Rene B. LaPierre '67 '71 MS, '74 PhD

Robert H. Goddard Award for Outstanding Professional Achievement

Rene LaPierre is well-remembered for his pioneering research in chemical engineering. Although the WPI community was saddened to lose this distinguished alumnus in 2006, we are proud to honor him today among his family and friends.

Dr. LaPierre earned his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees at WPI, all in chemical engineering. He was a flight navigator in the Air Force from 1969 to 1972 and then spent 23 years at Mobil serving in a number of leadership positions.

As manager of Mobil's Exploratory Catalytic Process Group, Dr. LaPierre became known as a visionary for his work in catalytic processing for lubricant production. Under his leadership, this program established the key principles of what is now accepted as the route to produce Group II+ lubricant-base stocks, which have become a significant share of the base stock market. He engaged many researchers within Mobil, and his efforts eventually led to the commercialization of Mobil's MIDW (isomerization) and MSDW (dewaxing) processes for the production of premium lubricants.

His work also was instrumental in the conceptualization and development of a two-stage xylene isomerization process. This body of work became the basis for Mobil's Advanced Xylene Isomerization Process, which was commercialized in the late 1990s, as well as the foundation for other critical advances in chemical processes.

As manager of Mobil's Catalyst Characterization Group, he demonstrated his scientific versatility in engaging some of the best zeolite crystallographers of his generation to resolve the structure of several zeolites.

Demonstrating the depth of his technical versatility, he led studies in the area of fuel cells just prior to the ExxonMobil merger. This work ultimately led to a joint program with Ford to construct a prototype gasoline reformer.

At the time of the Exxon and Mobil merger Dr. LaPierre became vice president of engineering for Precision Combustion Inc. (PCI) in 2000, a small business developing advanced catalytic reactors for a range of energy application. In this last position, he led a group of PhDs and other engineers developing novel catalytic combustors, compact fuel processors, and compact catalytic burners. At PCI he successfully developed his new team, tackled new challenges, and developed a new set of friendships, passing on his love of technology and his professionalism to another generation of innovative engineers.

He was a prolific technologist—the first of his 39 U.S. patents was issued in 1980. He also published more than 20 articles detailing his and his teams' work.

Rene LaPierre is remembered in many ways, all fitting: talented researcher, effective manager, generous mentor and friend, and loving husband and father. Today we remember and him as an exceptional WPI alumnus whose research and leadership has made a significant impact on his field and in the world.