

Toolbox built at Purdue sends alum into outer space

By Tracy S. Petersen

It's a long way from a dairy farm in Chagrin Falls, Ohio to a San Francisco area company that manufactures insulation systems for commercial air- and spacecraft. But an agriculture graduate traveled that road, relying heavily on the "toolbox" he assembled while attending Purdue University.

"In college, you're basically building your toolbox," said Robert M. Schweikher, BS '58. "Purdue helped me build a pretty good-size toolbox."

Schweikher is the chief operating officer of Orcon Corp. in Union City, Calif., an advanced materials insulation systems manufacturer. He also is the principal owner of Chagrin Limited, a business consulting firm.

"I had to learn a lot along the way, but my education at Purdue helped," said Schweikher. "I went back to the basic science principles I learned at Purdue."

Schweikher began his career as a marketing trainee with the "just-formed" agricultural division of Monsanto. In 1977 Schweikher left his position as director of the Optoelectronics Group in the Electronics Division of Monsanto to serve as vice president of the Crop Chemicals Group of Mobil Chemical. Schweikher then served as an executive vice president for Allied Chemical and president of Allied Technologies Company. He joined Orcon in 1989.

Schweikher's work has acquainted him with everything from agricultural chemicals and landfill methane to uranium conversion and conductive polymers. Orcon insulation systems are used in commercial aircraft as well as satellites in projects such as the Hubble telescope.

"We're one of many hundreds and thousands of suppliers to those (space)

systems," Schweikher said.

Working among such varied and technical industries "is always difficult at first," Schweikher said. "It's what I call the tribal language. Once you learn the language, the technical and business principles are basically common between all industries."

In November, Schweikher visited Purdue as an Old Master. The Old Masters program was established in 1950 so leaders in various professional fields can share their experiences and observations with students preparing to finish their college careers.

Addressing Purdue students as an Old Master "gave me a chance to put something back, which I thoroughly enjoyed," Schweikher said. "Hopefully it was meaningful to them."

Schweikher has some words of advice for today's students. Patience, flexibility and focus are the keys to any successful career, he said.

"Building companies and organizations is my focus. I'm a builder, not a caretaker," Schweikher said, adding that he spent about the first third of his career gathering his tools and gaining an understanding of his personal focus.

"Everything is always a process," he said. "There's change all the time. It's not a black or white thing." ■



Photo Courtesy of Orcon Corp.

Schweikher

