The more I learnt about our in-country Chief Operating Officer, Hannes Miller – the more impressed I became. Immensely likable, always smiling, always positive. Passionate about both the Manono project, but also about the community projects we as a company, have been involved in. The beauty of having an “Insights” section in our website, is that we can write about absolutely anything. So, I sat down with Hannes for three hours to hear about his life, his influences and what drives him on. This article is the result of that discussion, and it’s quite a story. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

Johannes Jacob Miller was born on the 2nd of August 1961 in Kuruman, Northern Cape, South Africa. One of four children, his father was a miner, a rugged man who was a keen rugby player and heavyweight boxing champion. His mother was a lab technician and eventually Chief Chemist in the same industry.

Hannes’s childhood perhaps shaped him, more than most. Initially small, he entered a high school of approximately 1600 boys. A hostel environment, the discipled environment not unlike the military he was later to join – inspections and strict rules and the occasional “strap on the ass” meant Hannes grew up hard.

Life became harder for the family as his father suffered an accident whilst playing rugby, which led to a cancer diagnosis at 35. The remoteness of their home, meant up to 9-month stints in the Bloemfontein hospital, some 600km away. It was a fight which his father would eventually lose, but his typical fight meant that loss only came 17 years later.

Hannes’s holidays were spent working on the family farm, whilst his mother juggled the farm, her job in the lab, raising four children and looking after a sick husband. He has huge respect for her.
As I listen to Hannes recount these memories of how his parents coped with these setbacks, I can begin to recognize their spirit in the man who sits before me. Strong, resourceful, but full of empathy.

Hannes filled out by his mid-teens and followed his father into rugby. Hannes quickly made it to the first team in the position of flanker and impressed so much that he gained a bursary for entry into one of the best schools in South Africa. Sport continued to play an important part in his life, despite two dislocated shoulders and Hannes even made to the South African Championships in Biathlon.

By 19, Hannes finished school, leaving on the Friday, and starting work under his father in the mine on the following Monday.

His father, not wanting to show favoritism, gave Hannes all the hardest jobs. After one particularly bad day his father pulled him aside and said to him, “This is where your Rugby shoes come from.” Lesson learnt.

Listening to Hannes and knowing the person he is, I can see his childhood was not an easy one, but was underpinned by togetherness, loyalty and most importantly, love.

This childhood ended abruptly in 1980, with compulsory conscription to the army. Now an extremely strong and fit young man, Hannes joined the Bloemfontein First Parachute Battalion and trained for one year as an airborne soldier. Only 10% were given their wings, Hannes one of them. At this time, South Africa were engaged in the Angolan War and Hannes’s second year of conscription saw him in active service. Thereafter three-month stints of service continued as per the rules, for the next ten years.
Now 22, Hannes threw himself back into his career, combining work in the mine, with education at the soon to become Johannesburg University of Technology. Once again, life sent Hannes a curve ball. I think it’s understandable that after what Hannes had been through that he entered a short phase which I will call, “boys will be boys”. This phase resulted in the loss of his bursary, but as a true Miller, Hannes just kept on going.

A focus on topographical draftsmanship led to qualifications and then a mining and topographical based surveying qualification. It is becoming clear to me that Hannes likes to be challenged, he needs to be challenged in fact. He’s a very practical man and this combination of mathematical challenge and turning theory in practice, really suited him.

By 26, Hannes was combining his study – now mining engineering, with a role as section surveyor at Harmony Gold mine. “A huge underground mine, 2km deep shafts, I learnt a lot.” A similar role followed in Anglo Coal, before a move to Kimberley De Beers as a section surveyor and part time studying mining engineering. At this time CAD (computer assisted design) was beginning to become available and Hannes threw himself into converting old format mining plans into the new and exciting world of the 3D CAD system.

The use of new technology and how it can be used to improve processes became a lifelong fascination and can be seen as part of Hannes’s desire to always be learning, always be challenging himself and always be busy.

In 1991, Hannes moved to De Beer’s Vinetia diamond mine and the government seemed to use them as a guinea pig in using latest technology to map mines. Hannes had the largest computer in the company and must have looked like a Bond villain in his lair, plotting all his data in this monster computer.

By this stage, Hannes was a married man and a son and daughter followed. His son is an important part of the Manono management team and is specialized in Environmental Science. His daughter, an accomplished dancer having competed in the World Championships for contemporary dance and ballet, became a graphic designer. There is a pattern here!
Four years later, with a Survey drafting Diploma, Mine survey Certificate and Mining Diploma (Now B.tech degree) under his belt, Hannes left De Beers in search of new challenges.

Now here in the story is where Hannes’s CV comes up with a few surprises – and remarkable achievements. We already know he is keen on technology, but in the infancy of the computer age, Hannes took his savings and set up an internet service provider and computer sales business. Not content with just sales, but actually buying the parts from Johannesburg and building the computers himself. This in itself is extraordinary, but he was one of 34 computer dealers in the area and each one of them knew a great deal more than Hannes did about computers at the time.

Competition meant meager profits for all, but Hannes decided to source his parts directly from overseas, whilst all the others still bought from Johannesburg. This was so successful, that all the other dealers ended up buying their parts from him too. I did warn you that Hannes liked a challenge!

With a successful business now in full swing, Hannes set out to find a small mining exploration project to focus on, whilst his wife kept an eye on the computer side. This led him to a Tantalum project in Zimbabwe, where he lived in a caravan in the bush as he brought the mine to production. This was the time when Zimbabwean white farmers were losing their land to black empowerment in an attempt to improve racial equality. It was a time therefore of significant unrest. Couple this environment with the massive floods of 1991 and Hannes had surely found more of a challenging environment than even he had wished for!

Sadly, whilst Hannes was successful in bringing the mine forward, he too lost the mine, like the farmers, to the government initiative. And so, at 41 years of age, Hannes packed up his two trucks with his possessions and left Zimbabwe. The IT business had been sold, but he had not received all the money due – not the last time he would be a victim fraud. Back to starting from scratch, Hannes joined African Rainbow Minerals as a mining contractor.

Asked to be a mining contractor, Hannes became responsible for Vamping (cleaning out old, mined areas) where he received 45% of the gold his operation produced. Through vacuum mining in two shafts and then three, he created a patented mining method and became very successful. In 18 months, he had built up his company with 460 employees. African Rainbow Minerals sold some of their mines to Harmony Gold.
And then disaster – the fourth of February 2004, Hannes remembers the date exactly. The receipt of the phone call that told him that the sub-contractor he had been working with was a fraudster and had skipped the country, leaving Hannes with a very significant financial hit. To compound the problems, Harmony Gold as a direct result, were ceasing to use contractors. Hannes was left with a workforce of 460 people, but no work for them to do.

And so, Hannes set to work on another extraordinary re-invention of himself. His strong sense of duty and loyalty extended to his workforce. He began a paint company, at one stage employing 355 painters who consumed 3mt of paint per day at the peak of the project. This extended into building projects, building at one stage, 36 buildings in a six-week period with a workforce now 600. He found work for the initial workforce of 460 from the mining business.

2005 brought another of life’s challenges – living away from home to resolve his business issues, brought distance from his wife and subsequent divorce. The paint and hardware business was sold. The familiar feeling of being back at square one? Well, not exactly.

A senior mining consultant role in a platinum project and other projects in Africa and Madagascar led to First Quantum Minerals recognized his talents and soon a consultant position turned into a permanent position. Hannes was responsible for mine planning design and was Chief Planning Manager, Project manager and Relieving Mine Manager of their flagship Kansanshi Copper Mine.

By 2011, and at 50 years of age a new challenge presented itself in Mexico. Minefinders Corporation, which Hannes and the team developed with his expertise. The company was sold to Pan American Silver, but again, a new challenge arose. Hannes was offered the position as VPO (Vise President Operations) for the newly found Esperanza Recourses. Esperanza had nothing and he and the team started setting up office, bringing the project to life building the company. Hannes met his wife Rocio at this time. Esperanza was an interesting project and the company was sold to Alamos Gold.
We all know by now, that Hannes goes where the challenge is. So, it should be no surprise to know that a Nigerian tin mine was Hannes’s next port of call. The mine needed re-building, which is exactly what Hannes did in the space of 8 months. A further gold/zinc project in Nigeria followed, with the backdrop of terrorism and kidnapping in the country. And so, it came to pass in 2015, that Hannes himself was kidnapped, right from the mine site, by six armed men. Using his military training, Hannes ensured his tracks could be followed, even leaving his cap at the large river crossing point. He was taken into the mountains – a ransom was demanded. As negotiations took place, GPS signals from the phone gave their location away. An exchange was agreed, and once Hannes was safely recovered, so were the funds and the kidnappers. Hannes is very calm and levelheaded when recounting these events and it speaks volumes for the temperament of the man, that he took these events in his stride.

Back “home” in Mexico, a further stint in a gold mine was followed by a tin mining project in Australia. Again, living in camp, in the bush, Hannes made huge strides to improve the initially poor quality mine. His ever-supporting wife was shot in the stomach in a home invasion back in Mexico. Thankfully she recovered and joined Hannes in Australia. The mining project itself, became bogged down in litigation, due to a squatter entering a claim against the mine. This matter was resolved and the mine is ready to go into production in a few months.

Finally, to present day. Hannes splits his time between home in Mexico and the DRC, where he heads up the Tantalex projects from the ground. I find myself with aspirations on becoming Hannes’s biographer – his story could fill several books without doubt. In order to write the piece, I sat with Hannes for three hours and was hanging on his every word. I found myself reconciling the man I have come to know, not just as a colleague, but a friend, with the man in this amazing story, which is his life. Our project is in extremely safe hands. But more than that, Hannes’s results oriented approach, his compassion and his morals, reflect perfectly the company that Tantalex wants to be.

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