Energized by Curiosity

DEBRA EVANS'S DISTINGUISHED CAREER IN MATERIALS SCIENCE ACROSS MULTIPLE INDUSTRIES BEGAN WITH ASKING QUESTIONS AT NORTHWESTERN.

While attending a Northwestern University program for high school students contemplating science careers, Debra Evans ('79) received a Northwestern student handbook. For Evans, a wide-eyed, science-loving teen from Chicago's West Side, the manual shared far more than information on courses, degrees, and academic standards; it delivered inspiration.

"I fell in love with the idea of going to Northwestern and built my entire high school experience around that book," she says.

Contemplating medicine when she first arrived on the Evanston campus in 1975, Evans's thoughts gradually shifted to engineering. A work-study job at nearby Saint Francis Hospital in Evanston provided her a front-row seat to the healthcare environment. After talking to doctors, interns, and residents about their daily work and observing the clinical grind, Evans abandoned thoughts of medical school.

At the same time, materials science piqued her interest. She marveled at the energy of Professor Lyle Schwartz ('59, PhD '64) and was drawn to a small undergraduate program pushing its students to explore.

More than that, Evans appreciated the interdisciplinarity of materials science—its blend of physics, chemistry, and engineering—and the challenge of unpacking mysteries. For her senior thesis, she used methods like electron microscopy to investigate the composition and fabrication methods of an antique metal bell from Nigeria.

"I'm glad I was open-minded enough to take it all in, ask questions, and go toward something I was interested in rather than doing what others expected of me," Evans says.

Over the past five decades, Evans's curiosity has fueled groundbreaking work for powerhouse enterprises innovating in fields like defense, communications, and medicine. At Hughes Aircraft, she contributed to defense radar programs and the revamping of the F/A-18 airplane. At Motorola, she managed automotive electronic and telematic programs for partners like Mercedes, Jaguar, and Ford.

Evans has spent the past 25 years in pharmaceutical and medical products. She's led projects to enhance the absorption of cancer drugs at Baxter, developed a new infusion pump for Pfizer, and steered the development of rare disease therapeutics at Takeda. Since 2022, she's been the director of medical program management for specialty products at AbbVie, overseeing efforts to produce new anti-infectives and pipeline drugs for HIV, obesity, and pulmonary fibrosis.

"This industry provides a way to help people and society, which is incredibly energizing," Evans says.

> "Northwestern gave me a life I never could have imagined."

While enjoying a distinguished professional career and raising two children, both of whom followed her into scientific fields, Evans has consistently given back to her alma mater. She has served on the Department of Materials Science and Engineering Advisory Board and remained active with the Northwestern University Black Alumni Association.

"Northwestern gave me a life I never could have imagined," she says.

DANIEL P. SMITH