REPAYING GENEROSITY WITH GENEROSITY

by Meg Devine Maxwell

THE MERKERTS HONOR LIFE-CHANGING MENTORS BY PROVIDING FOR VILLANOVA’S NEXT GREAT ENGINEERS

For Robert J. Merkert Sr. ’59 EE, choosing Villanova was an easy task. Affording his education was not. His was a hardworking family of modest means, and Villanova’s tuition, room and board—topping out around $1800 during his senior year—meant careful planning and scrupulous saving.

In the middle of Merkert’s sophomore year as an electrical engineering major, his father underwent surgery and medical bills piled up. Merkert met with Father Thomas Burke, OSA, the University registrar, to put his studies on hold until his family’s financial stress eased. Father Burke responded with a $500 scholarship to get Merkert through the year.

The following summer, Merkert received a call from Father Burke: “The first thing he said to me was, ‘Did you go to Mass today?’ After that, he said, ‘I’ve just awarded you the Scott Paper Company Scholarship. I’ll give you $1000 a year for your junior and senior years.’” Father Burke’s call changed the entire shape of Merkert’s collegiate experience, and he remains grateful.

“I always considered that a half scholarship,” says Merkert. “Early in my career, my wife Marge and I decided that if we ever had the means, we would love to set up a half scholarship to repay Father Burke. We also wanted to recognize Professor Joseph Hicks, who introduced me to these newfangled things called transistors. He had a very strong feeling that the future of electrical engineering was in electronics and computer work. He changed my whole direction.”

Professor Hicks’ guidance pointed Merkert down a road that led to a 50-plus year career, including decades at the forefront of the smart card industry. Today, he is president of his own consulting company, IntelACS LLC, as well as president of the Americas for Advanced Card Systems Ltd.

In 1995, the Merkerts found themselves in a position to give back. DANYL Corporation, the pioneering smart card company that Merkert had co-founded, was bought out. The Merkerts used a portion of their profit to establish The Professor Joseph J. Hicks University Scholarship, an endowed fund that provides a partial tuition award to a student majoring in electrical engineering.

The Merkerts want the Hicks Scholarship to be a game-changer for worthy students, just as the Scott Paper Company Scholarship was for Bob. To that end, they have added to the fund every year, with a total contribution of nearly $250,000 to date. One student is selected to receive the award for the full four years of his or her enrollment. The Merkerts meet with each Hicks scholar, typically a few times per year. They share the story behind the scholarship, build a relationship with the scholars, and encourage them to consider—if they ever have the means—creating their own fund or adding to the Hicks endowment.

A past recipient, Paige Castle ’14 EE expresses gratitude for this scholarship, “I am extremely lucky to have received the Hicks Scholarship and to have met the most genuine, kind benefactors. The unique opportunity to develop a personal relationship with Bob and Marge has made me extremely grateful, and one of my biggest goals is to be able to give back as they have.”

Until then, there are plenty of ways to support today’s engineering students, at all levels of giving capacity. Merkert, who is the current president of the Engineering Alumni Society (EAS), reflects, “One of the things we do through the EAS is support student projects. This year we gave out more than $5,000 to support six student projects, and that funding came from Engineering alumni donations. Dean Gabriele is starting a mentoring program that will be part of the engineering curriculum, and that will be another meaningful way for alumni to give back. There are always opportunities, and we encourage alumni to get involved.”