When Henry Rowan, the founder, president and CEO of Burlington County-based Inductotherm Industries Inc., decided to challenge himself with a pledge to Glassboro State College in 1992, he not only began the transformation of a small southern New Jersey campus, he literally changed the course of philanthropy in American public higher education.

by Michael Shute ’93 & Patricia Quigley ’78, M’03
AS IT STANDS TODAY, Rowan University continues to progress toward becoming an institution of national prominence thanks to the vision of a risk-taking businessman who set out to make a profound difference rather than simply a polite donation. Henry and Betty Rowan's original gift of $100 million to the Rowan University Foundation has helped the Foundation's market value grow to more than $148 million in 2012, ranking Rowan University's assets in the top 40 percent of institutions in North America. Prior to the Rowan gift, the Foundation's assets totaled $787,000.

"Henry Rowan raised the bar for charitable giving to higher education in the United States," said then-Executive Vice President Philip Tumminia M'69 in 2002 during the 10-year anniversary of the Rowan gift. The Rowan gift was, until then, the largest made to a public institution in the United States. "I remember him telling me in 1992 that one of his goals was to get others with wealth to either match or exceed his gift," said Tumminia. In fact, the Rowan's challenge worked to inspire major donors across the country. Before the Rowan donation, the largest gift made to any higher education institution in the United States was $105 million to Emory University—a private college—in 1979. Since the Rowan gift, approximately 120 donations of $100 million or more have been made to colleges and universities in the United States.

The challenge made by the school's benefactor has struck a chord with those making more modest gifts as well, whether they be thousands of University alumni and friends or the region's corporate representatives. Since 1992, nearly 22,000 new donors have invested in Rowan University, supporting scholarships, facilities, academic programs and more. "Henry Rowan's generosity became well-known across the country, especially in academic and philanthropic circles," said Rowan President Ali A. Houshmand, who came to the University as provost more than a decade after the gift was made. "That gift was transformative for this institution in many ways. Of course, it led to the founding of the College of Engineering, but also important was the confidence..."
Dr. James Tracey had already been a faculty member at six institutions in the United States and abroad and was serving as dean of sciences and engineering and director of the Institute for Research in Science and Engineering at the University of Texas in San Antonio when he was tapped to be the College of Engineering founding dean. “I saw the newspaper article announcing Henry Rowan’s gift,” he recalled. “I thought it was such an unusual event. I had never heard of anything like that before. I had no idea I’d have anything to do with it. But I was attracted by the opportunity to build an engineering program from scratch and have the up-front resources to do it.”

Tracey added, “Henry Rowan’s goal to build an outstanding engineering program was a great inspiration to me. The emphasis was to be on quality and not quantity. Excellence was the primary goal.”

That’s not a surprise. The value of education and commitment to others were central to Mr. Rowan’s perspective when he made the gift—and he reiterated this when he spoke at the University’s Commencement ceremony in 2000.

“Make a difference, make this world a little better because you lived in it,” the entrepreneur and Massachusetts Institute of Technology alumnus told the crowd assembled on the Bunce Green after receiving a standing ovation from the University community and thousands of Commencement guests. Among those clad in caps and gowns that mid-May morning was the College of Engineering’s first graduating class. All 85 original engineering majors received full scholarships—another philanthropic initiative inspired by Henry Rowan—thanks to individuals, corporate sponsors and foundations that believed in the fledgling program.

Of course, the primary goal for the Rowan gift was to create a college of engineering in Southern New Jersey, something without precedent. “I was interested in having an engineering education institution in South Jersey,” Mr. Rowan said. “We should be teaching people how to build things, how to create real wealth, real jobs.”

Virginia Smith, daughter of Henry and Betty Rowan, group vice president of Inductotherm Group and a member of the Rowan University Board of Trustees, has perhaps one of the broadest views of her parents’ gift. “When my parents made the gift, my father’s dream wasn’t to create a
university; instead his goal was to make a difference in undergraduate education, especially in engineering, by creating a school of engineering. He was fond of saying, ‘We don’t need more engineers, we need more great engineers. Not more students graduating from college, but more graduates who are well prepared for their careers, especially in the engineering and technical fields,” she recalled.

Rowan students are not only well prepared, but they are thankful, as well. Thomas Xenakis ‘00, vice president, Commercial Concord Engineering in Voorhees, and a member of the College of Engineering’s Dean’s Advisory Council, said he explored options at numerous schools with strong engineering and basketball programs, including West Point. “For me it was scholastics and athletics that came together, and really the scholarship offered to everyone in the first class was the icing on the cake,” he said.

While he was a little apprehensive about entering an untested and unaccredited program (accreditation came when the first class graduated), he was pleased with the outcome. “It couldn’t have been a better learning environment. All the professors were here because they wanted to be here. Everyone wanted to be part of something that was groundbreaking and new. It really fostered a great learning environment. Engineering clinics had us collaborating with other disciplines from the beginning, much like a professional environment, and the entrepreneurial attitude and experiences that started with Henry Rowan filtered through the program.”

Since that day 20 years ago when the Rowans made their pledge, the College of Engineering has earned nationwide acclaim, consistently placing among the top 25 undergraduate engineering programs in the country (bachelor’s/master’s category) as ranked by U.S. News & World Report. Several College of Engineering programs consistently have ranked in the nation’s top 10, including chemical engineering, which has held the second or third position for multiple years.

At the 10-year celebration of the first graduating class of engineers in April 2010, Mr. Rowan told the crowd of alumni, faculty and industry partners gathered in the impressive atrium of Rowan Hall, “There’s nothing more important for the continued excellence of our country than education, and nothing’s more valuable for us to maintain our tradition of excellence in the world than technical education.”

But his intent in 1992 also was to enhance the institution as a whole to benefit of students and the region’s people. That, too, has taken place. The Rowan gift encouraged the school’s administration to think expansively about the future and act upon Mr. Rowan’s desire to have the most impact and to change people’s lives. The Rowan gift was the catalyst that began to transform the campus, invigorate its programs, attract new students and faculty and raise expectations for anyone who heard the name “Rowan University.”

Dr. Carol Sharp, dean of the College of Education for the last decade, has lived through many transitions at Rowan. The Vineland native earned her bachelor’s degree in elementary education from GSC in 1973 and returned to campus as a professor in 1987. “I remember the day they announced the gift. I was thrilled. I just knew it would have such an impact. I was here when we didn’t have any resources; we were scraping by all the time,” Sharp said. “I knew that this gift was a great thing. I believe people are proud Rowan is in South Jersey. This place changes lives.”

During the last 20 years, partnerships with private donors and investors have altered the face of campus, supplementing University resources significantly. New buildings, facilities and projects have expanded the capacity for instruction, research and student life, including Campbell Library, Rowan Hall, James Hall,
And the Rowan Family Foundation has invested in the Rowan Boulevard and the Samuel H. N. Bantivoglio and professorial chairs in environmental engineering, who saw the success of the gift isn’t surprising—everyone has worked hard.

—Henry Rowan

Science Hall, Edelman Planetarium, Rowan Boulevard and the Samuel H. Jones Innovation Center at the South Jersey Technology Park.

The new Medical Education Building, open this summer in Camden, serves Cooper Medical School of Rowan University (CMSRU). This public-private partnership is attracting contributions for scholarships and research, including its first gift in 2009 from Marque ’91 and Yvette Allen, to establish a scholarship in honor of biological sciences professor Richard Meagher. Since then, Haddonfield physician Dr. Michael Renzi and his family and Dr. Ludwig Schlitt and his children—Drs. Michael, Stephanie and Mark—of Advocare Pediatric Group in Haddon Heights have made substantial gifts to CMSRU. In March 2012, alumnus Lawrence J. Salva, senior vice president, chief accounting officer and controller of Comcast Corporation, and his wife, Rita, of Princeton, pledged $1.055 million for medical school scholarships, the largest gift ever from an alumnus.

New programs and majors have been developed as Glassboro State College has evolved into a university (CMSRU). In all departments across the University, his gift seems to have generated a kind of excitement and energy—even a confidence—among faculty, staff and students to create higher expectations and make real changes. Just the whole idea that one man’s gift can change the whole feeling, the whole image of a college such that it transforms itself into a fine university, is a wonderful thing.”

The historic Rowan gift has transformed this institution and thousands of lives in just 20 years. The vigor of Rowan University has contributed to economic development and opportunity in the region. In the past two decades, every donor’s decision to invest in Rowan University confirms that Henry Rowan’s personal challenge to invest in Rowan University confirms that Henry Rowan’s personal challenge to make a difference has been successful. “I’d say that his money was well invested,” said Dr. Ralph Dusseau, founding chair of civil and environmental engineering, who saw helping to build a new engineering school as an incredible opportunity. “I knew that we had a great group together, and I knew together we could pull it off. I think we built a truly great engineering school. I thank Henry Rowan for the opportunity.”

Thanks do arrive regularly and 20 years since his epic decision, Rowan still beams when he hears about what a difference he made. “It’s been a very successful and enjoyable endeavor with the college. The engineering building in itself was quite an accomplishment,” he said of the structure first planned as ordinary and revised at the philanthropist’s urging to be the architecturally stunning and highly functional facility that bears his name. “Students generally keep me advised of what they’re doing,” Rowan said, smiling. “The graduates write letters and Christmas cards. I’m very pleased. The success of the gift isn’t surprising—everyone has worked hard. It’s very much what I expected.”

The College of Engineering finally had its own home in 1998 when Rowan Hall opened with a dedication ceremony. Dr. Phil Tumminia joined Mr. Rowan on the dais with New Jersey Assembly Speaker Jack Collins, Dean Tracey and Trustee Virginia Rowan Smith.

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