Making a Difference...
From Ohio to Hollywood to MIT

Thomas F. Peterson Jr. ’57

Tom Peterson spent only two years at MIT before he was called home to run the family company—but those four semesters shaped his interests and career for life.

As a result, the man who would go on to lead two successful and very different businesses decided to give back to the Institute by becoming an active member of the MIT Club of Cleveland, Ohio, and by supporting—and regularly meeting with/MIT professors across a range of fields, from cancer research to earth sciences.

Peterson came to the Institute as a first-year student in 1953 knowing that he would return to his hometown of Cleveland to work at his father’s company, Preformed Line Products (PLP), a manufacturer of equipment and systems for telecommunication and energy applications. Unfortunately, his father’s deteriorating health precipitated his son’s return. But MIT had already made an impact.

During first-year rush week, Peterson had to choose between a lecture by MIT’s Harold “Doc” Edgerton and one by Timothy Leary (then a psychology lecturer at Harvard). He chose Edgerton, whose work with photography inspired Peterson to explore photography and video. After returning to Cleveland, Peterson continued to pursue his interest in those subjects, eventually concentrating on scripts, editing, and sound—all in his free time after coming home from PLP. That ultimately led Peterson to start Motion Picture Sound, Inc., a company that produced sophisticated audio for Hollywood, the Public Broadcasting Service, and the Department of Defense. Peterson eventually left PLP to focus full time on Motion Picture Sound.

Peterson speculates that he may have chosen a very different path had he attended Leary’s lecture instead!

Calculus with Norbert Wiener, known as the founder of cybernetics, was Peterson’s most memorable class at MIT. There, he “learned a lot about life,” Peterson says, “and not very much about calculus.” Wiener reviewed the homework problems in the first few minutes of class, only to spend the remaining hour brainstorming and bouncing ideas off his students. Peterson adopted Wiener’s strategy of brainstorming ideas—it is one of the things he enjoys doing today with current MIT faculty.

Return to MIT

At the urging of local alumni, Peterson decided to join the MIT Club of Cleveland in 2000. Peterson was hesitant at first because he was not an MIT graduate. When he contacted the Registrar’s Office, they could not locate his files. A friend pointed out that Peterson’s freshman yearbook photo was on the Class of ’57 website, which Peterson shared with the Registrar’s Office. A short time later, the office did indeed find his file—it was in offsite storage marked “waiting for return.”

And return to MIT he did. Peterson is now actively involved in many things MIT, from supporting graduate students in engineering and the conservation of rare and antique books at the MIT Libraries to serving on the McGovern Institute Leadership Board and the Corporation Development Committee. But it’s the personal connections that matter most to Peterson, especially his regular visits to professors on campus.

During these visits, Peterson likes to sit with researchers and brainstorm, much as he did in Wiener’s calculus class, with often exciting results. For example, Peterson
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formed an instant bond with Christopher Moore, an assistant professor in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences and a principal investigator at the McGovern Institute for Brain Research at MIT. He was interested in Moore’s groundbreaking work on human perception. After getting to know Moore, Peterson shared the professor’s frustration over a lack of access to equipment. Once a month, Moore had been borrowing equipment at Massachusetts General Hospital, but he wasn’t allowed to fine-tune it to his specifications. Shortly after learning of the problem, Peterson gave Moore a two-photon microscope and an accompanying set of lasers for optical control of brain circuits. Within three months, Moore published an article in the journal Nature highlighting his results from using these instruments. Peterson was so pleased that he then contributed to the purchase of a magnetoencephalography (MEG) machine for the McGovern Institute. The MEG provides a different, yet complementary set of data from a two-photon microscope. Peterson is eager to learn about the results from these studies in the coming months.

A proponent of interdepartmental collaboration, Peterson remarks that “some of the greatest breakthroughs in history were made by people who were not experts in that field.” Such people are uninhibited because they don’t know what “can’t” be done, he says. At the Koch Institute, for example, Peterson supports Institute Professor Robert Langer’s work. He likes that Langer’s background is in chemical engineering and not in cancer research. Plus, he adds, Langer’s track record—which now stands at more than 1,000 articles, over 500 issued and pending patents, and around 170 prestigious awards for his pioneering work in drug delivery systems and tissue engineering—is unbeatable.

Peterson also introduced Moore to Benjamin Weiss, an associate professor in the Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences (EAPS). Recently, Peterson began supporting Weiss’s research, which uses state-of-the-art imaging technology, in this case SQUID microscopy, to conduct laboratory magnetic studies on rocks from Mars, the Moon, Earth, and asteroids to understand the development of planetary evolution and magnetism. Peterson has a longstanding interest in geophysics, which began with an MIT course on the subject.

Peterson’s varied interests in MIT include the Koch Institute, EAPS, the McGovern Institute, and the MIT Libraries. “I know that I can’t make the same impact as Bill Gates,” he says, “but I can make a difference. There is definitely research at MIT that would not happen without my support.” Through his gifts and the resulting discoveries, Peterson hopes to create a catalytic response, generating more support than his own gift.

At a Gray House dinner, Peterson remembers hearing MIT President Susan Hockfield remark, “Some of MIT’s best friends are not graduates; some were not even students.” Peterson is pleased that he can give back to MIT—a place that gave him many things, if not a diploma.