Giving Back: Armen Avanessians and The Family of Samuel Y. Sheng

A University Trustee, Chair of the Columbia Campaign for Engineering, and longtime donor to many projects at Columbia University, Armen Avanessians `83 has played an integral part in Columbia Engineering’s growth over the past decade. In 2000, Armen and his wife, Janette, took the step of endowing a professorship to honor the memory of Armen’s parents, Alexander `62 and Hermine. This endowment supports exceptional faculty in the Department of Industrial Engineering and Operations Research. The Alexander and Hermine Avanessians Chair is currently held by Donald Goldfarb, a leading researcher in the fields of program algorithms, network flow, and machine learning.

Based in part on his experience in establishing this professorship, Mr. Avanessians began to directly participate in Columbia Engineering’s efforts to retain and support exceptional faculty like Professor Goldfarb. In October 2009, Dean Feniosky Peña-Mora announced that the School would augment these efforts by raising some $30 million to support exceptional engineering faculty. This initiative would enable the recruitment and retention of promising new faculty members who will ultimately do their best work at Columbia Engineering.

Recognizing the potential impact of this ambitious plan, Mr. Avanessians created a fund which provides a 1:1 match for major gifts to support endowed chairs and professorships in engineering. By aiming to interest other alumni in supporting engineering faculty, Mr. Avanessians and his family have greatly amplified the awareness of Columbia Engineering faculty as the heart of...
In this world-class engineering school. In his own words, Mr. Avanessians sees himself “helping Columbia Engineering take a significant step forward to fulfill its potential as one of the world’s leading engineering institutions.”

The generous challenge put forward by the Avanessians family has attracted an enthusiastic response from other alumni families eager to join the effort to support faculty endowment. For example, in response to the Avanessians matching grant, the family of Samuel Y. Sheng ’51 stepped forward to honor their father by establishing a professorship in his memory. A graduate of the Columbia master’s program, Samuel Sheng went on to enjoy a long and successful career as a chemical engineer. Throughout his career, Mr. Sheng was heavily involved in philanthropy and generously supported ophthalmology research and undergraduate financial aid at Columbia University. A scholarship named in his honor, which was established at Columbia Engineering in 2007, provides needed financial support to talented students who would otherwise be unable to pursue a Columbia degree.

To honor both his memory and his commitment to the School of Engineering, Mr. Sheng’s daughter Jean and son Kent, along with his daughter-in-law Lauren ’76, established the Samuel Y. Sheng Professorship, matching their families’ support with funds drawn from the Avanessians match. The Samuel Y. Sheng chair will ultimately support Columbia Engineering faculty pursuing research in the fast-developing field of biomedical engineering. “We wanted to honor our father in a meaningful way while supporting an institution that has had such a significant impact in people’s lives,” say Jean and Kent. “Armen’s generous match has made this joint effort to attract and support faculty talent even more rewarding,” adds Lauren Wong Sheng, a member of the School’s Board of Visitors.

Donor-funded professorships represent an extraordinary commitment to Columbia Engineering. In honoring their parents, the Avanessians and Sheng families, respectively, have come together to ensure the future prosperity of the School. Their mutual passion for academic excellence and exceptional faculty achievement will leave a lasting legacy at the School of Engineering and Applied Science.