KENNETH EDWARDS
Glendale, Calif.

Education:
'54 B.A., chemistry, Occidental College; '55 M.S., chemical and metallurgical engineering, University of Michigan

Profession:
CEO of Dunn-Edwards Paint Co.; chemist; inventor.

How did you get into the paint business?
I was born into it. My paternal grandfather was trained to be a painter, and later my father ran my grandfather’s painting business. In 1925 Frank W. “Bud” Dunn started a wallpaper and paint store in Los Angeles, in 1937 he started manufacturing his own paint, and in 1938 my father bought out Bud’s three partners.

What has been your greatest accomplishment?
Applying my knowledge of chemistry and chemical engineering to research and manufacturing. This focus has allowed the corporation to become a leader in product and manufacturing.

You have been instrumental in garnering support for the Western Coatings Technology Center in the university’s new Center for Science and Mathematics. How will the center enhance Cal Poly’s efforts in research and development, and what will be the benefit to industry?
It will be the only school west of the Mississippi where students can receive such intense education in polymers and coatings, combining damn good teachers with hands-on training so students will be specialists. A master’s graduate in polymers and coatings will have approximately five years’ advantage over non-specialty chemistry grads from other schools. Every paint company I know clammers for Cal Poly students.

What are polymers and coatings and why are they such important technologies?
If you look around your office, polymers and coatings are everywhere. If your living room is blue and your wife wants it green, you’ll be using a coating when you dip your brush into the paint can.

Polymers and coatings students are entering one of the most complex areas of chemistry. They need to know organic, physical, surface, colloidal, and, especially in our environmentally conscious time, atmospheric chemistry.

Your company was one of the first coatings manufacturers to work with, rather than against, environmental regulators to lower the amounts of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in coatings. Why is care of the environment good for both society and private business, and how does an emphasis on good ecological practices prepare Cal Poly students for the workplace?
We all breathe the same air and industry wants to produce environmentally sound products that people can afford. Wishful thinking about improving our environment and non-scientifically based regulation won’t do the job – only careful analysis of the complex mix and interaction of man-made and naturally occurring chemicals will allow us to protect our environment.

Although you are not an alum, you are an enthusiastic Cal Poly supporter. What is it about the school that attracted your attention?
In the mid-’80s, the paint industry started looking for a place where students could be given experience in coatings. Two associates and I visited Cal Poly and liked what we saw. We were impressed by the quality of the students, the faculty members and the hands-on training.

What advice would you give young people who want to enter your field?
Polymers and coatings is a very challenging field, and if you’re good, the sky’s the limit. I’ve been very lucky all my life, at the forefront of solving problems other people couldn’t figure out and brought to me. Few people are that lucky, but Cal Poly students are capable and well educated and they can accomplish whatever they set their minds to.

- Nels Hanson

Editor’s note: Shortly after this interview, Mr. Edwards was awarded the American Chemical Society Award for Industrial Innovation, presented at the ACS regional meeting in Long Beach on Oct. 15.