Leading a University

ALI DOGRAMACI MS’72, PHD’75

After earning his master’s and doctorate at Columbia’s School of Engineering and Applied Science, Ali Dogramaci MS’72, PhD’75 was asked to teach industrial and management engineering here.

That offer of employment—and his election to Columbia’s Faculty Senate—had a profound influence on the Turkish scholar, who taught at Columbia for five years.

In 1984, Dogramaci’s father, a prominent Turkish pediatrician and educator, founded Bilkent University, Turkey’s first nonprofit private university, donating large tracts of land and an endowment to launch the ambitious educational initiative. While Turkish state universities have foreign visiting professors in the classroom, Bilkent, under Ali Dogramaci’s leadership, hired a large number of international scholars to serve on equal footing with Turkish professors.

“You have equal vote, equal say, regardless of the nationality of your passport,” says Dogramaci. “That’s what makes you a world university.”

Dogramaci became the chair of Bilkent’s board of trustees in 2010, after serving for 17 years as the university’s rector—the position equivalent to president of an American university. He lives in Ankara with his wife, Ayse, a developmental psychologist, and maintains a home in the Riverdale section of The Bronx, where he visits up to five times a year.

During his years as Bilkent’s rector, the university blossomed, with enrollment now at 12,000 and international educators taking notice. A 2010 ranking of universities by the Times Higher Education of universities by the Times Higher Education in the UK ranked Bilkent 112th best in the world. (Columbia was ranked 18th.)

Dogramaci’s return to Turkey in 1991, to serve as provost of Bilkent University, followed an academic career in the United States that began in 1975 at Columbia’s Department of Industrial and Management Engineering. He taught at Cornell University’s School of Operations Research and Industrial Engineering and the Graduate School of Management at Rutgers University in New Jersey before returning to Ankara.

His family continues to build its network of private nonprofit educational institutions in Turkey, including private high schools, with 95 percent of the students on full scholarships in Anatolia’s rural eastern provinces.

He also participated, from 2005 to 2010, in the Global Colloquium for University Presidents, an international group started in 2005 that includes leading educators from around the world, including the secretary general of the United Nations and Columbia President Lee C. Bollinger.

While his competitors built their doors from plywood, Metro-Ply’s doors are made from medium-density fiberboard (MDF) and covered with a thin veneer. The MDF is made from the wood of rubber trees, Thailand’s largest cash crop, which is considered scrap wood, since production of rubber latex ceased more than 20 years ago. The veneer comes from oak and birch logs, imported from the United States, and Osuuna wood from Gabon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

“We are in the production world, and we are always looking for new markets,” says Piyasombatkul. “I’d like to spread my exports to many regions in order to diversify our company’s risk, because you just don’t know the future.”

Piyasombatkul, who majored in chemical engineering, has continued his connection to Columbia. His two sons are now enrolled at SEAS: Vipas ‘11 is majoring in financial engineering, and Kanapouch ‘13 is studying engineering management systems. He hopes they will succeed him at the helm of Metro-Ply in the future.

“I’d like them to run the family business,” says Mr. Piyasombatkul. “It was always my passion that they would attend Columbia, and I’m so glad they are here.”

Creating Doors to New Markets

CHATCHAI PIYASOMBATKUL ‘82

A niche in the global economy can be a beautiful thing. Just ask Chatchai Piyasombatkul, president of a leading manufacturer of wood products in Thailand (Metro-Ply Co., Ltd.), which sells doors and wood paneling to builders around the world.

Piyasombatkul came to Columbia in the late 1970s to study financial engineering, a multidisciplinary field involving financial theory, the methods of engineering, and the tools of mathematics. He returned to join the family business, founded 60 years ago by his father, Vorawit, who opened a small sawmill.

He started in the sales department in their plywood factory and ultimately assumed management of that plant. He led production at a saw-veneer factory and then was assigned by his father to run a fiberboard factory, where wood is made into chips, put into water to make a pulp-like mixture, and then pressed into wood panels, without using resin.

By 1999, he was Metro-Ply’s president. Today, Metro-Ply has 15 factories and about 3,500 employees. It has also expanded into real estate development, with a growing portfolio of four Bangkok office towers, an apartment complex, and a 200-room hotel that is now under construction.

The global economic downturn in 2008 hurt the US housing market, cutting significantly into Metro-Ply’s sales in the United States. To offset the decline, Metro-Ply turned to other housing markets, including China, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan.

“In the production world, and we are always looking for new markets,” says Piyasombatkul. “I’d like them to run the family business,” says Mr. Piyasombatkul. “I’d like them to run the family business.”

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