Elden (Stens) Stensaas

Elden Russell Stensaas was born on November 6, 1908, in Norway, Kansas, where he grew up and graduated from high school. He worked his way through Kansas State University, learning at a very early age the value of thrift and hard work. He was a member of Pi Kappa Alpha Fraternity and graduated from KSU with a BS in Mechanical Engineering in 1938 and then accepted a position at the School of Mines as an instructor. However, there was no degree-granting department of mechanical engineering at that time and students attended his classes in a single room at the back of the Physical Plant which used an old steam engine donated from Homestake Mine to heat the campus.

During World War II (1940-46), Stensaas worked as a civilian instructor in the Air Force Tech Training Program (mechanic schools) at Chanute AFB in Rantoul, Illinois, and at Sheppard AFB in Wichita Falls and Amarillo, Texas. In 1946 he returned to the School of Mines where he became the first Professor and Head of the newly-approved Department of Mechanical Engineering. He had no equipment and acquired an old government surplus barracks which temporarily housed mechanical engineering. One semester he had a teaching load of 26 credit hours – he taught every class in the department. He was affectionately known by many as “Stens.”

Professor Stensaas spent one summer doing advanced work in nuclear engineering at the University of California at Berkeley and was later Chairman of the Nuclear Engineering faculty at the School of Mines. He spent a summer at Argonne National Laboratory in Chicago doing a feasibility study on the design of a reactor and took a one-year sabbatical from the School of Mines in 1953-54 to work for General Electric at Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory in New York designing the reactor in one of the early atomic submarines, the Sea Wolf. He returned to the School of Mines where he stayed until his retirement in May 1974 and was honored as Professor Emeritus, Mechanical Engineering.

While at the School of Mines, he was recognized as an Honorary Member of Triangle Fraternity and was very active with the Student Chapter of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. He had an open door policy for his students and welcomed them to his office at any time. Under his leadership, the Mechanical Engineering Department became the largest department on campus.

Elden married Dorothy Aspegren on June 1, 1940, and they had two children: Michael (BS ME 63) who resides in Chicago, Illinois, and Jane (married to Gary Fick) who resides in Breckenridge, Minnesota. Professor Stensaas passed away on December 16, 1986, and Dorothy passed away on November 28, 1997.

Professor Stensaas’ grandson, Dr. Damon Fick, is currently an Assistant Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at SDSM&T. Dr. Fick received his B.S. and M.S. degrees from the University of Minnesota and his Ph.D. degree from Purdue.