

James A. Anderson, *MI E '66*

Endowment for the Michigan Epsilon Chapter at Wayne State University

AS A BUSINESS OWNER as well as someone intimately involved in university fundraising and budget-balancing, Jim Anderson understands the importance of healthy endowments and laying the foundations for things to come. “Growth and taking on new projects is important, but you need to start with a solid base of operations if you want to reach your final destination. Tau Beta Pi provides outstanding support to engineering students. If we as a country want to develop leadership talent, we need to focus on the entrepreneurs and innovators of tomorrow.”

Jim is a lifelong resident of Michigan, born at the hospital in St. Clair, MI, while his family was living in nearby Algonac on the St. Clair River. He attended a two-room elementary school and notes, “I learned you don’t have to have outstanding facilities to get a good education.” Growing up on the river led to a passion for boats. Jim and his wife have logged over 60,000 nautical miles, visiting 128 ports on the Great Lakes and another dozen on the Atlantic coast.

He received career advice as a five-year-old when he asked his older brother why he chose engineering. Big brother replied, “When you become an engineer, you never have to worry about finding a job.” Jim notes, “I believed him and he was right.”

Before starting business

Jim attended Wayne State University completing his B.S.C.E. in 1966 and M.S.C.E. in 1970 and pursued a Ph.D. until starting his business in 1977. Initially, his graduate work focused on soil mechanics and foundation engineering but then shifted to environmental engineering, principally air and water pollution issues. He developed computer mapping technology to display concentrations of air and water pollutants once they entered the environment from points like sewer pipes or smokestacks.

In 1975 computer mapping was a new concept and Jim gave talks on it beyond Wayne State. An economics student who went on to work at General Motors in the Cadillac division heard his talk on computer mapping. A key piece to her job in the dealer network planning department was a dot map illustrating the location of luxury car buyers in large metro markets such as Chicago. These maps were labor-intensive as they were produced manually by sticking dots on a conventional road map. In the Chicago metro area there were 36,000 dots. The young lady who had heard his talk on computer mapping asked

her colleagues why they weren’t using a computer for this laborious task. The response was that they had tried and been told it couldn’t be done. She knew someone who could! This encounter and subsequent introduction to her bosses at GM led to the start of Jim’s business.

Today, he is president, CEO, and chairman of Urban Science, which applies problem-solving tools from engineering to data in the sales and marketing departments of, principally, automobile manufacturers. Their analytics help determine the number and location of dealers selling a particular brand vehicle and also assist individual dealers with optimizing sales and profits. Urban Science has approximately 800 employees in 18 offices servicing clients in 40 countries. Jim would go around the world to visit each office every year. “This worked until we got to around eight offices. After that, the time spent in airplanes, hotels, and taxi cabs became too great to make effective use of my time. I was rescued by technology!” Business has been good and last year closed with \$180 million in revenue.

Jim cites as an influence in building his business the book, *Built to Last*, by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras. “You do things differently if you’re building a company to last, as opposed to sell. You must be capable of adapting to market conditions as they evolve over time. You need to be able to take advantage of current technology but also respond to a changing world.”

Jim can see Wayne State University campus from his office in downtown Detroit. He visits campus regularly as chair for the college of engineering board of visitors. He is also a member of the university foundation and enjoys his interactions with students. “I tell kids today that when I started this business we didn’t have the internet, PCs, cell phones, color printers, or laser printers. After a while they all ask the same question, ‘What the heck did you have?’” Jim notes that over 39 years it’s incredible how much the technology has changed. “I tell them to work hard and you will achieve your goals. I have been working for money since I was 13 years old. My first job was as a paperboy, and then I cut grass. I worked at a hardware store for the first two years of college and then got into drafting.”

Jim is most proud that he has been able to build both his family and business. “Thirty-two years of successful marriage while growing my business from \$2 million to \$200 million in 2015 is a great accomplishment. It is possible in America to achieve whatever goals you want.”

