Money Well Spent

A Sigma Pi Sigma donor who recalls his early days in physics chooses to support young physicists

by Tara Davis
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Many would describe Thomas A. Turano’s life as distinguished, even prestigious. Named one of the “Best Lawyers in America in Biotechnology Law,” he is a law partner at K&L Gates in its Boston office. His name appears regularly in Chambers USA, an annual publication that lists the nation’s top attorneys.

But this long-time Sigma Pi Sigma donor looks at it differently. From his point of view, the pathway he has taken has been “a random walk through life.” Turano did not start out intending to become a lawyer. He has earned five degrees, and the first one was a physics bachelor’s awarded in 1971 by the University of Rhode Island in Kingston.

Inducted into Sigma Pi Sigma in May 1970, Turano can recall what it was like to be a brand-new graduate. “I remember how difficult it was to be a student just getting started,” he says. “There was not a lot of opportunity for low-level degree holders.”

Memories of those early days of starting to climb the career ladder have propelled Turano to support others through Sigma Pi Sigma. His contributions to the physics honor society’s programs help physics majors in various ways, funding travel awards for professional conferences, internships, research awards, and more. “It’s money well spent,” says Turano. “It’s an investment in our future.”

After his physics degree, he went on to earn master’s degrees in biophysics, biology, and electrical engineering. This love for learning seems to have been inherited by his daughter, Morgan, who now has multiple degrees in creative writing and chemistry.

In the midst of earning those degrees Turano went to work in a laboratory at The George Washington University in Washington, DC, where he measured cell growth. Later he was hired at a company as a software engineer and eventually became a patent engineer. This was the first time the company ever offered such a position. “It just sounded interesting to me,” Turano said. As a patent engineer, Turano worked with the attorneys who represented his company.

He enjoyed that work, but it wasn’t long before he decided to try something slightly different. His lawyer colleagues suggested that he become a patent attorney. So he headed back to school and in 1988 he completed his law degree at Suffolk University Law School in Boston, Massachusetts.

No longer studying oscillating chemical reactions, cell growth, or how nucleic acids bind to proteins, Turano has nonetheless found joy in his work as an intellectual property attorney. His days are mainly spent helping inventors obtain patents, engaging in patent litigation, pursuing licenses to collect royalties, and working on mergers and acquisitions. “I still consider myself a physicist, because I use my physics background substantially every day to understand the materials that cross my desk.”

While it may sound daunting to many, Turano sees his work as an opportunity to expand his social circle and his knowledge. “It’s actually very interesting,” he says. “I get to see the toys before a lot of people.” He remembers looking over plans for probes that allow medical experts to see into the human body. “We saw this stuff 10 to 15 years before the public ever saw it.”

Turano says he feels lucky to be in a position to contribute. “It’s fun helping someone just coming out of school, helping them get funding, grow, and then sell their company.” Since his firm conducts business globally, Turano has colleagues around the world.

Although he isn’t working in a physics laboratory today, Turano never second-guesses his decision to get a physics degree. “Being a physicist is foremost for me, and for what I am most satisfied in achieving. A degree in physics gives you the ability to ask more questions.”

Photo courtesy of Thomas Turano.

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