Professor Milton Drandell set foot on Cal Poly’s campus for the first time in 1972. More than 40 years later — even after his death — he still finds a way to cross paths with the Orfalea College of Business’ best students, thanks to the generosity of his family.
Drandell was a dynamic character — a lover of tennis, travel and music — who was, at heart, a numbers man. After earning his doctorate in mathematics from UCLA, he led a 15-year career in IBM’s marketing division as the corporation pioneered the early computer.

Drandell stepped away from the corporate world to begin his tenure at Cal Poly teaching quantitative methods, which surveyed database management and quantitative controls in business operations. His work would help provide the foundation for the information systems concentration that exists at Cal Poly today.

Milt, as his wife Ruth called him, was known for his sense of humor and wit, something his students would often note in his instructor evaluations. Drandell retired in 1986 and continued to teach a few classes at Cal Poly while writing a book about his experience at IBM.

When Drandell passed away in 1990, his family realized how much he cherished his teaching experience at Cal Poly. With a $3,000 gift in hand, he included other contributions from friends, Mrs. Drandell established the Milton Drandell Memorial Scholarship Endowment to support the education of one outstanding information systems student each year. As the endowment principal grew to $22,000, so did the scholarship’s disbursement to students preparing for their senior year in the Orfalea College of Business.

In 1997, that student was Stacey Pham (nee Chu). She quickly rose to the top of the information systems discipline with a near-perfect GPA and an ambition to work in technology. That year, the San Jose native used the scholarship to buy vital software for her Learn by Doing senior project. But Pham quickly realized the scholarship meant something more.

“Far beyond the financial benefit, the scholarship was a significant encouragement for me,” Pham recalls. “My hard work was recognized, and I felt that I would owe the scholarship sponsor a commitment to succeed. The award made me feel proud of myself.”

Pham met Mrs. Drandell in the spring of 1997 at an Orfalea College of Business scholarship banquet where the two made an instant connection. Pham took it upon herself to update Mrs. Drandell on her success at Cal Poly and her internship with Hewlett Packard that summer.

Their relationship did not stop there. As Pham’s career continued to evolve in the technology sector, she never failed to stay in touch. “Every year, I would get a holiday card from Stacey with an update,” Mrs. Drandell said. “A few years later, I also received a wedding announcement, and eventually I saw she had two daughters. It’s been a pleasure to watch Stacey grow.”

Pham is just one of 25 students the scholarship has touched. Over the years, Mrs. Drandell has enjoyed seeing how her husband’s memory continues to support the best of Cal Poly. “I have had the utmost pleasure and pride knowing that excellent students have been chosen for this award for their fine character and academic records,” she said.

In 2015, information systems junior Jillian Zdepski won the scholarship for her academic excellence and leadership of her peers. Zdepski says she feels humbled by the Drandell family’s generosity as she looks toward her last year at Cal Poly. “As a senior and executive board member of the Information Systems Association, I have truly found home in the concentration among my peers and professors.”

From her home in San Luis Obispo, Mrs. Drandell’s thoughts are never far from Milton and the life they shared together.

“I feel sure this is the best legacy for him.”

In her own words, Stacey Pham reflects on what her scholarship meant to her.

“There are not enough words for me to express my appreciation for the Milton Drandell Memorial Award and Mrs. Ruth Drandell. It changed the way I believe in myself and the way I live my life. I’d like to let her know that her generosity is definitely not a one-time award to someone. It has placed ongoing support and encouragement to me to continue to strive and achieve. Her gift is priceless, and there’s no way I could pay it back. I look forward to staying in touch with Ruth over the years to come!”

Ruth Drandell and Stacey Pham meet in 1997.