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# HIGH STAKES: Risk taking is a way of life for Bob Mills, chairman of Mills Development

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On a scorching August day, I pull up to the front door of Bob Mills' Beavercreek home, just days after he hosted 800 guests at the biennial Gala of Hope in his yard.

He meets me in a golf cart, and tells me to leave my car under the overhang.

The 65-year-old real estate developer, chairman of Mills Development and **Synergy Building Systems**, says he's been burned by the media, so this interview is a rare chance. It's too hot for small talk, so he ushers me into



SARAH BENNETT FOR THE DBJ

his spotless office — first door on the left — pulling me away from drooling over the Bob Rhoads custom-built mansion.

Surrounded by stained wood paneling, Mills' office looks onto his fishing pond and across the estate to the pool and kids' playground.

"It's more than 25-feet deep," he tells me later, about the pond. "The fishing is incredible."

Feigning grouchiness, Mills tells me to thank his assistant and his son-in-law, Jerad Barnett, for convincing him to talk to me.

He's led a fascinating life, including beating Melanoma after getting diagnosed at 52, and I want to know more about him. But, feeling rushed, I dive into the hard questions.

I ask him about Pentagon Boulevard, a neglected strip of cornfields in Beavercreek he turned into a \$305 million development, with 1.2 million square feet of office space and tenants from **Wright-Patt Credit Union** to **Franklin University**. He says Pentagon was a challenge — so many parcels of land needed to be pieced together.

"But that didn't deter you?" I ask.

He smiles. He's warming up to me in spite of himself. He's definitely a people person.

"When it gets down to it, I go in and talk to the owners myself," he says. "I had to buy out a couple, and she was raised in that home. It had tremendous sentimental value."

He raises his eyes, as if to say, he's that good.

And he is.

Other developers, such as Dave Dickerson with **Miller-Valentine Group**, can attest to it.

“He’s created the landscape of that marketplace,” Dickerson told me about Pentagon Boulevard.

With only a small team of 16 employees, Mills has led the development of \$800 million worth of Class A office space around Ohio, Indiana and Pennsylvania, typically entering markets years before other developers realize there are any profitable opportunities. But Mills is always ready to get his hands dirty, even if it means taking a substantial risk.

With a passion for gambling, Mills got his start in real estate in 1978 with only \$200 to his name. Now, with seemingly unlimited resources at his disposal, he’s planning to continue leading development in the region for years to come.

I want to know what Mills is planning for the former Showcase Cinema property in Centerville he bought this year. But I’m not the only one. The rumors he’s heard about his own plans make him laugh.

“I’ve heard high-rise condos,” he says. “I’ve even heard a 13th-floor restaurant. I’m smarter than that.”

But he’s a steel trap about his real plans.

“I think what we do will please everyone,” he says.

He’s getting tired of talking about himself.

“What, are you writing the whole paper about me?” he asks.

He ends the interview with a tour of the estate. We climb in the golf cart, and immediately start off-roading across the acres of well-manicured lawn toward the swimming pool.

His grandkids are splashing around, their parents sitting on the sides. Mills beams with pride as he points out each one. Granddaughter Ally gets special attention, since she is a Leukemia survivor.

Mills built the pool while Ally was in treatment and couldn't be in the pool. So he built a concession stand for her to run.

"She learned valuable business lessons, and it gave her something to do," he says.

Mills' dedication to helping cancer patients defines much of his life, and his impact has been felt across the Miami Valley. Among many other things, he has funded a play space at **Dayton Children's Hospital**, and raised \$1.1 million at this year's Gala of Hope event supporting Premier Health, **The Kettering Health Network** and Dayton Children's.

As the tour proceeds, it's clear every aspect of Mills' estate is the result of meticulous planning, and that he has a talent for giving.

He points out the frog pond he installed so his grandsons could enjoy catching frogs, as he did growing up. A second pond sits down the hill from the fishing lake, and he notes that he doesn't aerate this one.

"That way it freezes smooth in the winter, and the kids can go ice skating," he says.

We visit the limo-bus, which he uses to take potential clients on regional tours.

"Is the bar fully stocked?" I ask.

"Oh yeah," he says, grinning.

I get him to hold still in front of the fishing lake long enough to snap a few photos, with his cherished pet ducks in the background.

“The two with tufts on their heads are 9 years old,” he tells me proudly.

We ride back to my car.

“You’ve really thought of everything,” I marvel.

“My friends ask, ‘Do you ever stop thinking?’” he tells me. “If I did, I wouldn’t want to live any more.”

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## **OVERHEARD**

*“Bob and his team are very strategic. He’s done a good job of understanding trends and relationships within the marketplace.”*

**Dave Dickerson**, Miller-Valentine Group

*“He likes to set a high bar. By force of his infectious personality, he encourages and motivates people to work their hardest. In Dayton, we need leaders who not only care, but put their effort, time and money into making this a good place to live, and Bob Mills is one of those people.”*

**Debbie Feldman**, Dayton Children’s Hospital

### **Olivia Barrow**

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