

Reflections of René Louis Latiolais

I believe that it was Mark Twain who said “youth is wasted on the young.” While it is my experience that the youth of today miss little, I think it is true that only through life experiences can one convincingly conclude that the “good ole days” for many of us began during our college days. This is certainly true for my wife, Joan, and me. As we look back in time, our stay at LSU is among the most memorable, productive and nostalgic days of our lives. As time passes, this conclusion is reinforced and feelings for our Alma Mater deepen. This was a place and time to be educated, to grow, to learn to work harder than ever before, and in cooperation with others. We even had two of our three children born while I was a student at LSU, one of whom returned to LSU to receive her degree. LSU will always be as important a part of my personal life as it has been to my professional success. My advice to the youth who might read this is to recognize now what this great institute of higher learning will mean to them with the passage of time, and approach their days at LSU with

the zest, devotion and appreciation that it deserves, and that they will increasingly cherish with the passage of time.

My selection of engineering as a career path was based in part on my interests, but to a greater extent, those interests were based on the reality of limited financial means of my family, and the need to pursue a field of study that would give an excellent career opportunity following an affordable investment of time at LSU. Engineering fit that criteria, and I received encouragement from family members and friends who had a sense for the profession. I quickly found a love for the sciences, especially chemistry and physics, which led me to chemical engineering. My initial instinct was reinforced as the chemical engineering curriculum proved to have great appeal and was more general in scope than the other engineering disciplines.

I knew early on that I wanted engineering to lead to a career in management and business, and chemical engineering just felt right to me toward that end. The hard work, long

hours in the unit operations labs, rigors of the course work and reports, and the structure of the problem solving and design approach really fit my temperament and need to suffer out of the pride of studying engineering. The team approach to our projects proved to be a challenge that would be familiar throughout my career in industry. The opportunity to work in the project teams—sometimes leading, sometimes following—that were frequently used by our professors then has proven to be an invaluable experience that serves me well even today. I have found memories of Drs. Coates, Pressburg, Groves, Sieps, Keller and Greenberg, their contributions to the soundness of my training and the confidence instilled in me by succeeding under their tough standards of excellence.

The year of my graduation, 1965, the petrochemical and chemical industries were booming. Most of my classmates had at least four job offers and some had twice that many in Louisiana. I selected Freeport Sulphur Company. This decision has been most fortunate for me and my family. While I am probably a dying breed, after 30 years I am still with my starting company. Today we are known as Freeport-MCMoRan, Inc. My years with Freeport have reinforced the quality of the education I received at LSU. I was fortunate in that Freeport moved me to many diverse positions during my years.

Through the wide variety of challenges and experiences, I came to rely on the training and the regimen of hard work, which was necessary to succeed when I attended LSU in the Department of Chemical Engineering.

Although my responsibilities have gone far beyond pure engineering, it was here that I learned and practiced many of the fundamental skills and the engineering disciplines that have

held me in such good stead in my professional life. Today, business is a global enterprise and the world is now our field of endeavor. Even in this vast environment that is far flung from the campus and “Tiger Town,” the traditions, the education, the values, and the work ethic of the LSU experience are a part of me. These are invaluable gifts afforded to me by this great university, its deans and faculty. For these, I owe a lasting debt of gratitude.

In closing, I would like to say that it is with the greatest pride and humility that I accept this honor from the College of Engineering. To be counted among the group of distinguished engineers that has been selected before me, some of whom I have known and greatly admire, is most unbelievable and will stand as one of the greatest honors of my professional life.