

Giving to the Department of Physics

by Erin McGrath Tribble

(KEN LA GATTUTA 1968 V, 1969 VIII



Ken La Gattuta

Inspired by reading physics@mit and his appreciation of his MIT degrees in Physics and Chemistry, Ken established a fund to support graduate fellowships in the Physics Department.

Ken was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1940 to parents Joseph Anthony La Gattuta, an accountant and graduate of New York University, and Josephine Smith, a housewife and high school graduate. He lived in New Jersey during his youth.

He had a strong interest in science and was admitted to MIT on a full scholarship and arrived at MIT in the fall of 1958. Ken struggled in his early years at MIT academically and his father took sick and died in 1960. His mother passed away when he was a junior in high school so Ken left MIT and moved back to New Jersey to live with relatives.

During this time at home Ken worked in the engineering development division of Union Carbide Plastic Corporation (UCPC) located on River Road in Bound Brook, for approximately one year. He transitioned to UCPC's research facility, located in the same place. Ken thought that was a better fit for him and it was there that he stayed for almost five years, working in his own lab with X-ray diffraction machinery and X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy equipment, characterizing new polymers which emerged from the organic chemistry laboratory. At work at UCPC, he did well and discovered a "powder pattern" being expressed by a thick filter formed by new polymer created in the organic chemistry lab. This was of a sort that had never been seen before in a thick film, having previously been known to occur only in very thin films of only a few molecular layers. It was only later, after he had left UCPC, that his supervisor, W. Niegisch, repeated this work and convinced himself that Ken was correct.

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In the summer of 1965, Ken was convinced that it was time to leave UCPC and return to MIT. He attended MIT's summer school in 1965, and then in the fall of 1965 he enrolled again as a full-time student. He did very well as a student unlike his early MIT years, and even worked as a taxi driver in the Cambridge and Boston area, which he said turned out to be great fun. By June 1968, he had graduated with an SB in Chemistry and he decided to stay for another year and take a second SB degree in Physics. In June 1969, he graduated again, with an SB in Physics. Ken wrote, "These two diplomas are still items of pride to me, and I display them in many parts of my environment."

After MIT Ken received his PhD from the University of California, San Diego, he went on to work as a postdoc and on the faculty at the University of Connecticut. He then went to work at the Los Alamos National Laboratory and said he had daydreamed about working there when he was in high school.

Ken worked at Los Alamos from 1986-2006, at which time he retired. He was employed for 20 years as a staff member in the X-Division, which was the thermonuclear weapons design division. He wrote, "Although, things other than thermonuclear design took place. For example, I worked on my own project, which was a continuation of work performed for Y. Hahn at UConn, pertaining to extensions of dielectronic recombination beyond the usual formulation into the realm of interaction of intermediate doubly excited states with each other through the continuum."

After retirement, Ken wanted to give back to his community and teach. He taught GED classes at Delancey Street in Alcalde, NM, near Espanola, a drug and alcohol rehab center run by the residents. He also had an English as a Second Language student for years, and he tutored a GED class in Spanish at Northern New Mexico College in Espanola, and he taught algebra.

In September 2019 he reached out about making a gift to MIT. He was inspired by reading *physics@mit* and felt very appreciative of his degrees from MIT. After hearing graduate fellowships were a top priority for the Department he wanted to establish the "Kenneth J. La Gattuta (1968 Chemistry, 1969 Physics) Physics Fund," which would support graduate students.

Ken passed away February 20, 2020, from a rare autoimmune disease and mesothelioma, a rare cancer of the lung lining, attributed to asbestos inhalation. Ken La Gattuta lived in San Pedro, New Mexico, for 25 years with his wife Pam. During their time together they enjoyed traveling, running, hiking and cross country skiing.

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Attracting the best graduate students to work with our faculty continues to be our highest priority. We have established the **Patrons of Physics Fellows Society** to recognize friends of the Department who have made it possible for us to recruit the very best graduate students. A commitment of \$70,000 or higher will make you a member of this society. You will receive updates from the named graduate student you are supporting and be invited to the annual Patrons of Physics Fellows Society dinner.

With your help, we will continue to understand the deepest aspects of nature, perhaps even the origins of space, time and matter. To make a gift, or for more information on making a gift, please contact:

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