

UP CLOSE ALUMNI

ALUMNUS CELEBRATES 100TH BIRTHDAY

Robert (Bob) T. Henson graduated from Purdue University's School of Chemical Engineering in 1936, four years before construction finished on the building now known as Forney Hall of Chemical Engineering. On Oct. 11, 2014, he celebrated his 100th birthday surrounded by family and friends at the Cherokee Country Club located near his Atlanta home.

In doing so, he took time to reflect on how much has changed through the years at his alma mater.

"The resources available to current students and faculty stand in stark contrast to the unsophisticated facilities I encountered during my time as a student," Henson said, noting that his class helped put together the first unit operations laboratory "in the bowels of old Heavilon Hall."

"The curriculum is now state-of-the-art," he added. "The faculty are people you should like to learn from because they represent obvious competence in a variety of disciplines. I'm more proud of Purdue today than ever."

Henson observed that, in 1936, graduating meant confronting the reality of an uncertain future.

"Edward Elliott was president of Purdue when I graduated and his message on my diploma served as a constant inspiration to me through the years," Henson explained. "It said in part – 'Whatever be the number and variety of changes you have experienced since you entered the University, the power you have gained for self-controlled, concentrated thinking should have the greatest value. Not what you do by what you already know, but what you will do by what you do not know will decide your achievements. Yours has been an education for uncertainty.'"

"Remember, this was still the Great Depression," Henson added. "Engineers were glad to get jobs paying \$65 – per month! Uncertainty was a way of life."

Six months after graduating from Purdue, Henson married Adeline "Coc" Henson, who remained by his side for 73 years. She passed away in August 2010 at age 93.

Together, they moved to Canton, North Carolina; to Akron, Ohio; to Libertyville, Illinois, before finally settling in Atlanta, Georgia, where Henson founded Flexible Products Company in 1951. Over the years, the company grew into one of the largest polyurethane system suppliers in North America.

"My job was to try to peek around the corner into the future," Henson said. "It just makes sense to anticipate the action if you can. Events usually move ponderously, from a whisper to a shout, so listen for the whispers and you'll be there, and ready, when the shouting starts."



Dr. Arvind Varma (right) congratulates Bob Henson at his 100th birthday celebration.

Flexible Products Company was sold to The Dow Chemical Company in 2000. Through the years, Bob and Adeline Henson have been extremely generous to the School of Chemical Engineering.

The Robert T. Henson Atrium in Forney Hall serves as a lasting tribute to them and they were presented with the President's Council Distinguished Pinnacle Award there on June 30, 2007.

In 1989, Bob Henson received the Outstanding Chemical Engineer award.

"It has been my privilege to watch the School of Chemical Engineering evolve through the years," Henson said. "In business, we had a culture that accepted the concept that the products and services we were currently offering, though perhaps introduced just yesterday or last week, were already obsolete. We knew they would be improved by someone someday – because Purdue is going to continue producing top-notch chemical engineers."

To view a special video tribute to Mr. Henson produced in honor of his 100th birthday, please visit www.engineering.purdue.edu/ChE.