Herbert Miller, professor of international business and German at Indiana University Kokomo and affirmative action officer for a number of years, was honored this summer with a gala retirement party. The invitation to celebrate was extended in nearly a dozen languages, in tribute to a man who spent nearly forty years bridging cultural and linguistic barriers at all levels. Among those who honored their colleague and friend were IUK Chancellor Emita B. Hill; Victor Bogle, chancellor emeritus of IUK; William Edgerton, former chair of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literature at IU Bloomington; and Kokomo Mayor Robert Sargent.

Dr. Miller came to IU Kokomo in 1960 with a singular set of attributes. He had been working on his doctorate in Slavic linguistics at IU Bloomington when he was hired to become one of IUK’s first six resident faculty members of the “extension center”, as it was known then. An African-American from Indianapolis, he was a product of that city’s segregated educational system, an honor graduate of Butler University, an Air Force veteran with service in Eastern Europe, and a world traveler who spoke nearly a dozen languages from Arabic to Rumanian. He must have seemed an unlikely match for a Midwestern town in the midst of cornfields and auto factories whose history was burdened by the Ku Klux Klan. Miller initially considered Kokomo to be stepping stone in his career, but as the IU center continued to grow and his reputation expanded, he moved into new areas, including a number of administrative posts, even serving for a short while as acting chancellor. Miller took a leadership role in helping to forge IUK into a respected institution of higher education—over the past thirty-four years, its resident faculty have grown to nearly one hundred.

At IUK, Miller has been honored many times, winning several coveted Amicus Awards bestowed by students on favorite instructors. As an advisor and affirmative action officer, he was known for his compassion and concern in interpreting multicultural subtleties. He has presided over numerous seminars on race relations and workshops on international affairs and cultural sensitivity, a role he continues to play in retirement as professor emeritus. Last spring, for example, he coordinated discussions on race relations for Kokomo High School ninth-grade civics students. More recently, in October, he moderated a two-day conference, “On Doing Business in Germany,” which was held for employees of one of the largest international firms headquartered in Indiana. This fall, he is teaching a non-credit Russian class, working with Kokomo Center Schools on diversity issues, and keeping involved in a number of IUK projects.

Throughout his career, Miller’s roles in interpersonal relations have been at least as important to him as his role in international relations. With characteristic self-effacement, he says that, “I tried—and I think I succeeded in some cases—to get people to think a little bit farther than themselves, to think about their role in society . . . we [must] continue to stress the need for people to think about the consequences of their actions, to question their beliefs and attitudes a little bit more, and to work beyond the stereotypes of race, sex, disability, to see through to the fundamental character and characteristics of human beings.” Although improvements have evolved over the years, he worries about many of the old attitudes that are still around, but can’t always be seen. “Attitudes will still control behavior if people think they can get away with it. Discriminatory behavior may now not be sanctioned by law but the attitudes are still there.” The modern world has real problems and one must be prepared for change, Miller cautions, observing that an individual must be prepared to accept perhaps as many as five or six basic changes in their lifetime. However, throughout these changes, Miller emphasizes, “We must work toward fulfilling our hopes.”