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Dear alumni and friends of Ole Miss Engineering:

I hope you enjoy this second expanded issue of Ole Miss Engineer, which continues a long publication record that started in 1961. This is the 50th anniversary issue! The theme, “Titans of Industry,” celebrates our graduates’ amazing accomplishments in many fields including higher education, governmental service, law, medicine, and, of course, the engineering industry.

In education, this rather small engineering program has produced many leaders, including a president, chancellor, vice president and provost for a number of universities. In this issue, we hear the story of Paul Murrill, a self-described “country boy” from Pocahontas, who became a professor, an author of textbooks that are still popular today, and later chancellor of LSU. After his retirement from LSU, he took the challenge to become a CEO of a utility company that later became Entergy.

In government, we feature Bill Parsons, a former director of the NASA Kennedy Space Center, who was also the space shuttle program manager responsible for getting the program back on track after the Columbia accident. Parsons also hails from a humble background, but a Naval ROTC (Marine option) scholarship enabled him to study engineering at Ole Miss. Every year, he comes back to tell engineering students how a fundamental technical education plus top-notch people skills developed here at Ole Miss brought him to where he wanted to be.

Barbara Beckmann is a pioneer many times over. As the first female engineering graduate at Ole Miss in 1961, she was also the first female engineer at a company that was the forerunner of Exxon-Mobil. Despite being a “girl” in a male dominated field, Beckmann thrived. Nowadays, in a senior adviser role at Exxon-Mobil, she enjoys mentoring young engineers.

The strong mentoring by faculty helped another female graduate, Debra Starnes, become a pioneer in her field. As with Murrill and Beckmann, Starnes was mentored by Frank Anderson, a revered professor for whom Anderson Hall is named. At various times during her career, Starnes was recognized as the highest ranking woman in the U.S. chemical industry.

The well-rounded education graduates received at Ole Miss also allowed them to enter non-engineering professions. Several of our graduates entered the legal and medical professions. Jim Greenlee is a former U.S. attorney who now practices law in Oxford. During his tenure as U.S. attorney, he prosecuted many high-profile white-collar crimes, as well as several civil rights cases. A native of Panola County, he also attributed the mentoring and engineering training received at Ole Miss for his success.

Johnny Reed grew up in a tiny town and found success not just in the big city, but also worldwide. Reed spent a large part of his career in Europe and became the first American CEO of Heerema Group in the Netherlands. Reed has since returned to the U.S. to become CEO of Global Industries, a billion-dollar company.

We must not forget about the student athletes. The school has a history of talented athletes who excelled in engineering. Wesley Walls of Pontotoc is a five-time Pro Bowler with the Carolina Panthers. While all student athletes do not play professional sports, they all receive an excellent education. In the last two years, a varsity baseball player and a varsity football player both received a Taylor Medal, the highest academic honor at the university.

In summary, as a relatively small engineering school at a flagship liberal arts university, our graduates received not only rigorous training in engineering fundamentals but also a well-rounded education that prepared them for successful careers, whichever career path they decided to take!
In Greek mythology, the Titans are known as originators, fearless leaders, and at times, forces of nature. In the School of Engineering at the University of Mississippi, they are individuals whose hard work has defined them as local, regional and world leaders. Here, seven “titans of industry” discuss how an engineering background helped them achieve success in business and in life.
A former U.S. attorney’s optimistic outlook and adventurous spirit led him to engineering and law degrees, both from Ole Miss.

“I’ve always been a guy with a view of how life should be lived, while not knowing exactly what to pursue, but I’m also the guy who is always open to other opportunities that may fit into what I think I might do later,” said Jim Greenlee, who served as U.S. attorney from 2001 to 2010.

His career plans started at South Panola High School when the school’s counselor suggested Greenlee should be a lawyer. A strong-willed teenager Greenlee replied, “I will be an engineer.”

“I was adamant, plus I had a great science and math background, and engineering just sounded right for me,” he said. “This was in the ’70s, and all I could think was that we’re putting men on the moon, everything is getting bigger and better, and I wanted to be a part of that.”

Luckily, Greenlee received a Navy ROTC scholarship, and majoring in engineering met the requirements to receive the funds.

Greenlee said he never considered attending another university.

“It never occurred to me that any school would offer a better engineering program than Ole Miss. And I am pleased that I did attend. I can be nothing but thankful for those in the engineering school. They didn’t force me into a standardized mold. They looked and saw what a young Jim Greenlee had and helped me pursue my strengths,” he said.

Greenlee said he found several mentors during his first month in the School of Engineering.

“I was taking Navy and engineering courses, and found career guidance from several professors who instructed me to use my best points,” he said. “When Damon Wall introduced me to the Bachelor of Engineering program, I jumped at the opportunity to study more broadly. It was very fulfilling.”

While completing requirements to
earn an engineering degree and preparing to be a Navy surface line officer, Greenlee became interested in law.

“At that time, the young lady I was dating introduced me to her dad, who just happened to be a lawyer. Her brother-in-law was also a lawyer. As soon as I decided to take the LSATs, I knew my high school counselor was right,” Greenlee said with a laugh.

But first, he had to do a four-year stint in the U.S. Navy. From 1974 to 1978, Greenlee served as 1st Lt. Gunnery Officer Navigator and administrative department head on two destroyers, the USS Stribling (DD867) and the USS Jonas Ingram (DD938). By fall 1978, Greenlee was a first-year law student at Ole Miss.

“Law is about knowing the rules of society and being able to understand and communicate the rules,” he said. “I think engineering prepared me for law school. It honed my analytical skills. Also, engineering is very much about understanding a problem or need. That’s very similar to law. Engineering is about applying the rules of physics and math: looking to see what can be used to make a thing or process better, and law is finding what can be used to make society better.”

After graduating in 1981, Greenlee went into private practice at Taylor & Whitwell in Southaven. He left there in 1987 to become an assistant U.S. attorney, working in the Civil Division, where he became the lead civil fraud attorney trying bankruptcy, tort, employment rights, eminent domain and white-collar criminal cases.

During this time, Greenlee also served in the U.S. Navy Reserve, retiring in 1997 as a captain.

“Working at the U.S. Attorney’s Office is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was truly an amazing time in my life. I worked with some of the most outstanding and dedicated public servants and litigators in the world,” he said.

In early 2001, Greenlee was presented with yet another opportunity. Former U.S. Sens. Trent Lott and Thad Cochran presented his name to President George W. Bush for U.S. attorney. In October 2001, Greenlee was appointed by the president, confirmed by the U.S. Senate and sworn in as U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Mississippi. Greenlee’s office prosecuted white-collar crimes, public corruption, drug and gun trafficking, and identity theft cases while also representing the United States in civil cases. He served until Jan. 30, 2010.

“In the U.S. Attorney’s Office, we were able to do some things that were helpful to the Mississippi northern district. I am proud of our work with the ‘Project Safe Neighborhood.’ We also assisted with opening the cold case of Emmett Till and prosecuted several other high-profile public corruption and white collar fraud criminal cases.”

After 22 years of service in the U.S. Attorney’s Office, Greenlee returned to private practice with Holcomb Dunbar Attorneys in Oxford in July 2010.

So, what’s next for Greenlee?

He said he’s not sure, but he thinks he can get his wife, Ann, to come along for the ride.

“I honestly don’t know what I want to do when I grow up, and Ann knows this all too well,” Greenlee said.

The couple married in 1974, and they have two daughters, both Ole Miss graduates, and one grandson.

“I can’t think of a finer program than Ole Miss engineering to get your start in life. You will learn a lot more than engineering; you will become a well-rounded individual who is ready to tackle whatever you decide to try,” he said.
Although the University of Mississippi and Louisiana State University are heated rivals in athletics, the LSU community embraced an Ole Miss engineering graduate as one of its own. Paul W. Murrill's multifaceted career at LSU began in 1963, and he soon became a familiar face on campus and throughout Louisiana.

Although Murrill's nearly 20-year tenure at LSU included stints as engineering dean and provost, the 77-year-old is perhaps best known as chancellor of the Baton Rouge campus, a position he held for seven years. A 1956 UM chemical engineering graduate, Murrill said his time as an Ole Miss undergrad-uate will forever be etched in his mind.

“It was the best time of my life,” he said. “I met many people who had a powerful impact on my life.”

They include Nancy Williams, a 1957 Ole Miss history graduate and Murrill’s wife of 52 years.

“Without a doubt, meeting my wife, Nancy, is the best thing that happened to me at Ole Miss,” he said with a laugh.

While the remainder of his college experience cannot compare to “finding the love of his life,” Murrill said earning an engineering degree rates as another “best thing.”

“I came to Ole Miss because of a Naval ROTC Scholarship, but I stayed for the degree,” he said. “I stayed because I knew an engineering degree from Ole Miss meant I could successfully compete against my peers. In other words, I gained self-confidence.”

The self-described “country boy” who grew up near the tiny Hinds County community of Pocahontas, credited...
several engineering faculty and staff for his successful undergraduate years. He particularly credited Frank Anderson, associate dean emeritus and professor emeritus of engineering.

“When I enrolled at Ole Miss in 1952, I knew no one associated with the university, and I was acquainted with only one student,” Murrill said.

But, by the first week of his freshman year, Murrill had met Anderson, who led an enrichment program for chemistry students. Anderson’s teaching “went beyond simple encouragement and the creation of a challenging environment,” he said.

“It rapidly became clear to me that he was the most genuine person I think I had ever met. I could not detect a devious or mean or selfish bone in his body. It also became clear that he truly cared for students. He became a most powerful role model as to how a man should conduct himself, and he demonstrated the values that a man should strive to make a part of his daily life and a part of the fabric of his being.”

With his newly printed degree, Murrill, along with his wife, journeyed to Baton Rouge in 1960 to begin his graduate studies. He received his master’s degree in chemical engineering in 1962, followed one year later with a Ph.D. in the same field.

By 1963, Murrill was appointed assistant professor in chemical engineering at LSU. Two years later, he was promoted to associate professor, and by 1967, Murrill was named head of the chemical engineering department, a position he held for two years. After achieving full professor status in 1968, Murrill was named vice chancellor for academic affairs at LSU. He became provost in 1970 and topped his successful academic career by becoming chancellor of LSU in 1974, a post he held until his retirement in 1980.

Murrill’s accomplishments as chancellor are many and varied, and include bringing a Phi Beta Kappa chapter to the campus, ensuring LSU’s Board of Regents named the campus as the state’s only publicly funded comprehensive university, having LSU named as one of 19 Sea Grant universities in the nation and establishing the School of Veterinary Medicine.

His honors and awards are equally plentiful. He was selected as Distinguished Member of Phi Kappa Phi, listed in Who’s Who in America and 26 other directories, won the 1967 Halliburton Award for excellence in engineering teaching and the 1975 Coates Award of ACS-AIChE, and was named by Phi Delta Kappa in 1980 as the outstanding educator in Louisiana.

And Murrill’s professional achievements are similarly impressive. He served as senior vice president for research and development of the Ethyl Corp., and later on its board of directors. He served as chairman and CEO of Gulf States Utilities and as adviser to the U.S. Department of Energy’s Oak Ridge National Laboratory.

While Murrill’s accomplishments in academia and private business are nothing short of amazing, he said he does not measure success by how much he has acquired.

“Success is about how you live,” he said. “Is your life focused, consistent, unselfish, and are you at peace with your understanding of God’s purpose for your life?”

Murrill said his career is simply proof that an engineering education can prove beneficial, not simply for the industrial or academic sectors, but for life in general.

“Just work hard and keep your vocation options open,” he said. “I guess that’s the best advice I can share with anyone.”
William “Bill” Parsons has always been well-grounded, but his career as an engineer and administrator has soared, helping America reach for the stars.

As NASA’s shuttle program manager for “Return to Flight” after the Columbia disaster, the University of Mississippi engineering alum was an integral part of the revived space program. That assignment was the highlight of his NASA career.

“I had friends that were Marines fighting in Iraq and for me; that was my way to serve my country,” Parsons said. “It was an awesome responsibility, and I was fortunate to work with so many, many talented men and women. The shuttle team is and was some of America's best!”

Parsons’ ascension began at Ole Miss, where he was on a Naval ROTC, Marine Option scholarship. All the Marines majored in political science, history, business or journalism, but the Navy Options had to major in engineering. With his excellent math skills and a lot of fellow Naval ROTC buddies in engineering, Parsons naturally gravitated towards the field. His fondest memories are of playing Frisbee on the field behind Kincannon Hall with friends.

“It was a little weather-dependent, but we were there a lot,” he said. “I’m not sure why that is what I remember, but it is. I also, remember hanging out at McCain Hall (the old NROTC facility at Barnard Observatory).”

Parson has remained close to friends he made both while at Ole Miss and at NASA. Joe Dowdy, Dana Martin and Dan Carpenter were all UM classmates with him and went into the Marines together. All three are retired from the Corps, and Dowdy works at NASA’s Kennedy Space Center.

“I brought him on board to be my chief of staff when I was center director,” Parsons said. “Dan worked for me at Johnson Space Center as head of public affairs after getting his master’s at Harvard.”

“Bill Parsons is one of those very special people,” said Martin, president of ITT Technical Institute in the Los Angeles area. “He possesses that most rare combination of intellect, ambition, common sense and strength of leadership. Bill did not come from a background of privilege. No one ever gave him anything. He earned it. When life would beat him down, it simply made him stronger. Perhaps those early experiences are what helped to prepare him so well for the challenges he faced when he was picked to lead America back to flight in 2003.”

Martin praised Parsons’ example for young engineers.
“You should strive to emulate him,” Martin said. “Understand, as Bill does, that while academics and intellect are essential, never forget to listen. Understand and appreciate the people who work for you, for they are the real keys to your success. Lead them effectively, as Bill Parsons has led, and you will spark passion within them that will propel your organization to great heights.”

Patrick Scheuermann credited Parsons with helping him find his NASA career and current position as director of the John C. Stennis Space Center.

“He has a great knack to ‘read people,’ concentrate on their strengths and build on them and that of the team,” Scheuermann said. “I will always appreciate his mentorship, advice and guidance. He always made the time for me and others.”

“Without Bill Parson’s leadership, we would not have been able to return the space shuttle to flight. He was the right person at the right time for NASA. It was an incredibly hard job, and he did it incredibly well.”

— John Shannon, space shuttle program manager

While Scheuermann was the chief operating officer at the Michoud Assembly Facility in New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. Parsons was named as the recovery director for Stennis and Michoud.

“I don’t know what I would have done in my capacity as COO if Bill had not been there for me as a leader and for the entire workforce to reassure us all,” he said. “He was unwavering in his commitment to ensure proper resources would arrive at the right time.”

Scheuermann credited Parsons and his ability to connect with individuals on many levels for helping personnel to recover from the disaster.

“By far, it is the most rewarding personal and professional experience of my life,” he said. “Bill Parsons is one of the finest men and leaders I know.”

Carpenter said Parsons gets a good read on people because he listens.

“Because he listens, people enjoy interacting with him, sharing deeper thoughts with him and working for him,” Carpenter said. “While his leadership style has evolved, as all good leaders must, he has the same values and tenets that he had in 1975 as a freshman Naval ROTC midshipman at Ole Miss. I personally observed his growth there, as an officer in the Marines and at various jobs with NASA. The core of who he is remains consistent over the years even as his technique improved and his wisdom grows.

“The highest compliment one Marine can give another is to say, ‘I’d want him on my left or right flank’ (meaning I trust him so much I’d go to combat with him at my side, or me at his side). Whether he is teaching a rifle squad how to low-crawl beneath machine gun fire or leading the space shuttle program out of the depths of despair after the Columbia accident, Bill Parsons has proven his leadership mettle in ways few people get to experience. I am proud to call him my friend.”

John Shannon, the last space shuttle program manager, said Parsons was an incredible mentor.

“Without Bill Parson’s leadership, we would not have been able to return the space shuttle to flight,” Shannon said. “He was the right person at the right time for NASA. It was an incredibly hard job, and he did it incredibly well.”

Parsons still stands tall in the aerospace industry as president and CEO of RD AMROSS LLC, a joint venture between Pratt & Whitney Rocketdyne and Energomash, a Russian rocket engine producer.

“We supply a Russian rocket engine called the RD-180 that is used by United Launch Alliance on the Atlas V,” Parsons said. “The RD-180 has been used on that vehicle for 12-plus years and has flown 33 successful flights from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida and Vandenberg Air Force Station in California.”

“I just want to be able to stay in the space business long enough to get my 17- and 15-year-olds through college,” he said. “My immediate goal is to learn a little Russian.”
Everyone loves a story about a small-town boy who goes to the big city and does well.

At the University of Mississippi, there are thousands of such success tales including the story of John “Johnny” Reed, who hails from Silver City, a tiny town near Belzoni, Miss., and found success, not just in the big city but also worldwide.

Looking back over his more than 30-year career in the offshore construction industry, Reed said that there are many advantages in going to work in a foreign country. He should know. From 2006 to 2009, he lived in The Netherlands and worked as the first American chief executive officer of the Heerema Group.

Reed described his time in Holland as “overwhelming at first and tough to adapt,” adding that he was fortunate to have had the opportunity. He advises students interested in being future business leaders to take advantage of similar opportunities.

Today, Reed is CEO of Global Industries, an offshore construction company primarily involved in worldwide pipe laying and diving work.

“The world is becoming more of a global economy minute by minute, and students must have a more global perspective to be successful, to climb the corporate ladder,” he said.

Reed said he developed a global outlook early in his career.

“I’ve always felt that it is important to be aware of what’s going on in the world. I tell students that they must open their minds to other cultures. You can’t be localized, especially in today’s world,” Reed said. “Very early in my career, I would read books and magazines about other cultures just to expand my horizon.”

It was Reed’s interest in engineering that brought him to Ole Miss, and he said it was engineering that provided a gateway to other cultures.

“I’ve always been interested in building things, but I still wasn’t sure if engineering was the field for me. I remember my professors, Dr. Stead and Dean Brinkert, as challenging, but they didn’t just lecture, they talked to you about the world. They talked to you like an adult.”

After earning a bachelor’s degree in engineering in 1977, Reed worked in the tire and pharmaceutical manufacturing industries in Mississippi, and he worked on a business degree at night school.

“Getting that MBA was always in the back of my mind. I’ve always known that my ideas wouldn’t get off the ground unless the money was right,” he said.

In 1981, Reed earned an MBA from Delta State University in Cleveland, Miss., and immediately moved to Texas.

In Houston, Reed landed a job with...
Heerema Marine Contractors, thanks to his Ole Miss roommate, Clay Ethridge.

“Clay invited me to check out Heerema. He said it was a place I could grow. He was right,” Reed said. “I’ve been in Houston ever since, and Clay, well, he’s my next-door neighbor.”

Reed began his long career at the offshore construction company in 1981. Prior to being named CEO in 2006, he held a number of senior management roles at Heerema including serving as CEO of INTEC Engineering Inc.

“I was at Heerema a long time because of my boss, Jan Meek. I admired him for the way he analyzed things, but more importantly, for how he treated people,” Reed said.

Reed said he proudly mimics Meek’s management style. Coupled with his natural leadership in project management, business development and engineering, it’s little wonder Reed was tapped to head Global Industries in March 2010.

“The most important thing I’ve learned is if you concentrate on the success of other people, you will have success too,” he said.

It’s advice he also got from Winston Churchill, one of his favorite historical figures.

“Churchill was very human with plenty of flaws, but he never gave up. He said, ‘Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never…’ ” I keep that quote in my office,” Reed said. “I try to encourage people to live that way, to learn from their past, so they can overcome their obstacles and achieve the success they want.”

At 55-years-old, Reed said he enjoys life outside of work just as much.

In addition to reading about historical figures, Reed said he likes birdhunting, golfing or going to the theater or art galleries with his wife, Deidre, a graduate of Mississippi University for Women. The couple has been married for 34 years and has one daughter, Swayze. Swayze and her husband, Cade White, are the parents of 19-month-old twin girls.

The Reeds reside in Houston and are members of St. Luke’s Methodist Church, and when they’re not busy with the twins, the couple travels to Oxford for an occasional Ole Miss football game.

The world is becoming more of a global economy minute by minute, and students must have a more global perspective to be successful, to climb the corporate ladder.”

— John “Johnny” Reed, CEO, Global Industries
Oil and water generally don’t mix, but Debra L. “Debbie” Starnes and the oil and gas industry certainly did.

Since graduating from the University of Mississippi, the chemical engineering alumna has earned unparalleled success and, at various times during her career, was recognized as the highest ranking woman in the American chemical industry. From humble beginnings as a process engineer at Atlantic Richfield in Houston, Texas, to strategic planning, business management and merger and acquisition roles with Lyondell Chemical Co., Starnes carved a stellar path in her profession.

“I managed Lyondell’s petrochemicals, polymers and intermediate chemicals businesses at various times during my 16 years with the company,” Starnes said. “Before my retirement, I led a companywide business reorganization focused on using e-commerce while standardizing business practices across different acquired assets.”

Starnes’ journey to achievement began with her enjoyment of math and science in high school.

“I wanted to follow a course of study that built on that in the hope that I would also enjoy the ultimate jobs in that field,” said Starnes, a Beaumont, Texas, native who grew up in Memphis. “Ole Miss was a logical choice, as one of the closest schools with a chemical engineering curriculum. Meeting and talking to Dr. Frank Anderson made the decision an easy one.”

With only five chemical engineering students in Starnes’ class, the group was close-knit from the beginning. “Most of my memories involve those people and our five professors, as well as football weekends when Oxford just came alive.”

During her years at Ole Miss, Starnes was active in AIChE and Tau Beta Pi, graduating with a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering.

After earning her degree, Starnes went to work for ARCO, where she spent a decade in both line and staff manufacturing and optimization assignments in Houston and Philadelphia, Pa. She later became the aromatics business manager for Lyondell Petrochemical Co. (a division of ARCO also headquartered in Houston) and then ARCO’s strategic planning manager for its integrated oil production, transportation and refining businesses in Los Angeles. Starnes later returned to Houston to join the newly formed Lyondell Chemical Co., a spin-off public company holding ARCO’s commodity chemical and refining assets.

Her career achievements aside, Starnes said two honors, including one
from her alma mater, have meant a lot.

“The Society of Women Engineers Upward Mobility Award recognized my contributions to the field of engineering, specifically my success as a woman engineer,” Starnes said. “The Ole Miss Alumni Association Hall of Fame was both a tremendous surprise and a real delight—to be viewed in such esteemed company.”

Those who have worked with Starnes said they admired her professionalism and work ethic.

“Debbie was highly recruited out of Ole Miss to work in a very traditional, male-centric manufacturing facility,” said Norm Phillips, retired fuels division president of LyondellBasell Industries. “Expectations for her were very high. It soon became clear that the expectations were well-founded. We soon learned that Debbie was not one to rely on her ‘press clippings,’ as she won over the organization with her competence, commitment and teamwork.”

Phillips said Starnes earned the trust of the organization through her demonstrated leadership, integrity and principled commitment to the best interests of the enterprise and its people.

“Debbie grew her interpersonal skills to match and complement her analytical skills,” Phillips said. “The combination made her extraordinarily effective. She coined the phrase ‘compete externally, cooperate internally’ that became a watch-phrase for the organization. She always championed a culture based on the Golden Rule.”

Starnes was known to change tactics to meet situational challenges, all without compromising her values.

“As a leader, she sets high standards for herself and her organization but is extremely supportive of her employees,” Phillips said. “She was a mentor to me and many others, an ‘equal opportunity’ mentor who was accessible to people throughout the organization.”

Starnes served as the chemical industry representative on the MTBE Blue Ribbon Panel, created to provide independent advice and counsel to the Environmental Protection Agency on policy issues. She was on the boards of directors of Parker Hannifin Corp. and Envera. A past member of the Ole Miss Engineering advisory board, she remains active in private investment and volunteer roles while enjoying the freedom to travel, play golf, ski and enjoy fine food and wines.

In the School of Engineering, more than 50 percent of Outstanding Seniors and Taylor Medalists in recent years have been females. Additionally, Anna Hailey, a chemical engineering major, won the 2010 Barry Goldwater Fellowship and Christina Bonnington, an electrical engineering major, was named a 2010 Tau Beta Pi laureate. Read more about our outstanding seniors on page 24.
Wesley Walls, who earned a Bachelor of Engineering degree from Ole Miss in 1989, grew up in Pontotoc, and although he and his family have lived in Charlotte, N.C., for several years, the five-time NFL Pro Bowler said Ole Miss will always be home for him.

“I have so many great memories of Ole Miss that go well beyond football,” said Walls, who was an All-SEC tight end for the Rebels in 1988 before being drafted by the San Francisco 49ers. “It was the best experience of my life, the four years I spent there.”

But many football fans, who cheered Walls through his career with the 49ers, New Orleans Saints, Carolina Panthers and Green Bay Packers, might be surprised to learn that it was not all football and fun for Walls, who earned a Bachelor of Engineering degree from the university in 1989. In fact, the versatile tight end counts his hard-earned engineering degree as one of his most prized treasures, right up there with his Super Bowl ring.

“Most people just assumed my life at Ole Miss was consumed with all things football, but that’s simply not true,” he said. “I actually came to Ole Miss because of the School of Engineering. The program was small and focused, exactly what I needed.”

While it took just one visit for Walls to fall in love with Ole Miss, his love for engineering began much earlier. He was valedictorian of his class at Pontotoc High School and didn’t shy away from challenging courses.

“Math and chemistry were just classes I loved taking in high school,” he said. “They are classes that offer so much opportunity and open so many other doors for students. Naturally, engineering attracted me.”

Once Walls decided to study engineering at Ole Miss, he quickly found a mentor and friend in Damon Wall, then assistant dean of engineering and associate professor of electrical engineering.

“Professor Wall became my guidance counselor during my studies in Ole Miss engineering,” Walls said. “He helped me figure out what I wanted to do with my education. But, more importantly, he helped me understand that engineering is a great foundation for whatever you want to do in life.”

Walls quickly discovered engineering was a great foundation for his football endeavors too.

“I’m pretty sure most people don’t consider the true dynamics of football,” he said with a laugh. “It’s more than pushing and shoving, although there’s a lot of that too. It’s also 90 percent mental and you are always trying to outthink the other team’s defense. Like
engineering, football is complicated and requires discipline, skill and practical knowledge in order to build a successful and improved defensive or offensive structure.”

Walls’ quick absorption of those aspects is why the former defensive end and linebacker was considered a “natural tight end” by Red Parker, who joined the Ole Miss coaching staff as offensive coordinator for Walls’ senior year.

While engineering provided Walls with a foundation for his successful NFL career, he said he must also give credit to former head coach Billy Brewer.

“Yes, I had the foundation, but I was young,” he said. “Coach Brewer guided me, helped me focus and pushed me to believe in myself, to believe that I could and would make it in the NFL. I will always be very grateful for that.”

After earning his degree in 1989, Walls went on to become one of the best pass-catching NFL tight ends of his era.

Since concluding his NFL career in 2003, Walls has not stopped relying on his early foundation. He used his engineering background to launch a real estate company, Pavilion Development, a single-tenant retail company earning more than $100 million in projects.

He is also president and owner of Delta Furniture Manufacturing in his hometown of Pontotoc.

“I discovered a long time ago that success is the result of hard work and great effort,” he said. “You have to start with a desire to be better and want better, and then you do the best you can.”

It’s a lesson Walls often shares with Ole Miss engineering undergraduates and freshmen Rebel footballers.

“No matter what your dream is, make sure you back it up with a solid education,” he said. “That’s the first important decision you will make. It doesn’t matter if your dream is to be an NFLer, country singer or movie star. That dream can go away, but no one can take away your education. It’s your solid foundation for life.”

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Although she didn’t set out to do so, Barbara Kerr Beckmann has been breaking new ground for five decades. The first woman to graduate from the University of Mississippi’s School of Engineering, she became the first female engineer for Exxon shortly after she graduated in 1961.

Beckmann recently celebrated 50 years of service in the engineering field, as well as her golden anniversary at ExxonMobil. She credits her Ole Miss education with preparing her to work and succeed in a field that remains largely dominated by men.

A native of Aubrey, Ark., Beckmann did not become the university’s first female engineering graduate by design. “I was convinced I wanted to go into medicine,” she said. “It’s a field that still intrigues me. But a teacher told me that I didn’t like people enough for medicine, and suggested I should be an engineer.”

Beckmann said her “teenage self did not think highly of the engineering field. The only thing I could remember about engineering was muddy boots.”

By the summer of 1957, Beckmann was a freshman at Ole Miss but still did not have a major.

“I remember reading the course catalog over and over again, searching for a major that did not require foreign
language,” she said with a laugh. “At that time, engineering was the only major that fit that need. I’ve been in the business for 50 years, which has enabled me to afford to visit all seven continents; I guess foreign language was something I needed after all.”

Despite being a “girl” and having limited foreign language skills, Beckmann thrived at the Baton Rouge, La., division of Exxon. She started as a computer analyst, eventually moved up to engineer and these days works as a senior associate in economics, planning and optimization for ExxonMobil Refining and Supply, based in Baton Rouge, La.

“For the first eight to 10 years at Exxon, people didn’t know what to do with me,” she said. “Whenever I moved from computing to engineering and back, people didn’t seem to know what to do with a female engineer.”

At her first meetings—all-male except for her—Beckmann would wait to be addressed or consulted.

“It was like I spoke a foreign language no one understood,” she said. “It was scary and uncomfortable at times, but I didn’t dwell on the negative. I was there to do a job and do it well.”

Learning not to dwell on the negative is but one skill Beckmann acquired at Ole Miss.

“(Former chemical engineering chair) Dr. Frank Anderson taught me that,” she said. “He taught me to do what you have to do to get the job done. Don’t be afraid to get your hands dirty, and don’t ever ask people to do what you can do.”

“Anderson will always stand out as my most influential engineering professor because he didn’t treat me as something different. Yes, I was a female, but first and foremost, I was an engineering student. He expected me to learn what I needed to know in order to be successful in the real world.”

After earning her engineering degree, Beckmann was immediately hired as a computer analyst at Humble, which was later purchased by ESSO. Later, ESSO changed its name to Exxon and in 1999 merged with Mobil to become ExxonMobil.

Beckmann has made it her life’s mission to train young people just getting started in engineering, many who have become officers in the corporation.

“I love mentoring young people,” she explained. “Helping them overcome adversity and learn the company culture—that’s my give-back deal. I feel it’s necessary because of all the things I’ve received during my career and lifetime,” she said.

Throughout her long career, Beckmann said she’s mentored hundreds of young engineers and shared her most important life lessons.

“Don’t dwell on the negative is first,” she said. “I tell them to move on and learn from your mistakes. The second important thing is to have a mentor. Find someone who doesn’t mind you asking questions.”

For budding female engineers, Beckmann added an extra piece of advice: “Learn to enjoy math and science. Introduce yourself to someone who loves the field, so they can share the fun side of their career. Because engineering is fun for me, and it can be fun for you.”
Formally established in 1900, the School of Engineering has been an integral part of the University of Mississippi since its founding. In April, the school officially celebrated 110 years of service to higher education with a series of activities that showcased not only engineering’s esteemed past but also its exciting future. “The Ole Miss School of Engineering is at a cusp of opportunity that can create a quadruple convergence of students, faculty, alumni and friends, and facilities,” said Alex Cheng, dean of the engineering school.
Work is not supposed to be fun. Yet at the Mississippi Department of Transportation central office, employees don’t just enjoy their work, they also brag about how great they have it at MDOT.

Jeff Pierce, the state planning engineer, is responsible for projecting traffic needs for the state and deciding how to best allocate available funding.

“I know, it sounds boring, but it’s not,” said Pierce (BE 86). “I’ve always enjoyed working with numbers, so trying to find the most efficient way to allocate our available funding is one part of the job that I like.”

Pierce, who joined MDOT in 1987, said working with “capable and friendly people” is another great part of working there.

“MDOT is more than a job. I’ve had jobs. This is a career that has nurtured me. This is a place where I know people and where people know me. I’ve also been lucky to work with some really outstanding people over the years, and that has always made coming to work enjoyable,” said the Indianola native.

What’s more, MDOT is an agency that values family, said Pierce, who resides in Madison with his wife, Stacy, and their children, 6-year-old Casey and 5-year-old Matt.

“When people generally talk about fun, togetherness, closeness and friendships, they don’t think of a big company like MDOT. But, we are like a family. That was instilled from the very beginning. More importantly, I get to spend necessary time with my family,” he said.

Celina Sumrall agreed, saying the most enjoyable aspect of her job is the “family atmosphere.”

“We are a close group who enjoys spending time together at work and at play. Nearly all of my co-workers have met my husband, Rick, and our children, Carmen and Richard, and I’ve met their families,” she said.

MDOT’s family atmosphere definitely extends into the workplace, said Sumrall (BSCE 95, MS 03).

As state maintenance engineer, Sumrall is responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the state highways and bridges.

“The MDOT crew is like my second family,” she said with a laugh. “I think it’s because we share a common goal. We all really want the safest and best roads in the state. If you knew the people here, you would feel it too.”

Wes Dean, state traffic engineer, said MDOT is definitely a people-oriented company.

“You’re in the field as much as you’re
in the office. There’s a lot of interaction with the general public and with your co-workers,” said Dean, who joined MDOT’s Roadway Design Division shortly after graduating from Ole Miss engineering in 1983. “At MDOT, you have to be the type of person who likes to mix and mingle with all types of people. You can’t be the typical introverted engineer in this type of job.” Dean joined MDOT’s Traffic Engineering Division in 1995.

The traffic engineering staff maintains more than 1,200 traffic signals across Mississippi. This requires some traveling, which Dean considers another great aspect of his job.

“Asides traffic engineering support for all MDOT districts and divisions, our jobs include statewide traffic signal and sign maintenance, operation of the ITS program, and administration of MDOT rail and highway safety programs. With so much variety, no day is the same, and that makes our area very unique. I think the staff would say the same,” he said.

Another unique aspect of working at MDOT is the number of Ole Miss engineers employed with the agency. Dean named three co-workers who are also engineering graduates. Pierce added two more, and Sumrall cited three.

“That makes the job fun too. We get to talk shop, then we talk sports,” Dean said. “My wife and I visit Oxford often to see our son, Wesson, and to catch an occasional sporting event. I can’t name a time where I haven’t run into a co-worker too.”

Dean’s wife, May, is a 1983 Ole Miss home economics graduate. Wesson is a sophomore accounting major. The couple also has a 12-year-old daughter, Sidney.

Sumrall’s uncle, Glenn Waddle, is the announcer for Ole Miss football, and her husband, Rick, earned a master’s in environmental engineering from Ole Miss in 2003.

“We’re a Rebel family, and it’s fun to be able to share that connection with several of my co-workers. At least two of my co-workers are also my classmates. How great is that?” she said.

MDOT is divided into six districts, with the main headquarters located in Jackson.

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— Celina Sumrall, MDOT

**GRADUATES HONORED FOR HIGH ACHIEVEMENT**

**BY DEBORAH A. PURNELL**

**DOCTORAL RESEARCH AWARD GOES TO OLE MISS STUDENT**

Payam Nayeri received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Iran before he came to the U.S. in 2008 to enroll in the Ph.D. program in UM’s Department of Electrical Engineering. Throughout his studies, Nayeri maintained a 4.0 GPA, published four refereed journal papers and submitted three more. Additionally, he published or presented nine conference papers.

Nayeri is a recipient of the 2011 USNC/URSI Student Fellowship Grant Award and the 2010 IEEE AP-S Doctoral Research Award. His research focuses on broadband and multiple beam reflectarray antennas for deep-space communications, infrared reflectarrays for potential applications in concentrating solar power (CSP) systems, and broadband and multiband microstrip antennas for wireless applications.

**SPACE GRANT FELLOWSHIP GIVEN TO GRAD STUDENT**

Samantha Sabatino received a Bachelor of Engineering degree in civil engineering and mathematics from Vanderbilt University in 2008. Later that year, Sabatino enrolled in the master's program of UM’s civil engineering department.

During her time at the University of Mississippi, Sabatino has maintained a 4.0 GPA and has submitted one conference paper. She is presently preparing a journal paper.

Sabatino is a recipient of NASA/Mississippi Space Grant Consortium’s Graduate Research Fellowship. She is also a member of several honor societies including Chi Epsilon, Tau Beta Phi and Phi Kappa Phi. She is a student member of the American Society of Civil Engineers.
OUTSTANDING SENIORS RECOGNIZED AT HONORS BANQUET

BY DEBORAH A. PURNELL

While many impressive students are enrolled in the School of Engineering, eight stood out from their peers. They were honored in April during the annual School of Engineering Banquet for their outstanding academic achievement and significant contributions to Ole Miss.

OLE MISS GRAD APPLIES KNOWLEDGE IN CHILE FIELD STUDY

Maria Brown received her B.S. in geological engineering from the School of Engineering in May 2011. A native of Brandon, Brown has worked as a hydrologic technician with the U.S. Geological Survey in Jackson and as a research assistant in the National Sedimentation Laboratory in Oxford. She attended an international field hydrology course this winter in Chile, where she learned and applied field methods in geophysics, soil characterization and hydrology.

At Ole Miss, Brown was a National Merit scholar, Byrd scholar, and Brevard scholarship recipient. She was a member of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College and Tau Beta Pi and Phi Kappa Phi academic honor societies.

SUNFLOWER NATIVE EXCELS IN OLE MISS ENGINEERING

Hannie Quay Parker Capps fell in love with the University of Mississippi School of Engineering at 17-years-old.

“I had an older cousin who studied civil engineering at Ole Miss. She knew I really enjoyed math and recommended the program to me,” she said.

Capps immediately signed up for the Ole Miss Summer College program in engineering, and the rest, she said, is history.

“It was a challenging program, but I really enjoyed it. The professors are hands-on and very knowledgeable in their fields,” she said.

A student in the university’s Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, Capps is also a member of Phi Kappa Phi honor society, Omicron Delta Kappa honor society, Tau Beta Pi engineering honor society, and Chi Epsilon civil engineering honor society. She is the recipient of the Deep South ITE Temple Award and Scholarship, and was named to the Chancellor’s Leadership Class and Who’s Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges.

Capps credited the engineering faculty for her success.

“What can I say that hasn’t been said about our outstanding faculty? Honestly, I can’t say thank you enough for their unwavering support,” said the Sunflower, Miss. native.

Capps is the daughter of Billie Dove Parker of Sunflower.

STUDENT-TO-FACULTY RATIO BRINGS ALABAMIAN TO OLE MISS

Small classes and close relationships between faculty and students lured Alabama native Anna Kathryn Hailey to the University of Mississippi.

“I thought that Ole Miss engineering would be a nurturing environment for my education,” said Hailey, a 2011 Outstanding Student for the School of Engineering.

It seems Hailey was correct. A member of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, she was the recipient of the 2010 Tau Beta Pi and 2010 Milden Award scholarships. She was named a 2009 Taylor Medalist and 2010 Outstanding Senior in Chinese. Hailey was also inducted to Phi Beta Kappa honor society and the Mortar Board.

Hailey has had several internships. In 2009, she participated in a research internship at the Institute for Thermal Power Engineering/State Laboratory for Clean Energy Utilization at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, China. The next summer,
Hailey participated in a research internship at the Institute for Thermo/Fluid Dynamics at Ruhr University in Bochum, Germany, through the Research Internships in Science and Engineering program.

The 2010 Barry M. Goldwater scholar, Hailey plans to begin a Ph.D. program in chemical and biological engineering at Princeton University. She is the daughter of William and Paula Hailey of Muscle Shoals, Ala.

NIGERIAN NATIVE SUCCEEDS AT OLE MISS

Chiedozie Ibekwe said he’s always had an aptitude for math and physics. It’s little wonder the Nigerian native continued his engineering studies at the University of Mississippi.

Prior to enrolling at Ole Miss, Ibekwe studied electrical and electronics engineering for a year at the University of Lagos, Nigeria.

“I wanted to study at a respected institution located in a relatively small university town, as opposed to a big city like Lagos,” said Ibekwe, the son of Tony and Chinwe Ibekwe.

At Ole Miss, Ibekwe was vice president of the African Caribbean Association and treasurer for the International Student Organization. He also served as parliamentarian and education chair for the Ole Miss chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. Academically, he was a member of many honor societies including Phi Kappa Phi and Tau Beta Pi. Last year, he was listed in Who’s Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges.

This summer, Ibekwe interned as a lean manufacturing intern with General Electric in Houston, Texas. Previously, he took part in the Summer Research Institute for Undergraduates at the National Center for Physical Acoustics.

After graduation, Ibekwe plans to work with GE Energy (Operations Management Leadership Program) before returning home to Lagos to join GE Oil and Gas.

ENGINEER MAJOR DEDICATED TO DISADVANTAGED

Jonathan David Jones co-founded the Ole Miss chapter of Engineers without Borders because he is passionate about helping disadvantaged communities and people all over the world through engineering solutions.

Jones said he’s always been the type to dedicate himself to important causes.

“I’ve always valued critical thinking and creativity as a way to impact economic and societal changes,” said Jones, who served as president of the organization in his senior year.

At Ole Miss, Jones also conducted research to impact changes. He worked for the University of Mississippi Green Initiative in his junior and senior years.

A 2011 Outstanding Senior for the School of Engineering, Jones is also a recipient of a Taylor Medal, the David W. Arnold Award, and was a member of Phi Kappa Phi academic honor society.

This summer, he interned for ExxonMobil and has previously interned at the company's Chalmette, La., refinery in its process engineering and chemical sales units.

After graduation, Jones plans to work for DuPont’s DeLisle, Miss., branch as manufacturing technology engineer. Jones is the son of Mark and Lisa Jones of Long Beach.

OLE MISS REBEL FOOTBALLER NAMED AN OUTSTANDING SENIOR

Mark Wesley Phillips originally planned to study architecture, but quickly changed his mind because he wanted something “a bit more challenging.”

“Civil engineering felt like it was the best fit for me, plus Ole Miss is an outstanding school,” said Phillips, the son of Michael and Linda Phillips of Madison, Miss.

At the University of Mississippi, Phillips said he found a mentor and friend in Chung Song, assistant professor of civil engineering.

“I just liked his teaching style,” Phillips said. “He didn't just preach, he involved us in the learning process, and thus inspired us to want to know more.”

In addition to being named a 2011 Outstanding Senior in Engineering, Phillips is the recipient of a Taylor Medal, Brevard Engineering Scholarship, Adler Engineering Scholarship, and was on the Chancellor’s Honor Roll.

When not studying, he was a long snapper for the Ole Miss Rebels football team where he received the Crower-Walter Outstanding Senior Football Player Award. For his football prowess and academic achievement, Phillips was named to the ESPN The Magazine Academic All-District first team, and the National Football Foundation and College Hall of Fame 2011 Hampshire Honor Society.
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