“FROM SPE I HAVE LEARNED AS MUCH ABOUT HOW TO BE A PROFESSIONAL AS I HAVE ABOUT PLASTIC.”

WHY THE PLASTICS INDUSTRY AS A CAREER CHOICE?
I chose plastics engineering as a college major because I was fascinated by the injection molding machines when I toured the Penn State Behrend plastics engineering lab as a prospective student. I had no knowledge of, or love for, plastic at that time.

My fascination with machinery led me to choose plastics engineering as a college major, which is more specialized than many other degrees. Because plastics are so prevalent, my specialty opened up a world of opportunities.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO BE A STUDENT MEMBER?
I became a student member of SPE in 2000, when I was a junior. My professors understood the value of connecting their students with the broader plastics industry through SPE, so they coordinated an annual trip to ANTEC® so students could present their research projects.

As a student, I was excited for a trip to San Francisco, but was also intimidated by the prospect of presenting in front of an audience of plastics professionals. What I did not now then was that I was about to become a member of the “plastics family.” As a student member, I was talking to SPE Fellows, executives from major companies, researchers from around the world and other students. The entire plastics industry seemed to be connected in one place, and today, SPE events are like a family reunion for me.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO BE AN SPE VOLUNTEER?
As a professor teaching plastics engineering at UMass Lowell, I am now responsible for connecting the next generation of plastics engineers to SPE. It is incredibly rewarding to introduce students to SPE, watch as they get involved and, ultimately, reconnect with them as plastics professionals year after year.

My volunteer activities have largely centered around student activities at ANTEC®, advising our UMass Lowell Student Chapter and interfacing with our local ENE SPE section.

FAVORITE SPE MEMORY?
My favorite memory of SPE is one born of my own ignorance from my first ANTEC®. I had packed my rollerblades and was skating the city on the Sunday before the conference started. It seemed logical to me at the time to stop by the conference and pick up my registration as I skated past. So, I took off my skates and walked into ANTEC® in my socks and athletic gear carrying my skates...WOW, did I get some strange looks at the registration desk! I often hear senior SPE members complain about student members and their lack of professional awareness or their lack of engagement, but that was once me. From SPE I have learned as much about how to be a professional as I have about plastic. Thank you to everyone along my path and remember to help guide the next generation of clueless rollerbladers.

ONE THING YOU WOULD LIKE PEOPLE TO KNOW ABOUT YOU?
When teaching classes, I always ask students to tell me something “not about plastic” about themselves, so, the rest of my life revolves around: family lake weeks on Chautauqua (New York) and Dunmore (Vermont) with lots of canoeing, waterskiing, sailing, bonfires and 30, or more, days of downhill and Nordic skiing every winter. I have also enjoyed traveling Europe and hiking the Alps, woodworking, home winemaking, house remodeling, and most importantly, dancing with my wife who thankfully puts up with a lot of plastics engineering talk.

WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE PLASTICS PRODUCT?
My favorite plastic product has nothing to do with creative design or technology, like my specialty would suggest, but rather the origins of our industry as a whole. It is Hyatt’s original cellulose nitrate billiard ball. The fact that a competition to find a synthetic substitute for ivory billiard balls helped launch the plastics industry, while in turn saving thousands of elephants, is intriguing.

Today when the outstanding benefits of plastics are often overlooked, I like to remember that the materials were first created to help save our environment and that with better engineering, and policy, we can solve the waste disposal challenges that now face our industry.

BEST ADVICE YOU GIVE YOUR GRADUATING STUDENTS OR COULD GIVE A YOUNG PROFESSIONAL ABOUT THE PLASTICS INDUSTRY?
Engineering is one of the few professional occupations that only requires a 4-year degree to practice. However, our field is advancing and becoming more technical every day. My best advice to graduating students or young professionals is to always continue their education. This can be done by attending SPE conferences, reading SPE publications, or formally with graduate classes.
OUTDOOR SPORTS ENTHUSIAST, DANCER, ROLLERBLADER, PROFESSOR...

STEPHEN JOHNSTON
member since 2000