when I graduated, I wanted to work for Ford. I drove a beat-up 1938 sixty-horsepower Ford, which is how I got interested in the company. More than once I’d be going up a hill when suddenly the cluster gear in my transmission would go. Some faceless executive at the Ford corporate headquarters in Dearborn, Michigan, had apparently decided they’d get better fuel economy by taking a V-8 engine down to only sixty horsepower. That was a fine idea—if they had restricted the car to places like Iowa. Lehigh was built on a mountain. “Those guys need me,” I used to joke to my friends. “Anybody who builds a car this bad can use some help.”

—Lee Iacocca ’45, from Iacocca: An Autobiography

Lee Iacocca was right, of course. Ford did need him. After graduating from Lehigh with a degree in industrial engineering, Iacocca earned his master’s degree at Princeton University and immediately boarded the Pennsylvania Railroad’s Red Arrow flyer bound for Detroit, where he began his career as an engineering trainee. He rose through the ranks at Ford, gaining national fame as the “father of the Mustang” en route to being named president of the company in 1970.

Years later, the Chrysler Corp. needed him, too, as it stared into the abyss of bankruptcy. So did Lehigh University, as it dreamed of expanding its physical campus and its global reach. And so did the United States of America, as two of its most cherished symbols of freedom—the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island—deteriorated after decades of neglect. And finally, so did people everywhere who have been afflicted with the scourge of diabetes, the disease that claimed the life of his beloved wife, Mary, in 1983.

Lido Anthony “Lee” Iacocca clearly made his mark in the latter part of the 20th century. In June 2005, CNN named Iacocca the fifth most influential businessperson of the past 25 years, ahead of such luminaries as Bill Gates and Warren Buffett.

Today, Iacocca, 86, has cut back on his public appearances while still keeping up his philanthropic work. And, of course, he maintains his passion for fast cars. In 2009, 45 years after the Mustang first catapulted Iacocca to fame, a special limited-edition Silver Iacocca Mustang was built. Only 45 of the sleek, fastback models were made and handbuilt by Metalcrafters of Fountain Valley, Calif.

And to think, it all started with the son of Italian immigrants tooling around South Mountain in a beat-up 1938 Ford.

THE LEHIGH YEARS

Peter Facchiano ’45, Iacocca’s classmate at Lehigh, still remembers that car. “He would pick me up on top of Gant’s Hill,” Facchiano recalls. “He would be his passenger,” he adds. Facchiano, who retired in Bethlehem after a distinguished 37-year career at Bethlehem Steel.
Lee Iacocca ’45, left, with Lehigh’s 10th president, W. Deming Lewis, in the mid-1970s. They are in the Packard Motor Car Company’s first car, the Ohio Model A, made by the company founded by James Packard 1886. The car is still on display in Packard Lab. Below, Iacocca made the cover of Time magazine at the age of 39.

eight straight semesters, skipping summer vacations.

In April of this year, Iacocca was honored with the Distinguished Alumni Award by what is now known as Lehigh’s industrial and systems engineering department (ISE).

In a prerecorded acceptance speech, Iacocca—who as a member of Lehigh’s board of trustees chaired the fund-raising campaign to purchase the Mountaintop Campus from Bethlehem Steel and jointly started the Iacocca Institute in 1988—said he accepted the award “in honor of current and future Lehigh students who have continued to lead and shape the world.”

Tamas Terlaky, the George N. and Soretria Kledaras ’87 endowed professor and chair of ISE, says Iacocca represents the best that ISE has to offer.

“Industrial and systems engineers constantly strive to build better systems,” Terlaky says. “They have to combine knowledge of materials, equipment, and information systems with people skills. Lee Iacocca used his knowledge of processes, organizations, and people to turn around the ailing Chrysler Corporation in an amazingly short time span. His vision and leadership have made an everlasting impact on Lehigh as well.”

“The skills and knowledge Lee acquired in Lehigh’s IE program put him on track for a phenomenal career. Lee is an ideal role model for all ISE students, an engineer who took his profession to a whole new level.”

THE AUTO YEARS

In September, the USS Midway Museum in California bestowed on Iacocca its prestigious American Patriot Award. In a ceremony that featured Frank Sinatra Jr. and the San Diego Symphony on the deck of the living museum in San Diego, Iacocca reflected on his career before a large, distinguished gathering that included Brandt, Lehigh President Alice P. Gast, and several others representing Lehigh University.

“I chose the automobile industry because honestly I just love cars! And, if you have to work for 50 years, it’s a lot more enjoyable grades, graduating near the top of his class while finding time to be active in the drama club and debating society, among other extracurricular activities.

“Money was scarce, and my dad was determined that Lee was going to go to engineering school,” Delma says. “At that time, it was hard, even though the tuition was low. My dad always said, ‘It’s not cheap if you don’t have the money.’”

The family scrimped and saved so Lee could attend nearby Lehigh University.

Dick Brandt, director of the Iacocca Institute at Lehigh, says Iacocca never forgot the many ways his family supported him. “He remembers where he came from because it was not easy for his immigrant parents to get the money for him to go to Lehigh University,” says Brandt, who has worked closely with Iacocca over the past 14 years.

Iacocca started as a mechanical engineering major but, after struggling early with physics and advanced calculus, switched to industrial engineering. He also took courses in business, psychology, and abnormal psychology.

“I’m not being facetious when I say that these were probably the most valuable courses of my college career,” Iacocca wrote of the psychology courses in his autobiography. “It makes for a bad pun, but it’s true: I’ve applied more of those courses in dealing with the nuts I’ve met in the corporate world than all the engineering courses in dealing with the nuts (and bolts) of automobiles.”

Iacocca also found time for extracurricular activities, and particularly enjoyed working as a reporter and then layout editor on The Brown and White.

He graduated with a 3.53 grade-point average (his self-imposed goal was 3.5) in

"We would talk about our upcoming classes and so forth. He was a very studious individual at that time,” says Facchiano, who has been the Class of 1945 correspondent for the Alumni Bulletin for more years than he can remember.

The son of Nicola and Antoinette Iacocca, young Lee and his older sister, Delma, grew up in Allentown. “We had a wonderful childhood and home,” recalls Delma Kelechava, who married a Lehigh graduate, the late Lawrence Kelechava ’48.

They grew up in a neighborhood surrounded by family and friends. “In the beginning, it was great. Then the Depression hit, and it was hard,” Delma recalls. “But we never lost our home. Everybody helped everybody.”

Both Iacocca children attended Allentown High School. Lee maintained good
doing something you love,” Iacocca said in brief remarks. “Thank you, Ford. Thank you, Chrysler, for providing the opportunity so I could live my passion.”

It’s a passion that goes back to his childhood. As Delma Kelechava recalls, there was only one place her brother ever wanted to work.

“All his life, he wanted to go with Ford,” she says. “Even as a little kid, he’d drive you crazy with those cars and he read everything on the old Mr. Ford, the founder. That’s all he ever talked about was Henry Ford. That’s where he wanted to go, and that’s where he went.”

After earning a scholarship to get his master’s in mechanical engineering from Princeton, Iacocca began his career with Ford in 1946. He completed the 18-month training course in nine months, and went to work as a salesman in the Ford district sales office in Chester, Pa. His success there caught the eye of Robert McNamara, then general manager of the company’s Ford division. Promotions followed in quick succession until McNamara was named president of the company in November 1960, and Iacocca was named to take his place as general manager. (McNamara went on to become Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.)

Under Iacocca’s leadership, Ford began making and marketing cars to young people, broadening its appeal. He also pushed the company into automobile racing to boost its reputation. His efforts culminated with his championing of the Mustang—often over the objections of Ford’s top executives. The first Mustang rolled off the assembly line in 1964, and it was so hot, it landed Iacocca on the covers of Time and Newsweek magazines the week it was launched.

In its story headlined “Ford’s Young One,” Time wrote: “At 39, after 17 years in the auto business, this tall, rugged son of Italian immigrant parents is the hottest young man in Detroit and probably the most ingenious automotive merchandising expert since General Motors’ hard-selling Harlow Curtice.”

Two years later, the one-millionth Mustang was built.

Iacocca’s meteoric rise continued and, in 1970, he was named president of the company. It was, he often said, “a dream come true.” Although the company continued to enjoy great success, Iacocca increasingly clashed with Henry Ford II, the grandson of the company’s founder Iacocca had admired so much as a boy.

It all came to a head in 1978, when Ford fired Iacocca—coming off a year when the company posted almost $2 billion in profits. The news stunned the business world, but within four months, Iacocca was hired to run rival Chrysler, which was on the verge of bankruptcy. Drastic measures including layoffs, plant closings, and selling off the ailing company’s European division weren’t enough to turn things around.

So in 1980, Iacocca went to Capitol Hill to secure $1.5 billion in loan guarantees to be used to rebuild the company. Iacocca cut his own salary to $1 a year, restructured Chrysler, and launched two of the most innovative and successful automobile lines of the decade: the K-car, a compact car that offered higher gas mileage during the depths of the energy crisis, and two years later, the first Chrysler minivans—the Dodge Caravan and Plymouth Voyager.

Iacocca also started in a series of TV commercials for Chrysler that made him one of the most recognizable figures in the country. In the commercial that cemented his status, Iacocca pointed directly at the camera and uttered his famous catchphrase: “If you can find a better car—buy it!”

Sales boomed and, in 1983, Iacocca paid back the government loans—with interest and seven years early.

He was on top of the world. The miraculous turnaround fueled talk that Iacocca would run for president. He didn’t, choosing to sign another three-year contract with Chrysler at the time instead of entering the political arena.

It was during that period that Facchiano saw his old classmate during a visit to the Lehigh Valley.

“I saw him give a lecture at DeSales College,” Facchiano recalls. “At that time, I asked
him if he was going to run for president. He was at his peak then. He gave me a direct answer: No way.”

But just as Iacocca reached the pinnacle of success, he lost the love of his life when his wife, Mary, whom he married in 1956 and with whom he had two daughters, Kathryn and Lia, died as a result of complications from diabetes.

Iacocca threw himself back into his work, but a year later, established The Iacocca Family Foundation to fund research to help find a cure for diabetes. Since retiring from Chrysler in 1992, Iacocca has devoted much of his life to the foundation, which his daughter Kathryn now runs as president.

GIVING BACK

In his remarks at the recent USS Midway ceremony, Iacocca talked about his decision to use the proceeds from his 1984 bestselling book, Iacocca: An Autobiography to fund diabetes research.

“After so many blessings, the time does come when we need to look at our lives and ‘give something back,’” he said. “Mine hit me like a ton of bricks with the death of my wife and the promise to her to find a cure for diabetes. The Iacocca Family Foundation was established and I am still hopeful my promise to Mary will be realized in my lifetime. My gratitude extends also to all the researchers who are diligently following that road.”

Over the years since the foundation was established, it has awarded more than $30 million to researchers at numerous hospitals and institutions conducting diabetes research. Among recent possible breakthroughs funded at least in part by the Iacocca Foundation is a program at Massachusetts General Hospital, where researchers are testing whether a shot or series of shots of a vaccine that has been in use for decades could reverse Type 1 diabetes.

Another opportunity to give back came in 1982, when President Ronald Reagan asked Iacocca to lead a private sector fundraising drive to restore two of America’s beacons of freedom: the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. For Iacocca, the campaign had special meaning, since his immigrant parents had come through Ellis Island when they came to America.

His sister, Delma, and mother, Antonette, joined in the fund-raising campaign. “Everybody in the United States was into it,” Delma recalls. “That was such a fun time.”

Thanks to the donations of young and old, rich and poor, and people from all ethnic and religious backgrounds, $500 million was raised to restore the two monuments. The gloriously refurbished Statue of Liberty was unveiled in spectacular style on July Fourth weekend, 1986, and Ellis Island reopened in 1990—two years ahead of schedule.

About that same time, Iacocca also answered a call from his alma mater. In 1985, Lehigh University had the opportunity to obtain what would become the 742-acre Mountaintop Campus from Bethlehem Steel.

Iacocca, a member of Lehigh’s board of trustees, agreed to lead the effort to pull together industry, government, institutional, and alumni support to make it happen. And in the process, the Iacocca Institute, created to help U.S. industry compete in the global marketplace, was born.

Bill Hittinger ’44—chairman of the board of trustees when the Mountaintop Campus was dedicated in 1991, who

“AFTEV SO MANY BLESSINGS, THE TIME DOES COME WHEN WE NEED TO LOOK AT OUR LIVES AND ‘GIVE SOMETHING BACK.’”
Lehigh and the work of the institute that bears his name.

“I think most people are aware how I feel about education ... get as much as you can!” Iacocca told the crowd. “I see Alice Gast, president of Lehigh University, here. I want to thank her and the faculty for everything they have done, not just for me, but for young people all over our great country who go there to study and learn. I’m especially proud of Dick Brandt at the Iacocca Institute and the Global Village that invite students from dozens of countries each year to participate in their international program.”

Brandt, who came to Lehigh in 1997 after 25 years with AT&T, during which he worked and lived in six different countries, says that Iacocca “was ahead of the curve” when it came to globalization.

“I remember from my first conversations with him, he felt that American business managers didn’t really have a clue of how difficult it was to do business in an international environment,” says Brandt, who started as a teacher before becoming director of the Global Village program and then director of the Iacocca Institute. “He really believed that we were out to lunch. And he probably was right. Now, everybody speaks globalization speak, and everybody knows it’s important.”

The Iacocca Institute, which was established in 1988, gave birth 14 years ago to the Global Village for Future Leaders of Business and Industry, an annual program that prepares promising young business leaders from around the globe to succeed in the international market. The villagers, or interns, spend six weeks at Lehigh immersed in team-building projects, lectures and courses, business trips, consulting projects, and cultural experiences designed to give them a foundation in business and industry leadership that has a global perspective.

When the program first started, Brandt says, it drew about 53 students—all under the age of 21—from 25 countries. This past summer, 111 interns—ranging in age from 19 to 40, with a third of them already holding multiple graduate degrees and a third already working in business—came from 48 countries to take part in the program.

While the Global Village program has realized Iacocca’s dream of teaching students how to compete in the global marketplace, it also has spread goodwill for Lehigh across the globe.

“We have now got 1,265 graduates in 120 countries,” Brandt says. “And they are fervently in favor of Lehigh University.”

Just as the Iacocca Institute begat Global Village, Global Village begat Global Village on the Move, which runs shorter educational programs in different countries.

And that’s where everything comes full circle.

Lee Iacocca’s father, Nicola, came to America from San Marco dei Cavoti, about 25 miles from Naples in the province of Campania. To honor that heritage, the Iacocca Family Foundation, working with the local government in the Italian town, sponsors three residents to attend the Global Village each summer.

In 2012, Global Village on the Move will run a special program in San Marco dei Cavoti to celebrate the completion of a college-level school named for Iacocca. The business center with classrooms is being built there with support from Iacocca’s foundation in Italy and from the European Union.

“We’re actually going back to the hometown of Lee’s parents and grandparents to run a short version of the Global Village there,” Brandt says, with pride. “He remembers his roots. He never forgets the past, so that’s why he’s given back to the small little town in Italy and helped them establish this foundation that’s building the school.”

The journey from son of immigrant parents to one of the most influential figures of his generation has been a long and fulfilling one. On that night aboard the USS Midway, when he was honored for a lifetime of service and patriotism, Lee Iacocca wished no less for all who attended.

“If I have one wish for all of you here tonight,” Iacocca said, “it is to find a road that brings purpose and happiness to your life.”

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As Delma Kelechava, above, talks with a visitor about her family’s strong ties to Lehigh University, her voice is filled with wonder.

“I’m so proud of all of the members of our family who have gone to Lehigh and how close our family has been to the university,” she says.

Those family ties continue to this day. Since Lee Iacocca ’45, his future brother-in-law Lawrence Kelechava ’48, and his cousin, Julius F. Iacocca ’47, graduated from Lehigh, members of two more generations have made their way to South Mountain.

Laurie Kelechava, daughter of Lee’s sister, Delma, and Lawrence Kelechava ’48, earned her master’s degree in education from Lehigh in 1977, while their other daughter, Lisa Lynne Kelechava, graduated from Lehigh in 1986 with a bachelor’s degree in journalism. And today, Delma’s grandson, Erik Kelechava ’10, is an electrical engineering major on South Mountain.

Meanwhile, Julius Iacocca’s son, Gary—who took over the family business, the Allentown-based Yocco’s Hot Dogs, from his father—graduated from Lehigh in 1976. Gary’s son, Alex, wrestled for Lehigh and graduated in 2009 with a degree in finance. He currently is a graduate student studying management science.