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Kavli's Gift of \$1 Million Endows Two Engineering Chairs

Santa Barbara, Calif.--An elaborately in-laid cabinet with glass doors enclosing display shelves and a tufted red-satin back looks as though it belonged at Versailles with the last of the French kings. But instead of delicate Limoges porcelain, the shelves contain an array of hardware—the aircraft and automotive sensors manufactured by Kavlico Corp., located in Moorpark, Calif. Its founder, chairman, and CEO is Fred Kavli, who has endowed two chairs in engineering at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB).

Kavli has a penchant for unusual uses of fine furniture. He noted at an April reception at the College of Engineering that the chairs he was endowing with his \$1 million gift were "not meant for sitting, but for running at the leading edge of technology."

One of the chairs is in Optoelectronics and Sensors and the other in MicroElectroMechanical Systems (MEMS). Two distinguished engineering faculty, Larry Coldren and Noel MacDonald, have been named to be the first holders of the Kavli Chairs.

In his remarks at the reception for the new chair holders, Chancellor Henry Yang addressed Kavli, "Your gift has helped the College of Engineering immensely. A rocket put into space requires your sensors for guidance. Your generous gift is a tremendous help in guiding engineering at UCSB in the right direction."

Endowing a chair means that the gift is invested, and the income on the investment provides the chair holder with funds for research, student support, and other professional activities such as travel and publication costs.

Matthew Tirrell, Dean of the College of Engineering, explained, "Fred Kavli's gift is so very important because endowed chairs are absolutely essential for recruiting and retaining topnotch faculty especially in technology fields where the competition among universities and industrial research laboratories for the best people is now so keen."

Kavli gave two reasons that decided him on his gift. He said, "Fiber optics and micromachining are closely related to what we are doing at Kavlico, and so it is natural for us to support the research that underlies our applications. And I am very, very pleased to have two such excellent professors in these chairs. In addition, I believe in supporting education. It is very important for America to have the quality education that leads to technological innovation."

Norwegian born and educated, Kavli came to the United States via a year in Canada with the explicit intention of founding a business. A little less than two years after he had arrived in Los Angeles, Kavli started his own business in 1958. He said, "There is no other country I could have come to right after school and started my own business."

Kavli studied physics at the Norwegian Institute of Technology. He financed his studies with proceeds from a small business he and his brother, both teenagers, ran during World War II; they made wood briquettes for automotive fuel.

When he first arrived in Los Angeles, Kavli recalls, "Venture capital was not as easy to come by as it is now."

To secure backing for his business idea, he placed an ad in the Los Angeles Times, "Engineer seeks financial sponsor to start own business." Among the replies was the key backer for the business Kavli started in a Van Nuys "tool crib," smaller, he says, than his present office in Kavlico's quarter-million-square-foot complex.

Initially, Kavli made linear feedback position sensors for aircraft. Most planes today are equipped with Kavli's sensors. These devices detect the position of an aircraft's control surfaces such as the rudder. The sensors provide a feedback signal for positioning of these surfaces.

In 1975 Kavli began to design pressure sensors for automobiles. Now used in many areas in cars, pressure sensors detect pressure differentials in, for instance, automotive exhaust recirculation or fuel-injection systems. That information is relayed to the car's computer which regulates the combustion processes. Pressure sensors?Kavlico manufactures around 10 million a year?now comprise 80 percent of the company's business.

What advice would Kavli give today's would-be entrepreneurs?

"When I started my business," Kavli said, "I had a great deal of confidence that I could succeed. When I made a profit in a year, I figured I was not going broke. Many companies try to expand fast and thereby go into debt and go broke. I have been relatively conservative in my approach to growth even though we have grown rapidly.

"And most important," Kavli emphasizes, "the customer really counts. That doesn't mean you give your products away, but that you always try to get and maintain a satisfied customer. Directly related to satisfying the customer is the quality of the product. The reputation for reliability of our sensors has been one of the main reasons for our success."

Kavli, a resident of Santa Barbara, is a trustee of the UCSB Foundation.

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