Solar energy pioneer pledges $1 million gift

by Jo Ann Lloyd

Harold Hay has a passion for passive solar energy and he wants to tell the world about it.

Hay, a Los Angeles-area scientist, inventor, and building materials expert, made a $1 million gift commitment to the College of Architecture and Environmental Design. Contributions to date include cash and appreciated securities, along with a solar-heated, solar-cooled house. Hay's gift will go a long way toward furthering his quest for more research and development in the area of new energy-efficient technologies and his desire to spark widespread interest in the field.

Hay, who just turned 89, has long been interested in passive solar design. Before the early '70s, when the world's oil crisis changed the way people thought about energy and resources, he had developed the patented "skytherm" principle, a passive solar system that uses "roofponds" and insulation for heating and cooling.

This system was put to the test when Hay and a team of Cal Poly faculty designed the "skytherm house" in Atascadero in 1973 — the house he recently donated to the college.

The system passed with high marks. Hay had succeeded in designing an affordable, simple heating and cooling method.

"Skytherm is elegant in its simplicity," notes Gilbert D. Cooke, director of the architecture program.

Because of that simplicity and the system's affordability, skytherm could have broad implications.

Indeed. Recently a representative of Habitat for Humanity called Cooke to find out more about the skytherm system.

"Habitat for Humanity is probably the third largest builder of single-family housing in the country . . . all done by volunteers," Cooke says. "They see an opportunity to put cooling and heating into houses with minimal capital investment and enormous, long-term savings in energy costs."

Half of Hay's gift is earmarked for an endowment fund to assist the college in bringing visiting professors to Cal Poly.

Martin J. Harms, dean of the college, says Hay's gift is not just about architecture. "We see it as an opportunity to bring many kinds of people with many kinds of expertise together. Harold is an advocate of crossing disciplinary lines and looking at all applications."

At Cal Poly and elsewhere, architects, engineers, chemists, biologists, and agriculturalists are involved in projects that are looking at recycling, renewable energy, and waste recovery systems.

"Harold is a universal man who understands the need to bring the disciplines together in a synergistic way," Harms says.

Both Harms and Cooke say that Hay's gift has generated enormous excitement among faculty and students eager to delve into some of these subjects Hay is so passionate about.

"He is an ingenious and marvelous gentleman," says Cooke. "I imagine spending time with Harold is the closest thing that anybody in this generation can have to being able to spend time with Thomas Edison. He comes up with new ideas every day you spend with him. I'd like to think he's going to be doing that for years and years." CP

Pictured at the College of Architecture and Environmental Design press conference and reception are (left to right) Director of Architecture Gilbert D. Cooke, Dean Martin J. Harms, Harold R. Hay, and President Warren J. Baker.