Engineer earns applause by moving from corporate ladder to classroom

By Kristin Copenhaver

Dean Pichette never planned on a career in education. Or two careers, for that matter. Ask him, though, and he’ll say that sometimes the best things in life aren’t exactly planned.

Growing up, Pichette wanted to know how things worked. One birthday gift in particular from his dad, a doctor and a Wayne State University alumnus, solidified his career path. “I had no idea at the time, but the walkie-talkie he got me led me into electrical engineering,” Pichette says.

He earned a bachelor’s degree in engineering from Michigan State University in 1972 and immediately started his first career — which lasted 33 years — as an engineer with Ford Motor Company.

While at Ford, Pichette helped successfully launch the entire electrical system for the Ford Edge/Mercury MKX, Ford Fusion/Mercury Milan/Lincoln Zephyr, and the Lincoln Mercury product development electrical and electronic systems engineering organization. He also served as acting chief engineer for the Electrical Engineering Large Vehicle Center and spent time on construction management. In 2000, his electrical system helped the Lincoln LS earn Motor Trend’s Car of the Year title.

“My time at Ford was filled with long workdays, but it provided me the opportunity to learn, design and excel in an extremely collaborative and innovative environment,” says Pichette, who, after earning an MBA from MSU in 1990, enrolled in Wayne State’s Electronics and Computer Control Systems master’s program in 1995.

In the early 2000s, long-time Wayne State Industrial and Systems Engineering (ISE) Professor Kenneth Chelst was interested in finding a part-time lecturer who might give students a more practical approach to project management for the department’s Professional Engineering Management master’s program. Pichette’s experience at Ford and his education and familiarity with Wayne State made him a perfect candidate. As it turns out, Pichette and Chelst were members of the same synagogue.

“Even though we both were members at Young Israel of Southfield, Ken and I didn’t really know each other very well then. He asked if I was interested. I declined because I didn’t think I could handle the workload at that point in my life,” Pichette says.

That didn’t stop Chelst from asking again in 2005. At that point, the time was right for Pichette.

“Ford went through significant headcount reductions starting in late 2006 and offered me a package,” Pichette says. “I had been there for 33 years. I didn’t want to be home all the time and thought this was a good transition. I really wasn’t sure what to expect. Turned out, I really loved teaching.”

He taught project management as a part-time instructor from 2005 until 2007, when he began full-time employment with the university as a senior lecturer. Since then, he has taught courses including systems engineering, project/program management, design and engineering economics. He also leads all senior capstone and master’s level leadership projects for ISE.

Pichette has authored a chapter on ethics and decision-making, and a session paper on systems engineering. He is a member of the department’s Lecture Capture Task Force and Undergraduate Program Committee, and project manager for the department’s Global Executive Track Ph.D. program and Climate Working Group.

“They and their employers through various projects and initiatives.”

In turn, his students have helped him realize his passion for teaching and have given him a new perspective.

“My students teach me things every day. I’m so impressed by the diversity of our students and their work ethic in general. I really enjoy working with them, especially if I can help turn the light on. I feel fortunate to have fallen into my fun and rewarding second career,” says Pichette, who received a teaching recognition award for his efforts at a December ISE alumni event.

Pichette, who spends an hour nearly every morning at Young Israel learning Daf Yomi, also was honored last year by his synagogue for his service. He is married to Barbara with four children, three of whom are Wayne State alumni, and three grandchildren.

Copenhaver is associate director of marketing for the College of Engineering. For details about these and other programs, visit engineering.wayne.edu.