From Lebanon, With Love: Alumnus Abe Najjar Supports Electrical Engineering Students With Endowed Scholarship

As a child in Lebanon, Abe Najjar (BSEE ’89, MSEE ’91) never dreamed he would one day be working in Houston as an engineer for one of the largest engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) companies in the U.S. Najjar’s parents encouraged him to strive for excellence in his studies, but the money for college just wasn’t there.

Today Najjar finds himself 21 years into a successful career with Bechtel Corporation, where he serves as a senior control systems engineer—a reality made possible many years ago through the generosity of one individual.

“Thanks to a wealthy Lebanese man I received a fellowship to attend university in the U.S. and study engineering,” Najjar says. “The opportunity to enroll at the University of Houston, he adds, was the single most important aspect of his life.  My life would look a lot different today if I wasn’t given that gift to attend the University of Houston. That’s why I wanted to pay it forward and reward scholars by giving them the chance to get an education.”

Najjar established an endowed scholarship for electrical and computer engineering students with financial need at the UH Cullen College, providing the gift of world-class engineering education to students who may otherwise be unable to afford tuition.
The power of passion

When Najjar first arrived in the Lone Star State, engineering wasn’t on his list of potential careers. Originally a student in UH’s hotel management program, a lack of passion for his studies coupled with a love of math brought him to the office of a counselor who suggested engineering as a possible path. Once I got to the electrical engineering program at the Cullen College, I knew I was in the right place, Najjar says.

Najjar describes his college lifestyle as ‘monk-like’ from that point forward. He focused on homework, studying and lab assignments, finding that the more of himself he devoted to the engineering coursework, the more he wanted to be an engineer.

After earning both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in electrical engineering from the Cullen College, Najjar was faced with yet another turning point. Houston’s oil and gas market was still on shaky footing after the oil bust of the 80s, making the job market more competitive for young professional engineers. After many months of job searching and interviewing, Najjar was considering a move back to Lebanon when a phone call from the Bechtel Corporation forever altered his path.

I have been a citizen of the U.S. for 12 years now because of that phone call, Najjar says. The rest, of course, is history.

Lessons learned

Najjar’s education didn’t stop after graduating from the Cullen College. Once at Bechtel, Najjar said he learned some of the biggest lessons of his career, including how to ask for a raise, climb the corporate ladder and ensure your work is best suited to your passions.

At the beginning I didn’t want to speak up. I didn’t want to make waves. It took me some time to learn that’s not doing any good, he says.

A piece of advice Najjar often imparts to young engineers is to speak up early and often.

Najjar learned this lesson early in his career after revealing his salary to a coworker who informed him he was underpaid for his position. Overwhelmed with anxiety, Najjar approached his supervisor to ask for a raise and was stunned by his response: Why didn’t you come to ask sooner?

In that moment I learned you can’t just do your part and rely on your managers noticing. It takes two hands to clap. If you’re doing your job and doing it well, then go to your supervisors and let them know your worth, says Najjar.

Najjar also urges new engineers to be open-minded in the face of new challenges and opportunities? even ones that don’t seem ideal at first. Don’t be too choosy? when you’re early in your career you may not know what your needs and preferences are yet. You may end up loving a job you thought you would hate, so give it a shot, stick it out. You never know what you might be missing out on.

This lesson is particularly palpable for Najjar. When he first arrived in Houston, Najjar couldn’t imagine calling the Bayou City his beloved home. I hated it! he laughs. Now when someone talks badly about Houston I become offended. I’m a Texan now. If I hadn’t given it a chance I’d have never known how happy I could be here.

More information on the scholarship

The Abe Najjar Endowed Scholarship in Electrical and Computer Engineering was established with a bequest of $100,000 from Najjar’s estate. A bequest scholarship allows donors to make a lasting and impactful commitment to UH engineering students without affecting their current finances. The endowed scholarship
provides funding to engineering students indefinitely by distributing annual earnings from the fund.

Najjar set specific eligibility requirements for his scholarship, seeking to help academically-gifted students with financial insecurities. “One unique aspect of the scholarship is that it’s based on financial need. If a student’s GPA improves after receiving the scholarship, they will have an opportunity to receive even more funding through the scholarship the following year.”

For Najjar, helping future engineering students pursue their dreams is his own dream come true.

“Some of my best memories of my life took place inside those two engineering buildings at UH. It was a special time in my life and it brought me a lot of success,” Najjar recalls. “Being able to give other engineering students the same opportunities I had is one of my proudest achievements.”

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