



## Connecting With Ray Rothrock '77

“College is the last time and place where you will get to sit in a room and be taught things,” said Ray Rothrock '77. “After that, you’ve got to learn it for yourself, mostly without instructors. College is magical that way.”

Rothrock certainly made the most of his own higher education. He graduated, summa cum laude, with a degree in nuclear engineering from Texas A&M University and went on to complete both a master’s degree at MIT and then an MBA, with distinction, at Harvard. He said the practical education he received at A&M was unparalleled.

“The best engineers in the world are graduates of Texas A&M. I’ve met engineers from scores of places and, simply put, A&M engineers know how to get things done. It’s amazing.” But he also credits A&M for some other important things he learned along the way, outside the classroom.

“I always had a bug for service,” he recalls. “I did the whole scout experience, including the Eagle Scout, was active in my church and other community activities. At A&M all those early leadership experiences found even more fertile purchase. A&M helped shape my leadership skills beyond local or small organizations. I moved up quickly to rebuild the MSC Radio Club,

which was dying. I became a member of the MSC Directorate, which was like the board of directors, the Student Engineering Council, and ran radio communications for bonfire. I had to solve problems—people problems at a level never before in my experience. You learn really fast dealing in the real world. I really didn’t know any of this when I landed at A&M.”

Rothrock said that problem-solving and goal-setting are lessons of leadership. “The world is a big place and there are so few leaders with the guts to make the hard choices. Honing that skill a thousand times on small things makes it that much more easy when the really tough one comes along.”

He has applied all these lessons many times during his career, first as a nuclear engineer and then for more than two decades as a venture capitalist. “After playing engineer for a while, I moved to California to try my hand at startup companies, which were pretty new in 1981. I got the bug. And now in venture capital, I get to do it over and over and over again. It’s never the same but always fun.”

Rothrock has a stellar career investment record at his venture capital firm, Venrock Associates. “When it works out well, you do great financially,” he

said. “But that’s not the driver. It’s the building and working with people to build dreams into reality that make venture fun.

“I probably didn’t realize until I got in this business just how optimistic I am. Venture capitalists and entrepreneurs are the most optimistic people on the planet. When you’re in the startup business, it’s very risky. Most startups die; maybe 90 percent go out of business. So you have to have a certain amount of optimism. And you need to be forgiven for failure. If people are not forgiven to fail, they might not take a chance.

“Lots of people are afraid of failure. I worked for three companies before business school. Two lasted exactly one year, ran out of money and sold nothing! Acknowledge failure, pick yourself up and keep going—that is definitely what venture capitalists do all the time.”

Rothrock’s optimism extends beyond his work. “I believe in the human spirit, and in the human capacity to solve our problems,” he said. “Whatever breaks, we can fix it. Whatever problems we created, we can solve.”

He thinks education offers the best path for solving many of those problems, and that is part of the reason he gives back to Texas A&M. “Lack of resources, mostly money, I think is the biggest obstacle for people to go to college. The more barriers we knock down, the better. The more educated we are as a society, the better. The more Aggies who know how to do things in the real world, the better.”

He also believes in the A&M core value of Selfless Service and strives to practice it in his life. “This goes back to my Boy Scout roots. There is so much to do and so many needy folks. My parents were always involved in the local community and church and school. What I didn’t know then that I now enjoy is broad purview of service opportunities. It is so cool to see people grow and develop. An A&M core strength is the notion that service is OK. Making students aware of the many opportunities for service broadens their experiences, makes them think about themselves, and frankly helps everyone around them.”

Rothrock has served A&M and other causes in many other ways. He is a for-

mer member of the Board of Directors of The Association of Former Students, and he chairs the investment committee of the Texas A&M Foundation's Board of Trustees. He also serves on the Visiting Committee of the MIT Nuclear Science and Engineering Department, and he is past chair of the board of Woodside Priory School in Portola Valley, Calif. He also has numerous philanthropic interests around music, including A&M's Ray Rothrock Chair in Music.

"I've tried to fill in holes in the academics at A&M, like with the Chair in Music. Missing totally when I was there, music is important in everyone's life, now more than ever thanks to Steve Jobs and the iPod."

Rothrock has also been a major supporter of recent enhancements to the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center. "The power of the network, generally, has been well studied. It has a geometric impact on people. Just look at the Internet, a big network of computers

with people talking/working together. An amazing thing for sure. With The Association of Former Students at the heart of the Aggie Network, it seemed right and proper that that hub be the best it can be in terms of look, feel and capability. Nothing stands still very long; everything changes. If you don't upgrade and improve, then it stagnates and dies. It was time to improve the Alumni Center, and I'm glad I was in a position to do something." 🍷

## AT A GLANCE: RAY ROTHROCK '77

### EDUCATION

Rothrock graduated with highest honors from Texas A&M University in 1977 with a bachelor's degree in nuclear engineering. He went on to receive a master's in nuclear engineering from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and then an M.B.A., with distinction, from Harvard Business School.

### FAMILY

Rothrock's wife, Meredith, is a University of California-Berkeley graduate and "a total athlete who plays tennis, races sail boats, jumps off mountains and does things that would scare any normal human being to death," he said. Their relationship is an equal partnership. "I could never in recent years have been as involved in Texas A&M and made the contributions of time and treasure without her support," he said. The Rothrocks have a son, Nathaniel, who is a theater major at Middlebury College in Vermont.

### CAREER

Rothrock began his career as a nuclear safety engineer and then software applications engineer before getting into venture capital. He has been managing general partner of Venrock Associates since 1988 and serves on the boards of 10 private companies and one public company.

### KEY AGGIE INFLUENCES

"At the bottom of it all is J. Wayne Stark '39, head of the MSC in those days. Wayne was a truly special person one could not ignore once you found yourself in his tractor beam. He definitely was a significant factor. Dr. Richard Newton ran the remote sensing center and had great advice about graduate school, which left me with clear ideas of how and what that would mean. Dr. Robert Cochran, head of nuclear, was one of those engineers who wrote the original textbooks about nuclear energy. That generation is passing now at A&M and also at MIT. I feel very lucky to have been taught by the fathers of the nuclear industry at both schools."

### A FAVORITE A&M MEMORY

"I have been a musician since I was 9 and play a number of instruments, so when I got to A&M and realized there was no civilian form of music, I was bummed. In the spring of freshman year, a bunch of us in calculus class discovered we all were equally frustrated and decided to find out how to organize a band, University-wide. The reception at the band hall was not encouraging. The reception at the MSC was encouraging but without direct support. The reception at student affairs laid out a lot of hurdles for this handful of engineers to get over. We did. We organized the Texas A&M Symphonic band, open to all students. We offered to provide our own instruments, pay for our own music and even find a conductor, but at the end of the day, Maj. [later Col.] Joe T. Haney '48 stepped up with full support, instruments and all, and suddenly we were in business. We had 200 people trying out for 60 seats. What success! I remember well the first concert, where I played the oboe solo in *Die Fledermaus* by Johann Strauss II. My parents were in the audience. It was truly a special moment that wrapped up a gauntlet, a tenacious team effort, and support from the University."

### ADVICE FOR INCOMING FRESHMEN

"Work hard. While grades mattered in high school—they still matter. Get involved in your passions and try many things. This is the most risk-free time of your life since you have no history or legacy to direct you. It's a great time to be an Aggie. Have lots of fun."

### ADVICE FOR GRADUATING SENIORS

"Mr. Stark taught me that the fish rots from the head down, and that you are known by the company you keep. So, watch the top and keep friends your mother would be proud of. Set high standards for yourself as you'll only obtain the goals you set. Remember, you are an Aggie, an American and a leader. People are watching what you do. They always do. If you are inclined, go to grad school. It'll change your view of the world. Move somewhere and live elsewhere. While Texas is a wonderful state, it's not the only state. Have fun. And no matter how high you get or where you go, never forget where you've been."