what we said, but I did say that I would "look him up" when I left the hospital. There was something very calming, relaxing, and trusting about "Don" that would change my life forever.

As promised, I went to visit Don to say hello when I was discharged from the hospital. I remember dropping off some old clothes to the church's donation box that he was standing next to while talking to a group of parishioners. He asked me how I was doing, and I told him that everything was great. He said, "Great to see you, Den." He called me Den. I don't remember anyone else calling me Den, but I always liked that he did for some reason. We didn't see each other for a few weeks.

After a few weeks of meeting with some friends and trying to find a job, I drove my car to visit Don who was living in a temporary rectory while a new rectory was being constructed next to the church. I rang the bell and was escorted to his room by the church worker who cooked for the priests. I don't remember what was exactly on my mind, but when he saw me and asked me how I was doing, I started to cry. I mean really cry. I never, ever remember crying as much in my life as I did on that day. He had me sit in a large cushion chair in his room and held my hands tight. It must have been ten minutes before I could stop crying, regain some composure and speak.

I began to open and tell him the truth that everything was not great. I told Don about the tremendous pain and abuse that my father was

inflicting on me and my mom, brothers, and sister. I described the emotional pain that I had to live with each day and how I covered it up my entire life hiding it from everyone. I developed a strong sense of humor to mask the pain and hurt. Don was the first person I ever felt I could trust and speak to about my home life. Up to this point, I was too embarrassed and ashamed to admit to anyone the level of hurt, rejection and emotional trauma going on at home. For the next few months, it seemed that I went to visit Don for his emotional support on almost a daily basis. He never seemed to mind and was always supportive of me, regardless of the time of day.

I remember one night throwing pebbles at his window because I needed to speak to him and didn't want to wake up the other priests by ringing the front doorbell. There was also one night that I sat on the curb in front of the church, waiting for him to come home and wondering if I was ever going to be able to leave my house and get away from my father.

I could not imagine living on my own nor could I imagine living any longer at home. I felt so despondent and hopeless felt like a failure. I didn't realize at the time that Don was researching behavioral healthcare providers that could help me. I even thought seriously about going back to Fair Oaks, but I felt that I would end up living there for the rest of my life. I thought that living in a psychiatric hospital for my entire life was a real possibility.

Though Don was a priest, we hardly ever talked about religion. There was one time when I did discuss with him my doubt about the existence of God, but he never made me feel defensive. He just said, "Who else but God could have created the human eye?" What the heck was I to say after that! I needed an adult's support and didn't even know there was such a thing as a "therapist."

Don helped save my life and came into my life at a time when I desperately needed him. He was such a fantastic human being. A few years later, he would be transferred to a parish in Illinois. Though I did get to see him again many years later, it was a big loss for me, and it still brings tears to my eyes today when I think about his love and support.

After the winter, I bought a used bicycle from someone and rode the bike for hours, often staying out until two o'clock in the morning just riding in the park. I remember riding without touching the handlebars and just peddling away. I felt exhilarated and free. It was my way of trying to stay physically active and coping with my many emotional problems. My physical routine often consisted of riding my bike over twenty-five miles a day and occasionally jogging five miles a night. I thought of running in the New York City Marathon, but never applied.

I also walked for miles and hours at a time, going from one town to the next. My biggest struggle was feeling disconnected from everyone. I felt very isolated from everyone, even when people were around me. I didn't feel comfortable anywhere. I was constantly having panic and anxiety attacks. I didn't think that I could hold out much longer. I didn't think there was an answer. No one else seemed to be in trouble, just me. At least that's how I felt. I was exhausted from experiencing so much anxiety. I also found out later that one of my so-called friends was laughing behind my back because I was still riding a bicycle around town at the age of twenty-one. I guess you can't please everyone!

Chapter 3: Raritan Bay Mental Health Center

After I struggled for many months to hang in there, Don brought me to the Raritan Bay Mental Health Center in Perth Amboy, New Jersey in June 1971. There I met Dr. Michael Murphy, psychiatrist and medical director. I remember how much I liked him immediately. He did not look like a psychiatrist (whatever that means), but more like a college professor or businessman. He wore a sports jacket and tie. He was always dressed comfortably and looked relaxed. At one of our first meetings, he introduced me to Mrs. Lena Raymond who was the Day Hospital program director. She was also extremely nice, friendly and supportive. I liked her too.

Dr. Murphy had scheduled a meeting for me to meet with the professional team at the Mental Health Center. The entire team consisted of about twenty-plus professionals. I remember going into a large room where everyone was sitting in a circle and I was the center of attention, sitting in a chair next to Dr. Murphy. He told me later that he wanted me to have an image in my head of being supported by the entire organization. That he knew that I needed that picture in my head was incredible. One of the questions that the group asked me was why the priest took me to the Mental Health Center for help, not my parents. Good question. I didn't have a good answer at the time. I never actually thought to ask my parents. They also asked me what brought me to the Center, and I don't remember exactly what I said, but I did admit I needed support for living my life and getting on my feet.

I was admitted to the Day Hospital Program, which was a five day a week full-time program for patients who were transitioning from a hospital setting to living in the community. The program was great. I was so happy to go to the program. It was the first time in my life where I felt supported. Feeling supported was new to me. I had never ever experienced any sense of emotional support.

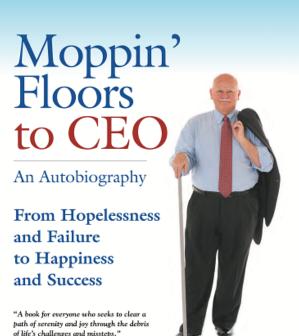
I began to grow up and make decisions and choices for myself. I remember meeting weekly with my assigned psychologist, Dr. Diane Nichols, and going to groups all day long. The psychologist on the unit was Dr. Bart Rossi, another great person. I also remember the wonderful social worker who ran the day sessions named Lena Carney. I thought it was amazing that I never heard of anyone being named Lena before and now there were two delightful people in my life by that name. They all made me feel accepted and so good about myself. They even had art therapy sessions once a week. The only thing I remember about those sessions was how attractive the art therapist was. Wow. I wanted art therapy forever!

One night they invited my parents to join me in a parent support group. I remember Lena Carney asked my parents to describe how they expressed their love for each other at home. My father said he made things around the house for my mother and kept the house in great shape. My mother said she cooked and cleaned the house which was her way of expressing her love. The social worker told me the next day that, "your parents are pretty uptight people." You think?

I remember how deeply I felt alone during this time in my life. I wrote a poem to my fellow colleagues in the Day Hospital program called "How to Grow From Loneliness." I knew both the pain of isolation and loneliness, but I also knew intuitively that my ultimate happiness would come from having the ability to be in a loving relationship someday down the road. I accepted my feelings of being lonely and did not run away from them.

I embraced them and became more in touch with myself and those around me. I spent more time writing about my experiences in my journal and I began to become more active in just talking to everyone I could during my day. It is amazing how friendly the guy at the gas pump or the woman working in the local laundromat can be if you just say hello. I also got more involved in physical training at the local YMCA. I still had a long way to go, but I certainly learned that there is a big difference between being alone and being lonely. I could be alone more without feeling the pain and isolation of loneliness.

After about nine months in the program, I was told I was graduating. I remember having to sit in the waiting room to see my psychologist to schedule an appointment. I remember "hating" sitting in the waiting room. I missed being in the Day Hospital with all the group activities. I felt so comfortable there. I felt I belonged there. It made me feel good about myself being there. Now, I began to panic again. Dr. Nichols told me I needed to separate from my parents emotionally and physically. How was I to do this? I was so scared of moving out of the house, yet I did not want to live alone or be alone. I was terrified. What was I going to do?



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