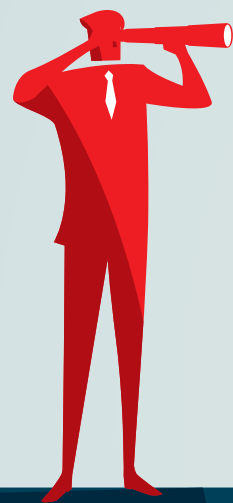


# Thriving on Challenges

*Brandon Miller takes the reins of HW&Co.*

BY JILL SELL



**OHIO COLLEGE FOOTBALL FANS** who bleed scarlet and gray should give the new CEO of HW&Co., a certified public accounting and consulting firm, a bye even though he grew up in Ann Arbor. Yes, in “that state up north.”

Brandon Miller, who became head of the firm Jan. 1, graduated in 1997 from John Carroll University (JCU) in University Heights, where he played on the school’s football team. Although he credits JCU business classes for his solid foundation in accounting, he also learned lessons on the field.

“A lot of what was instilled in me about facing challenges came through football,” says Miller, who lives in Solon with his wife, Jennifer, and their two young daughters. “You realize when your body feels like it can fail, mentally you have to keep yourself focused. The body can achieve more than you think it can. When I feel like I am getting tired, the competitive juices start flowing, and I want to keep going.”

That perseverance has served him well since he was an intern with the company in 1996 and joined HW&Co. 23 years ago. At the time, there were about 40 employees and one location in Beachwood. Today, the firm has about 125 employees and additional locations in Mentor, Middleburg Heights and Columbus. Additional accounting firm acquisitions are expected.

“One of the main reasons I am still here is because of the opportunities. If we were the same size we were when I was an intern, the chances of me staying here were pretty slim,” says Miller, who met his wife, also a CPA, at the company. “And, I like the challenge of not doing the same thing every day. This firm provides that.”

A new long-term strategic plan was rolled out last month that will focus on a legacy of growth. The modest firm of Howard, Wershbaile & Co. (the name was changed to HW&Co. in 2014) was founded in 1990 with 22 employees. It is now considered the 201th largest

**“I’ve lived in Cleveland longer than I lived in Michigan now. It’s a good place, and I want to continue to be a part of the community, as well as help HW&Co. grow here and in other locations.”**  
— Brandon Miller



accounting firm in the country.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the firm’s founding. Miller also recognizes another milestone. He is the first CEO who is not from the first generation of the company’s members. Miller, injecting some subtle humor into the accomplishment, says he is “not sure if that is good or bad.

“But, I am a forward thinker. I always have a plan for things, and I always have to be a couple steps ahead,” says Miller, admitting that his assertiveness sometimes challenges his wife, but works well in his current leadership role.

HW&Co. serves a number of industries, including construction and real estate, entrepreneurs, health care, manufacturing and distribution, nonprofit organizations, private equity and professional service firms. Clients receive help in accounting and assurance, tax planning, health care consulting, fraud and forensic, litigation, executive search, mergers and acquisitions and valuation services. Individuals receive tax and investment planning through HWFA, an affiliated investment firm of HW&Co.

“Over the time I have been here, I have serviced clients in all our verticals. The people here know I have been in their shoes and that I am not just from one specific area. It’s not like I have just done private equity and don’t know anything else about the firm,” says Miller, adding that experience ultimately helps partners and staff assist clients who benefit from a well-oiled firm. “We identify leaders in the verticals, and that also has helped grow those divisions.”

Miller has been called upon for expert witness testimony and to settle business

disputes. Many times, cases are settled before they go to court. But, Miller says his CPAs are “trusted advisors” who are called upon in financial disputes to figure out “who owes whom what.” Take for example the case of a top salesperson who feels he should have part ownership of his company, but the owners don’t see it that way. So the salesman leaves the company and takes his clients with him. A lawsuit develops.

“We get involved to determine proprietary information, what he took, its value, what he owes his former company and other concerns,” says Miller.

HW&Co. also steers employees toward a Personal Purpose — choosing a vertical that is significant to them. The firm aids employees in participating in relevant speaking engagements, writing tasks, webinar sessions and other activities that help employees express their interests, introduce HW&Co. to others and serve clients. Miller says the firm’s Fun Task Force organizes special events and activities that relieve normal work stress and tension and foster team cooperation.

Miller also has a purpose. He plans to carry out the firm’s missions and its motto, “conversations that change everything,” while balancing anticipated expansion. It’s one of those tasks in which Miller thrives. And, he plans to do it in the city in which he chose to remain after his college years.

Miller says Cleveland isn’t always associated with economic growth, but job opportunities exist. He also made the decision because of the number of entrepreneurs who call the region home.

Miller appreciates the city’s vibrant downtown area, professional sports and superb health care systems. In addition, Miller says the region’s many institutions of higher learning have given HW&Co. a well-educated and varied pool of business graduates from which to hire.

“And really, there are just good people here,” says Miller, who is impressed with Northeast Ohio’s reputation for philanthropy and its residents becoming involved in making the region a better place to live.

Miller has been long involved as a board member and supporter of Beech Brook, a leading behavioral health and foster care agency in Pepper Pike for children and their families. Last fall, Miller encouraged his daughters to volunteer for Beech Brook’s 5K Race and Family Fun Race/Walk to support the institution’s programs and services. The participation was important to Miller, as he believes instilling community support and giving back should begin early in life.

“I’ve lived in Cleveland longer than I lived in Michigan now,” says Miller. “It’s a good place, and I want to continue to be a part of the community, as well as help HW&Co. grow here and in other locations.” ■