Clemson Legacy Connection

PLANNED GIVING NEWSLETTER

CLEMSON forever | PLANNED GIVING

The Joy of Meaningful Relationships and Lifelong Learning — Robert Davis ’85, July 2025

What if the secret to a fulfilling life isn’t just what you learn, but *who* you learn it with? At Clemson, we believe the pursuit of knowledge doesn’t end with a diploma — it’s a mindset, a spirit of curiosity that opens doors, creates connections and deepens the bonds that shape our lives.

This month, we invite you to celebrate the power of lifelong learning and the joy of relationships that stand the test of time. Few embody this better than Robert Davis ’85, whose journey shows us that staying curious, nurturing friendships and giving back can transform not just a career, but a lifetime.

A Lifelong Curiosity

Being a lifelong learner means embracing a mindset of continuous learning and personal growth throughout one's entire life, both in formal and informal settings. It's about cultivating a curiosity to explore new ideas, acquire new skills and adapt to a constantly changing world, both professionally and personally.

Lifelong learning can mean different things to different people. To Robert Davis ’85, being a lifelong student simply means staying interested and curious.

“If you’re not learning new things, you’re going backwards,” Robert stated. “I always encourage younger people to stay inquisitive and pay attention, and they will be surprised what can happen.”

Discovering the Value of a Clemson Education

Robert began his Clemson Experience in 1981 when he and his best friend, Blaine Williamson ’85, M’86, arrived on campus. “Those four years at Clemson are really meaningful to me, and they were some of the best years of my life. Every time I return to Clemson, usually once a year, it reinforces my lifelong connection to this great institution. The University campus has changed over time; however, the standards and warmth are still the same. And that is so encouraging to experience,” he added.

After graduating with a B.S. in financial management, Robert worked for Chrysler Corporation while earning his MBA from Georgia State University at night. “I didn’t realize what a great education I had received from Clemson until I was out in the workforce and pursuing my MBA,” Robert said. “Clemson taught me how to learn, think and solve problems, which made graduate school so much easier.”

A Career Fueled by Passion

After five years, Robert joined Mazda Motor Corporation, where he invested 30 years in various roles across the country. He found many similarities to Chrysler, in that both companies are relatively small in the automotive world. Robert believes the size of the companies gave him broader opportunities to do different things; for instance, at Mazda, he oversaw research and development and quality assurance in North America — even without an engineering degree.

“My career was focused around my passion for cars and how they work, and my involvement in the motorsports program taught me a great deal. I was able to put a non-engineering perspective on R&D at Mazda, and it has been rewarding to see that they still value that cross-disciplined approach today,” Robert said.

The Importance of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is crucial for problem solvers due to the rapidly evolving nature of technology and the constant need to adapt to new challenges and advancements, particularly in the automotive industry. It ensures employees remain relevant, competitive and innovative throughout their careers.

“Mazda was a fantastic company to work for and gave me a lot of life experiences that I couldn’t have gotten anywhere else,” he said. “I credit the leadership at Mazda for the opportunities I enjoyed. My career taught me so much, gave me amazing experiences and was a mutually beneficial relationship.”

A Global Network of Relationships — People Matter Most

During the course of his career, Robert traveled to Mazda facilities in Japan, Europe and Australia and met people with whom he is still connected today. This also includes colleagues from Ford Motor Company, Volkswagen and other companies that he had the pleasure of getting to know.

“Something I think back on a lot is that we were able to restore quite a few of Mazda’s old racing cars,” Robert said. This became the 90-car strong Mazda Heritage Collection, and Robert had the chance to drive some of those cars, not only in the U.S. but also in Europe at the infamous Goodwood Hill Climb.

“There were a lot of things that were great about my career — the cars and the travel — but nothing compares to the people and relationships built during a career,” he reflected. “I saw at Mazda and still see it today, even though I retired in 2020: The employees are passionate about the company and care about the products being made. When you care, you give a little something extra — no matter what your role.”

A Friendship That Stands the Test of Time

Relationships have always played an important role in Robert's life. He is still the best of friends with Blaine, whom he has known since sixth grade and roomed with for most of their time at Clemson.

"The one year we weren't roommates, we were next-door neighbors. We spent three years in Johnstone Hall and one year at Calhoun Courts. The oil stains from our motorcycle are probably still on the pavement in front of that apartment," he laughed.

Love and Lifelong Connection

Robert has also maintained friendships with people he worked with across the globe and even met his wife while working at Mazda. "Bonnie and I met at a corporate meeting in Dallas, Texas. She worked for Mazda's advertising agency when I was working in the sales and marketing division."

"We have a running joke that she went on a 'date' with my father before she met me. My dad's close friend Joe was a friend of Bonnie's family. Joe agreed to drive his daughter and Bonnie to a concert; however, he got stuck out of town for work and asked my dad to step in and drive them. When we met and Bonnie told me that my dad had taken her to an Air Supply concert, I thought she was pulling my leg. It was quite a coincidence," Robert said.

A Life of Shared Passions

Robert and Bonnie were married in 2001, and Robert said that Bonnie quickly became a huge Clemson fan.

"I think Bonnie loves Clemson about as much as I do. She values our visits to Tigertown a great deal," Robert said.

The couple eventually purchased a ranch in Southern California, and when Bonnie retired in 2009, she began to devote her time to the ranch and the care

of their animals. Around the time of Robert's retirement in 2020, they sold the property and acquired a ranch in Prescott, Arizona. "Bonnie reminds me not to count the number of animals on the ranch and says she won't count the number of cars I collect," Robert laughed. "Both the ranch and the cars give us great joy."

Giving Back to Secure Clemson's Future

When Robert began thinking of ways to support Clemson, he fondly recalled working with Dr. A. Wayne Bennett on two Deep Orange projects in conjunction with Mazda. Robert said their relationship and his interaction with faculty and students involved in the CU-ICAR program jump-started his desire to re-engage with Clemson.

"Two things went through my mind when I began to consider how to best support Clemson. The first was a realization that I trust the judgment of the leadership at Clemson on how best to utilize my donation. The second was that I want to give people the chance to develop and grow, to experience outstanding opportunities, build careers and enjoy fulfilling lives," Robert said. "A big part of having the career that I did was built on great opportunities, and I want to provide others with similar opportunities."

Advice for the Next Generation

Robert's successful career is due in large part to the relationships he built along the way and continues to foster to this day. His advice to future students — and to those of us reading today — is to find something you're passionate about, forge meaningful relationships with others, listen with respect and make the effort to get to know those you work with. "When you spend many hours a day with co-workers, it is a lot more enjoyable when those relationships are built on mutual respect. It's a pretty easy formula for success," he emphasized.

Keep Learning and Always Remember To Give Back

May Robert's story remind us that no matter where life takes us — from campus halls to racetracks across the globe — it's the people we meet and the knowledge we share that create our richest memories.

Let's all strive to stay inquisitive, forge connections that matter and lift each other higher, just as Robert has done. Keep learning, keep asking questions and keep showing up for one another — because the greatest lessons are often found in the people walking this journey beside us.

If you feel inspired by Robert's commitment and want to make a lasting impact on generations of Tigers to come, consider including Clemson in your estate plans. Your planned gift can open doors, create opportunities and ensure that meaningful relationships and lifelong learning thrive at Clemson for years to come.

To learn more about how you can shape the future through planned giving, please visit our website or contact me at *jovanna@clemson.edu*. I always enjoy hearing from you! We have an amazing team of professionals to help you navigate a potential current or future gift to enhance and support Clemson. We also provide a variety of resources on our website for you to review as you navigate various opportunities that can be shared with your financial and legal advisors. There are numerous trusts and planned giving vehicles that can significantly benefit you and your family.

Together, we can keep the Clemson spirit alive — today, tomorrow and always.

Best wishes to you for an enjoyable summer! Please make plans to stop by '55 Exchange for some delicious and refreshing Clemson ice cream, and don't forget to take home some legendary Clemson blue cheese for family and friends!

Ever Loyal and Forever Grateful,