

*It's Summertime ...
It must be Miller time On*
**BALD HEAD
ISLAND**



Old Baldy watches over the Miller family antics each summer.



BY MONICA YOUNG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID WILSON

Life with the Miller family is better than fiction, more realistic than any summer movie and a lot more fun than most childhoods. Every summer the clan of Janie and Craig Miller pack up life in Winston-Salem and head to their home perched above the marina boardwalk of Bald Head Island (BHI). Janie and Craig transport four kids, Craig's career, two dogs, a ball python, a hamster, a tarantula and other assorted sea creatures from the previous summer in the annual trek. They move to Bald Head on Memorial Day and do not return to reality until school revs back up in August.

Miller time at BHI is idyllic, full of adventure and mayhem – all the makings for memories and magic and a little mischief, to boot.

The Millers foray into BHI property began when their oldest son, Sutton, was a toddler and Janie was pregnant with Megan.

The family of three was on a family trip to Oak Island where Janie's parents have lived full-time since 1983. It had rained the entire week, and Craig had cabin fever. After reading about the historical tour of Bald Head Island, they island-hopped from Oak to Bald Head for the day. Jane Oakley led the tour, and the Millers were captivated by her phenomenal presentation of the island.

They returned a week later to sink \$100,000, a huge amount of money at the time for the young family, into a lot at BHI.

"I was pregnant with Megan and we knew



Grace, Janie and Sutton kayak with their lab Drake.

she had Down's Syndrome. What could be bigger than that? We coped with her having Down's Syndrome by buying at Bald Head," says Janie.

They built their first house on the island on Leeward Court, a creekside location. Move-in date was a tight squeeze. Baby Megan had been born and was waiting for open-heart surgery, so Janie and Craig recruited help with child care and moving, loaded a U-Haul and scurried down to Bald Head for a speedy move-in.

If you are familiar with Bald Head, you realize that part of the appeal is the lack of automobiles. Transportation is by bicycle, foot or golf cart. The few vehicles present are for construction or similar purposes and come over on a large barge from the mainland. The only way to get to BHI is by boat.

Back when the Millers moved in, there was not a land ramp for the few vehicles going

over to drive up into the barge. It required maneuvering through the river sand to the barge's ramp.

"There was not a dock at this point on the river beach. So there I am with a 24-foot U-Haul with a trailer. The front wheels are on the barge; the back wheels are stuck in the sand. They pulled the barge in, and I got the U-Haul on. Then the trailer got stuck, became submerged and started to sink." Craig shakes his head in disbelief at the memory.

They worked through loading the U-Haul on the barge and arrived to find their new home's toilets sitting in the yard, now a comical what-else-could-happen memory.

Despite the first few toiletless nights, the house on Leeward Court became the family's refuge, the beginning of summer life on Bald Head, the beginning of where memories are as crisp as the ton of Bald Head photographs that line the family's basement walls back in Winston-Salem.

In 2001 they moved to their new BHI home on the marina's edge to be closer to the boats. This time everything was moved via golf cart, another exercise in Miller "sure you can" philosophy.

The family found that they loved being so close to the dock activity. They have a 2000 Pursuit 3070 for offshore fishing that Craig bought last year in Tampa. It had been in a climate-controlled building, had less than 60 hours on it and hardly been used, according to the dealer who sold it to him

"It was a new boat five-years-old," says



Their smaller Pursuit, the *River Raft*, carries the family all over. Drake frolics while Greer, Sutton, Grace, Janie and Craig explore.

Craig, who flew down to Tampa with Sutton and took the boat out overnight to check it out.

They also have a Pursuit 2250 with a cuddy cabin that they “use around town” and call the *River Raft*. They use this boat to get back and forth from the mainland. It has ferried the Millers on many a trip, looking like a gypsy boat crossing the Cape Fear.

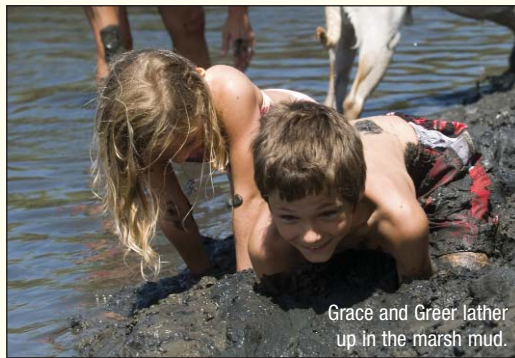
The teak picnic table and benches on their Winston-Salem deck came from the Coastal Living house on BHI via their boat. They had rented a U-Haul (yes, another U-Haul) to take the table home to Winston, but the river was too rough for the ferry. Instead, they loaded the furniture on the boat and set off.

“We live by the river. If the waves are too rough, we just don’t go,” says Janie.

Much of their boating is by kayaking. Sutton, 14; Megan 12; Greer, 9; and Grace, 7; are children of nature, lured by all of God’s coastal creatures, big or small.

The family keeps a tank where interesting finds live until the summer’s end, and they are released. Struggling or exceptionally interesting ones come home to live in Winston-Salem for the school year until they are large enough or well enough to return to the sea the next summer. This year Greer brought home a little four-legged starfish. I met Grace, her long blonde hair falling forward, with her small hand cupped around an important find. With a huge grin on her face, she ran to deposit it into the family tank.

“We’ve learned that the crab always wins. There was this gorgeous puffer fish we had found . . .” Janie’s voice trailing away in memory of the poor puffer fish. “We’ve also realized that the jellyfish eats a lot of stuff.”



Grace and Greer lather up in the marsh mud.



Sutton takes his sisters Megan and Grace on his john boat around the marina.

Janie’s main passion on the island is monitoring the sea turtle nests. Turtle time for the family is dark until midnight. Janie and the kids troop home and sleep until 10:30 or 11 most mornings, recharging for another active day ahead.

This works out great for Craig, who rises early to work in the crofter where he has set up his office. Crofters are part of BHI architectural lingo. Small detached golf cart-sized garages with a room above, they complement the main home’s style.

Craig’s crofter office allows him to work as

a senior vice president of wealth management of the Winston-Salem based Miller Osborn Group at Smith Barney. Due to SEC and NYSE regulations, he has to return to Winston-Salem every three weeks; but that is a small price to pay for the summer life the family leads.

Janie ticks off a list of all things Bald Head that keep the family captivated by their summer life.

“We’re really into the island. We love to swim across the creek at low tide and get clams in a bucket. We rarely eat them, though. At high tide we go up Bald Head Creek and Cape Creek to East Beach to the wildlife sanctuary. We walk from the marsh to the beach,” says Janie, emphasizing that “everything depends on the tides.”

The children, sun-tanned and freckled from sun, are a well-mannered, personable bunch that spill into the summertime lifestyle with gusto. Stories about their antics entertain to the point of side-splitting laughter.

Like the time Greer and Sutton planned to surprise their dad when he came out of the crofter for a break. They carefully rigged a pitcher of water, invisible with a fishing line pully system. The boys waited for the perfect moment to douse their dad. As Craig emerged, the next-door-neighbor walked over, hair done and ready for the day.

Greer figured he could still get his dad. Sutton frantically shook his head, realizing that the odds might not be in their favor to nail their good-natured father. Greer confidently proceeded with the plan.

You can imagine the result. One wet neighbor and a profuse apologetic father later, the boys’ tomfoolery has become one more layer in family legend.

Meanwhile, island living with a child with Down syndrome might intimidate some; but Megan, says her mother, is the easiest. She loves life on the island and loves to be outside. There have been moments to give them pause, like the day she disappeared and no one could find her.

Megan had wandered up the street to Theodosia’s, a wonderful BHI bed and breakfast, and had slipped in the side door. They found her at the desk, answering the phone and taking care of business for the owners.

“Robin, with the Bald Head police, has been so kind to our family. She is like a part of our family. If Megan leaves on her bike, Robin calls and tells us where she is,” says Janie.

With Megan’s strong sensory issues, boating sometimes has been a dilemma. Getting her to wear a life jacket has had its challenges, and the Millers are constantly in search of a life jacket that will make Megan feel more comfortable.

“It’s tough. One time we pulled up to get gas at [the] Provision [Company in Southport]. The Coast Guard came over to talk to us about it, but we couldn’t get Megan in a life jacket. We heard later that they had talked about it at their meeting,” Craig says matter-of-factly.

While situations like this can be tough, the family doesn’t let anything deter them from fully experiencing life on the island. They have become a familiar sight at BHI.

“After having been there nearly 15 years, people who come are the same people,” Janie explains.

Craig chimes in. “God’s given us relationships with these people and we’ve developed friendships.”

For example, Janie took a name off the pool bulletin board for a babysitter. The babysitter ended up coming to school at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, and was Megan’s tutor during the school year. She continued tutoring once summer came at BHI. When she married at the BHI Shoals Club, the Miller family celebrated with her.

On Sundays, the family attends Oak Island Presbyterian with Janie’s parents or worships in the beautifully simple Bald Head Island



Golf cart transportation slows the pace down at Bald Head Island. Craig’s office is in the crofter in front of their marina-front home.



The family likes eating outside where they can look over the marina.

Chapel. Craig sums it up well: “God meets you exactly where you are.”

That is why Janie’s Bible study group on BHI has become so dear to her. That and observing nature are her two main activities on BHI.

“There’s nothing to do here and then there’s everything,” she says.

Janie and Craig have educated their children on how to enjoy the island and then given them the freedom to explore their surroundings. The kids love to take a rope and tie it to the dock and hold on while the current goes out.

They love to explore the marshes and shores, so checking for ticks to avoid Lyme disease is a daily chore. They’ve seen marsh

racers (coastal snakes) curled up on their steps; Greer’s been scratched by a raccoon; they’ve been coated with marsh mud to the point that their eyes are the only thing on them the original color. They’ve boated out to the big fishing sites. They’ve watched their small Bichon Frise dog chase an alligator, climb on its back and live to bark about it, returned to the Millers green and slimy in a net by the BHI police.

The highlight of their summers comes when Janie’s brother’s family visits from Los Angeles. All year long excitement builds because this is the week that “Pirate Puff” comes, too. An intricate treasure map has a series of clues that must be unraveled by the entire group to progress to the next one, leading to a buried treasure. All of the cousins must figure out the clues together as they unearth items like Civil War coins, bullets and other items that Pirate Puff has gathered

through the year in anticipation of the hunt.

Life at BHI beats nothing else for the Millers. Sutton opted to forego football as he starts Reynolds High School this fall. Summer practice, he explains, would cut into fishing. This is a young man with his priorities in line.

The most poignant tale, however, involves Greer. Craig had a summer business meeting in Orlando two years ago. They began loading the boat to take the family to get the van. They would drive to Walt Disney

World in conjunction with the meeting. Everyone and everything was on the boat but Greer. His parents looked and called for him to no avail. They found him in the house and ended up bodily carrying him out.

“I’m not going to Disney World! Leave me here! I don’t want to leave Bald Head,” he cried.

In the marina neighborhood, sound echoes – and the neighbors have enjoyed retelling the time Greer kicked and screamed to be left at Bald Head. His parents want to point out that he thoroughly enjoyed the trip once there.

For the Millers, Bald Head Island has become their magical kingdom – and the summers slip by, too brief of a time for a family that lives by the tides, one sweet summer day at a time. 🌊