

Jerry S. Rawls, TX B '67

Endowment for the Texas Beta Chapter at Texas Tech University

AS THE ONLY ENGINEER in his family, Jerry Rawls looked outside of his home when considering career options. Like young people, he initially dreamt of becoming either a professional baseball or basketball player but decided to go into engineering because of a neighbor who worked for Shell Oil Company. "I remember liking what I saw of his lifestyle and thinking, 'I might like to do that.'"

Jerry graduated from Bellaire High School in Houston and enjoyed his time there as a student athlete. "Hard work pays off, and I accomplished a fair amount in basketball. I learned that you don't accomplish anything until you give the effort to develop a high level of skill."

He entered the engineering program at Texas Tech University and set his goal to become a member of Tau Beta Pi. "I was very proud to be offered membership and always viewed Tau Bates as a group of smart people." He earned his B.S.M.E. in 1967 and went on to earn a master's in industrial administration from Purdue University in 1968.

After Purdue, he began a twenty-year career with Raychem Corporation, a rapidly growing materials science and engineering company in Menlo Park, CA. In 1977, he became a marketing manager, and during his last six years there, he was general manager of two successful divisions, including the interconnections systems division. This employed 500 people and was the company's fastest growing and most profitable business unit.

Formed their own company

In 1988 Jerry and a partner formed their own fiber optics company, Finisar Corporation. They funded the company with their own money and no outside financing. The goal was to build cost effective gigabit optical transceivers providing the optical input and output for high-speed computer networks. In 1992 he and his partner revolutionized the fiber optic communication industry with a new approach that lowered the cost of gigabit optical links by a factor of 10. Originally viewed as technically impossible by conventional wisdom, Finisar's proposal was unanimously adopted by the ANSI committee as the basis for today's fibre channel standard and later by the IEEE as the gigabit ethernet standard.

In 1999, the company went public, and, in 2014, Finisar had revenues of \$1.2 billion, employing 14,000 people. It had facilities and operations in California as well as in Dallas, Philadelphia, Boston, Champaign-Urbana, Malaysia, Singapore, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Sydney, Tel Aviv,

Berlin, Sweden, Denmark, and Korea. Jerry's current role is as Finisar's executive chairman of the board.

Jerry notes that he was in his 40s and had already been a manager at a senior level at a corporation for more than a decade when he co-founded Finisar. At Raychem, he had learned a lot about building organizations, taking care of customers and employees, and the importance of recruiting top talent. He recalls that being at the helm of Finisar led to new lessons. "Being a public company has its own bag of problems. Dealing with Wall Street and the big mutual funds, Sarbanes Oxley reporting requirements, regulations, the Securities and Exchange Commission...it's all expensive, difficult, and time-consuming. I remember thinking, 'Wow, being a public company can be a serious burden!'"



Jerry cites Bill Hewlett and David Packard and the ethics, integrity, and respect for the individual that made "The HP Way" a model for Finisar. "The lack of pomposity in their organization was gratifying. They were positive, humble, smart guys who worked hard and selected very capable employees who helped build a culture of treating customers and employees

with great respect."

Jerry advises young engineering students: "Experience and learning in your first job are more important than money. The money will come, but it's what you learn and take away from those early jobs that build value for you as an individual. In my own work, I learned that initiative, creativity, and hard work really do pay off. Starting out in sales I saw first-hand that your personal integrity is more important than anything and absolutely determines your success. Your customers have to know you won't let them down."

Jerry has declined to serve on any other corporate boards but does serve on advisory councils at both Texas Tech and Purdue. He is also currently on the board of industrial affiliates at the Optical Society of America.

Jerry was honored to be invited as a member of the Association and notes, "Tau Bates have potential. They are very bright and can accomplish a lot." Regarding his gift he shares, "There's lots of things a chapter can do to provide service in the community and help to other students—having financial backing makes the chapter and the Association more productive."

Jerry and his wife have two children and two grandchildren. As a sports fan who enjoys college football and basketball, he enjoys playing golf in his spare time.