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THE INIMITABLE ERICA MILLER

A Holocaust survivor dedicates her life to helping others heal

Written by ELA LINDSAY Photo by RICHARD GILLARD

Erica Miller's castle is her home. The feisty, Romanian-born woman has fashioned the interior of her Hidden Hills residence after a Transylvanian castle as homage to her roots, decorating it with an array of huge, one-of-a-kind metal chandeliers and fixtures, oversize pieces of furniture and ornamental objects garnered from her travels. The richly colored and textured walls and tapestry-inspired ceilings add to the ambience.

One might surmise she likes to "monkey around" based on the hundreds of monkey statues and figurines she has displayed around her stately manor.

The 86-year-old mental health professional even had her likeness painted atop a coffin that sits at the foot of the massive bed in the master bedroom.

"Not because I'm dying," she explains. "But because I have a zest for life."

Erica is the author of three books and travels the world as a motivational speaker. Utterly dynamic, she has plenty to say.

"I'm not bragging," she states matter-of-factly while discussing aspects of her life. "I'm just sharing."

As an inspirational speaker, she says, "I always talk off the cuff, without notes."

She encourages people to "be in the moment" and says, "I know there's something bigger than me."

Her list of triumphs, experiences and adventures is long. She's trekked to Mount Everest's base camp at just over 17,000 feet and climbed to Machu Picchu in Peru's Andes Mountains. Last year she jumped out of an airplane in Auckland, New Zealand.

Though she's been around the globe, Erica seems most enthralled by a recent invitation to Sacramento, where members of the California Assembly planned to honor her as a survivor of the Holocaust. (The event has since been postponed.)

When Erica was 7, she and her family were sent to a Nazi holding camp in Mogilev, Ukraine. They were there for four years.

Erica described the experience in her 2009 autobiography, "The Dr. Erica Miller Story: From Trauma to Triumph."

"One old lady moaned and sobbed softly it seemed the entire time," she wrote. "I will never forget the wretched, contorted features of that face."

"I just wanted to comfort her and hold her, but my mother wouldn't let me," she remembers today.

It was in Mogilev, trapped in a concentration camp, that Erica knew she wanted to spend her life helping others heal.

Fast-forward to her immigration to the United States, getting married and having two children. At the age of 37, she went back to school and earned her doctorate in clinical psychology and, with her husband, Jerry Miller, opened a chain of mental health clinics throughout Los Angeles and Orange counties.

For a number of years they also ran the California Diversion Intervention Foundation, a nonprofit offering court-referred programs for individuals who had issues with substance misuse and domestic violence.

Jerry and Erica had been married for 53 years when he passed away in 2013. But Erica carries on. After all, she's a survivor.

Her books "Don't Tell Me I Can't Do It! Living Audaciously in the Here and Now" and "Chronologically Gifted: Aging with Gusto" focus on the concept that it's never too late to be relevant.

She lives by that concept, too. Named one of the visionary change-makers in photographer Mary Ann Halpin's 2012 book, "Fearless Women: Visions of a New World," Erica exercises five days a week, has been a pescatarian for four decades and has plans to go skiing in the Swiss Alps.

"(Age) is just a number," she says.

Erica is also thrilled by today's youth.

"Young people in my life want to grow old like me," she says. "The biggest compliment is that my grandkids bring their friends to meet me."

Which is why it's unsurprising to discover that at the far end of her Transylvanian castle there's a full-size theater dedicated to children, which her granddaughter Shayna Turk, a teacher and producer, has been running for about 17 years.

"When she was a child, she was always putting on shows in the backyard," Erica says with a proud laugh.

About herself, the inimitable Dr. Erica Miller sums up her life's philosophy: "I'm grateful to be alive," she says, with a smile and brightly glowing eyes. "I will continue to evolve." **B**

