

SOLVING THE EARTH'S
WATER PROBLEM

A BUILDING ALIVE WITH POSSIBILITIES

Q&A WITH COACH PASTNER | FOR THE LOVE OF HONEY (BEES)

PURE GOLD
HONOREES

GEORGIA TECH

ALUMNI MAGAZINE

VOLUME
92
NO. 4
WINTER
2016



SUSTAIN
+ ABILITY

A better world,
built to last

A Sustainable Legacy

How an environmental epiphany changed Georgia Tech alumnus Ray C. Anderson, his company and the future of business.

“WHAT IS YOUR COMPANY DOING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT?” This question, posed in 1994 to business leader Ray C. Anderson, IE 56, Hon PhD 11, at age 60, would dominate the remainder of his storied career.

Anderson, the late founder and chairman of Interface Inc., called it a “spear-in-the-chest” epiphany. He became driven to prove that sustainability was more than just the right thing to do for the environment; it was the right thing to do for business.

Interface had grown, since its start in 1973, into the world’s largest manufacturer of modular carpet tiles, with plants located across the globe. The company relied heavily on petrochemicals to make its products and also generated a lot of waste that went straight into landfills—just like most other companies in that industry and of that era.

“The term sustainability as we know it today didn’t exist yet,” says John Wells, IM 84, former president-CEO of Interface Americas. “And few leaders in business and manufacturing were talking about trying to improve the environment at that time.”

Wells had just been hired in 1994 by Anderson to serve as head of U.S. sales. “I remember we were approached by a potential client who wanted to construct a ‘green’ building and we wanted to sell them carpet,” Wells says. “They asked us what Interface’s environmental

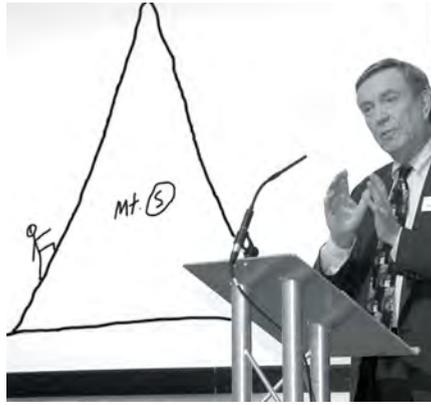


strategy was, and we didn’t really have an answer.”

This greatly bothered Anderson, and catalyzed a chain of events that would lead Interface to become a much-studied model for creating sustainable business practices—though many outside the company laughed at his efforts at the time.

More than 20 years later, Interface’s

plants get almost all of their power from renewable energy sources rather than fossil fuels, says Wells, who retired from the company this June. And a majority of the materials used in its carpet manufacturing operations are reused or recycled. The company’s mission is to eliminate or compensate for all negative impacts on the environment by the year 2020.



His collegiate football career cut short by injury, Anderson shifted his focus into engineering and business. After “getting out” of Tech, he went on to found Interface, which has grown into a global carpeting tile giant and sustainability leader.

“Anderson’s courage and vision have been taught worldwide, including at Georgia Tech,” Wells says. “He proved that businesses can perform well by doing good.”

Anderson died in 2011, but his legacy lives on within the company he founded, as well as at the Ray C. Anderson Foundation. The Foundation supports and funds a wide range of projects that promote sustainability.

One of those projects is the Ray C. Anderson Center for Sustainable Business in Tech’s Scheller College of Business, which also received financial support from the Kendeda Fund.

“The Center was created to give body to Ray’s legacy in an institution he loved and supported, and to educate the Ray Andersons of tomorrow,” says Beril Toktay, the Center’s faculty director.

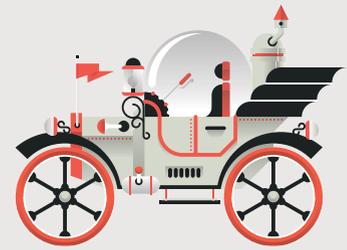
“Through the Center’s programs, we strive to give engineers, entrepreneurs, managers and CEOs—Ray was all of those—the mindset and the business thinking to help them lead us to the next level, where our economy operates in a cycle of sustainable production and consumption,” she says. “Typically, business leaders who

want to create change do not face just technical challenges; they face behavioral challenges, organizational challenges, operational challenges and economic challenges.”

That was Ray’s experience in embracing sustainability, and that’s where the Scheller College of Business plays a critical role, Toktay says. “We develop new business models that challenge conventional thinking—not ‘take-make-waste’ but a ‘circular’ approach to the economy,” she says. Ray called it ‘cutting your firm’s umbilical cord from mother nature.’”

The Center helps business leaders develop comprehensive strategies that make sense both economically and environmentally, and educates students of all levels about sustainability integration and sustainability-driven innovation, with an emphasis on a circular, low-carbon economy.

“With the tremendous resources of the Scheller College of Business and Georgia Tech, the Ray C. Anderson Center wields very powerful tools to help create a sustainable future that we think would make Ray very proud,” Toktay says. ▲



Time Machine

5 YEARS AGO, IN 2011,

Jane Ammons was selected as chair of the School of Industrial and Systems Engineering, becoming the first female chair in the College of Engineering.



10 YEARS AGO, IN 2006,

Georgia Tech formed a dual degree program with Shanghai Jiao Tong University in China.



25 YEARS AGO, IN 1991,

Tech reached an all-time high in fundraising despite an economic recession.



50 YEARS AGO, IN 1966,

the Electronics Research Building (ERB) was completed.



100 YEARS AGO, IN 1916,

the Tech football team won the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association championship for the first time under Coach John Heisman.



125 YEARS AGO, IN 1891,

the graduating class featured just eight students.