Lamar computer science alumni to reunite Saturday

By Sonya Campbell
Staff Writer

"The computer science degree program at Lamar University had a profound effect on my life and career," said Tim Magnuson, Lamar alumnus and CEO of Kashmoo Inc., a company that provides software solutions for small businesses. "The education I gained at Lamar still serves me every day in my work."

Magnuson will be among the alumni expected to gather at Lamar on Feb. 23 at the first computer science department reunion — part of the university’s homecoming celebration. The all-day event will include a breakfast, campus tour, reception and dinner.

Magnuson, who began attending the Lamar School of Engineering and Technology in the spring of 1975, recalled computer courses were taught mainly out of the industrial engineering department at that time.

"Some computer courses were also taught in the math and electrical engineering departments," he said.

He noted Dr. William C. Nylin Jr. was hired as an associate professor later that year, and "began an exciting transformation of the program that led to the creation of the computer science department."

Nylin introduced new courses, and restructured the entire program so the course of study in computer science at Lamar could stand toe-to-toe with any in the world.

"It was an exciting time to be a student in computer science at Lamar. I remember Dr. Nylin as an enthusiastic and excellent teacher," Magnuson said. "His courses always pushed us to the limit of our abilities."

"He expected a lot from us, and we rose to the challenge. Without question, the person who had the most impact on the early years of the computer science program at Lamar University was Dr. William C. Nylin Jr.,” he said.

Recently, a group of the early graduates of the program, including Magnuson, Clint Harwood, Keith Mott and Susan Mayfield worked with the Lamar University Foundation to create the endowed William C. Nylin Scholarship in Computer Science. The scholarship is awarded to deserving computer science students each semester.

"We surprised Dr. Nylin with the news of the scholarship at a dinner in his honor at the John and Mary Gray Library, and presented him with a plaque that says, 'As an instructor and mentor, you have touched many lives. This scholarship endowment will extend the reach of your consummate example to many more through time.'"

Magnuson said he’s enjoyed an exciting and rewarding career in computer science.

"I had interesting jobs with NASA, Compaq, GE, and MCC (in Austin) in the early part of my career, and have been an entrepreneur since 1991 when I was one of four founders of Pavilion Technologies, a company that grew to be the world leader in advanced process modeling and control, and was recently acquired by Rockwell," he said.

Magnuson also noted many of the other graduates went on to rewarding careers as well.

"Keith Mott has had a distinguished career at DuPont and Invista in Orange. Susan Mayfield formed a very successful consulting group, and Clint Harwood is the senior vice president of IT at Conn’s in Beaumont," he said.

Magnuson said, "After serving as head of the computer science department, Dr. Nylin was promoted through a series of positions at Lamar, including numerous director and vice presidential positions in both financial and academic affairs.

Nylin’s last assignment was as deputy chancellor of the Lamar University System. He left Lamar in 1995 to join Beaumont-based Conn’s in the position of president and was recently promoted from chief operating officer to executive vice-chairman of Conn’s.

“It has been 30 years since I have seen many of the people I went to Lamar with, and I am looking forward to seeing them at the reunion,” Magnuson said. "My years at Lamar were some of the best in my life, and I look back on them with fondness and a deep sense of gratitude."

Another alumnus, Jack M. Gill, received a bachelor’s degree in chemistry and engineering from Lamar in 1958 and a doctorate in organic chemistry from Indiana University.

He credited the small classes, faculty-to-student ratio and the quality of the teaching staff at Lamar University as being reasons his time there was outstanding preparation for graduate school.

Gill eventually moved to “the toughest club in the world” — Silicon Valley, the southern part of the San Francisco Bay Area that is home to high-tech enterprises.

He said all of his peers there had attended elite schools, but he was better prepared than many, thanks to his academic foundation from Lamar.

During his career, Gill has earned distinction and honors as a scientist, senior executive, entrepreneur, venture capitalist and philanthropist. He has founded more than a dozen medical companies and a computer company, and currently teaches and writes at Harvard, MIT and Rice universities.

He and his wife, Linda, established The Gill Foundation of Texas in 1999 that is focused on educational philanthropy. The Gills have endowed many high school and college scholarships, teacher’s awards, academic chairs and research institutes.