

LEADING THE WAY

SIU Alumnus Dick Bladow donates \$250,000 to establish Engineering Leadership Program.

BY GREG SCOTT

While growing up in the small farming community of Seymour, Illinois, Dick Bladow says traditional values were instilled in him. One of these values was the importance of hard work.

A self-described traditionalist, Bladow says his father's expectations included his sons toiling on the family farm 12 hours a day.

"We all had chores. Work duties came first, and everything else was second," says Bladow. "In our extra time, we could make money baling hay, scooping corn, or running tractors for other farmers. They paid us about \$1.50 an hour. That is the way we were raised in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

"My father and mother taught us to respect elders, respect the property of other people, be kind, and serve others. Those are traditional values; I enjoy and love traditions. It's a shame our country has given up so many traditions to discretionary thinking."

Bladow says these values paved the way to future success. A 1970 SIU electrical engineering technology graduate, Bladow is the founder, chairman, and CEO of Advanced Technology

Services (ATS) Inc. The Peoria-based company provides managed services for production equipment maintenance, industrial parts repair and IT infrastructure support for manufacturers.

ATS employs more than 1,700 people, has five branch offices, and has more than 150 customer-site locations in the United States and Mexico. In May, ATS was recognized as one of the world's top 100 outsourcing providers by the International Association of Outsourcing Professionals.

In the wake of this success, Bladow pays tribute to his upbringing.

"My father ran various businesses, including gas stations and restaurants. His businesses were always customer-service related," Bladow says. "My brother and I learned that it was all about serving others.

"Dad always said that people pay you what they think you're worth. I always took what my bosses gave me and came back and worked a little harder the next day. And that is exactly what our customers are thinking today. Your service translates into value."

Brigitte Bladow, flanked by College of Engineering Dean William Osborne and her husband, Dick, was presented with an engraved bucket recently by the University. Although she is an Illinois State University graduate, she has joined her husband in supporting Southern. "This was the College's way of recognizing and saying thank you to Brigitte for her contribution to the Bladow Scholarship," Osborne says. "We had recognized Dick several times but never Brigitte – she has been just as supportive."

In his words, Bladow "barely made it through his first years of college." He held student jobs and outside jobs throughout his time at Southern. Upon leaving the University, Bladow was hired by Caterpillar, a leading manufacturer in Peoria, where he toiled in the maintenance department.

"I told the gentleman who hired me that I wasn't the smartest kid on the block but I'll outwork everyone here," Bladow says. "He had me for eight hours daily, and I had the other 16 hours to make up for my shortcomings. I ended up spending 12 to 14 hours a day to keep up with the other guys. I have always been willing to work harder than the next guy."

After 17 years at Caterpillar, Bladow established ATS in 1985, which in his words was "the beginning of a new day."

"These values were instilled in me from my parents, to professors at SIU, and personnel at Caterpillar that believed in me," he says. "I had the confidence in myself and people around me to take a chance and pursue this dream."

"We had ups and downs at the beginning. There were times my wife and I didn't get paid because we needed money to pay salaries; owners get paid last. But we had a dream and moved forward."

And *now* Bladow is looking for young aspiring engineers with similar values in pursuit of their dream. Bladow and his wife, Brigitte, donated \$250,000 to SIU's College of Engineering to create an engineering leadership program.

The program targets community college graduates in the state of Illinois who plan on attending Southern. Recipients receive a two-year scholarship which pays for tuition and fees. In addition, the program includes a paid summer internship opportunity at ATS allowing recipients to attain hands-on manufacturing and leadership experience.

SIU's engineering college is currently recruiting students for the program, which commences this fall semester. Students must submit an application and will compete in an interview process.

"Leadership is hard to find these days. We hire about 50 people a month and have a need for great people who can lead others," Bladow says. "Our single largest challenge as our business continues growing is finding good people who can lead."

"This is a great way to help the college. It allows ATS to get engaged with young people. Our students can experience real-world work situations and receive leadership training. My intentions would be to hire every one of these students if they meet expectations."

Community college students are a primary focus because they have a higher success rate according to William Osborne, dean of the College of Engineering.

"We're going to invest 14 to 15 thousand dollars in each of these students, so the College aspires to maximize the program's chances for success," Osborne says. "Community college transfers have a higher probability of successfully completing the program than would freshmen; also, in two years we can evaluate the success of this program. On the other hand, if freshmen participated,

we couldn't begin the evaluation process for another four to five years when the first recipient graduates."

Osborne says the program seeks individuals who have similar work ethic and leadership skills to Bladow. In addition, he says the alum's generosity will lead to a recruiting advantage for Southern.

"This program represents an opportunity for our College to raise its image and brand, particularly with community colleges," Osborne says. "We're hoping this program attracts other major corporations in the state. Eventually, 10 to 15 corporations could be involved. It could have a legacy much larger than any one person. Dick's view is very visionary in this respect."

While participation in the program doesn't guarantee full-time employment, the opportunity is likely to arise at ATS or another Illinois-based manufacturer if the student prospers. Osborne says this is one of the means by which the success of the program will be measured.

"We'll see if our students go to work for industry in Illinois and become successful faster than the average graduate does. Also, will leadership program participants ascend to first-level management positions before the average graduate?" Osborne says.

"Also, we hope this helps us with enrollment. If we recruit a junior college student who is a leader on his/her campus, they will bring the people they influence with them to Southern. This leadership program could ultimately be a significant edge for our graduates and the University."

Bruce DeRuntz, an associate professor who is charged with developing and marketing the program to Illinois community colleges, in addition to mentoring the students in the program, agrees that Southern will derive substantial benefit. He notes that



NASA Systems Engineer and SIU Alumni Association Life Member Shirish Patel (left) chats with SIU Alumni Association Executive Director Ed Buerger and Dick Bladow at an event hosted on Bladow's yacht before the recent *Discovery* launch.

BLAUDOW'S LEADERSHIP BENEFITS SIU AND ATS

Jeff Owens, president of Advanced Technology Services Inc. (ATS) in Peoria, has worked closely with Dick Blaudow for 18 years. Therefore, when he approaches the company's founder with an issue or problem, he can predict Blaudow's response.

"Dick's reply every time is 'Let me know how that works out,'" Owens says. "He is an empowering leader who wants to develop you as a person. He listens to what you're saying, but allows you to solve problems on your own, which fosters professional growth. And that is the type of person we're looking for at ATS."

ATS had 33 employees when it was established in 1985. Today, the company employs more than 1,700 and continues to grow. As the company strives to prosper in the future, Owens says hiring solid professionals with leadership skills is essential. This is the impetus for the Engineering Leadership Program (see accompany story) ATS is establishing in partnership with Southern.



ATS President Jeff Owens says company founder Dick Blaudow is an empowering leader.

In addition, the values that Blaudow stresses will not be compromised. ATS staff members must be conscientious and hard-working in their approach to business.

"Dick doesn't demand many things, but his priorities of extending quality customer service and taking care of consumer needs is non-negotiable – this is required of all employees," Owens says. "Our culture is comprised of dedicated people who are fair and honest."

"Twenty-five percent of our staff is former military members. They fit the mold of clean-cut, professional individuals who walk with a spring in their step. You could also liken our company to the Boy Scouts. We're very similar in our approach."

William Osborne, dean of the College of Engineering, also notices similarities in all ATS personnel. While Osborne says Blaudow doesn't put a strong emphasis on grade point average for aspiring ATS employees, he wants young professionals to possess certain attributes.

"Dick understands that GPA is just one dimension of a person. It doesn't tell you what is in the person's heart," he explains. "He is looking for people who have potential to be leaders for tomorrow. For example, when you meet military personnel, or a former high school quarterback, they often have these skills."

Some observers may refer to Blaudow's approach as old school. But according to Osborne, those beliefs aren't going out of style anytime soon. "It's worked for him; he's built his company around it," Osborne says. "When you meet his staff, they all fit into the ATS culture of customer service and dedication to quality."

SIU has also benefited from Blaudow's drive and leadership. He served on the SIU Foundation Board of Directors from 1994 to 2001, which included a stint on the board's executive committee. He chaired an advisory board designed to equip a 75,000-square foot addition to the College in the 1990s. The College received \$1,540,000 in gifts and pledges.

In the wake of lending support to establish an engineering leadership program, Blaudow has also sent a letter to engineering alumni – primarily company CEOs, presidents and vice presidents – encouraging them to support the college. He plans to follow up with these individuals by phone. Also, Blaudow's ATS marketing staff has produced a video featuring the leadership program. University officials use the video to recruit eligible students for the program.

Owens says Blaudow's Saluki Pride is no secret to ATS employees.

"Everyone at ATS knows where Dick went to school because he is proud and it's evident during his conversations with us," he says. "He is supportive of Southern. Our company has recruited there and I know Dick always takes an interest in SIU graduates."

And now Blaudow, honored by the SIU Alumni Association as a Distinguished Alumni Award recipient in 1998, hopes to assist his University in prospering at an even higher level.

"The engineering leadership program will provide SIU students with an opportunity to be a part of our team and perform in real jobs. This isn't a backup role or shadowing experience," he says. "Our motto at ATS is to do a little work, make a little money, and have a little fun. We're trying to do all of these things. It will be fun to watch this unfold."

he has created a tag line for the scholarship: "Giving you a career, not just an education."

"Dick's vision to sponsor several tuition and fees scholarships, coupled with the offer for fast-track careers has rewritten the standard for alumni generosity and loyalty," DeRuntz says. "This isn't charity. He is receiving the best and brightest students who will become the next generation of leaders at his company. Imagine what he may have just started if other SIU alums or other universities adopt his same vision."

And imagine if other colleges at Southern follow suit. Michael Murray, chief development officer for the College of Engineering, says this is another exciting possibility.

"Once the engineering leadership program is successful, we're hoping to help other colleges on campus to design a similar program," Murray says. "The impact of Dick's generosity could reach far beyond the College of Engineering."

This potential excites Blaudow.

"Brigitte and I wanted to be alive to see our money impact people and our business in a positive way," he says. "We've had the opportunity to be involved with SIU over the years. This is an opportune time for Brigitte and I to give something back to the University."

Blaudow says his ideal recipient will approach their responsibilities with a positive attitude, have a willingness to work hard, demonstrate commitment, good character and a sense of service.

"I look for people who are willing to work toward a dream. You do the work first and somewhere down the line you'll get paid," he says. "If the first and last thing they think about is their own interests, they have already lost me."

Clearly, one thing Blaudow hasn't lost are values instilled in him on that farm in Seymour 50 years ago.

For more information about the College of Engineering Leadership Program, contact Michael Murray at (618) 453-4321.