

Working for Chrysler – Like Joining a Family, 1946

Bruce Thomas retired Chrysler Engineer, Oral History Interview:

Starting to work for Chrysler in the 1946 was like joining a family. It was a very intimate thing. Fred Zeder, Owen Skelton and Carl Breer were the real father figures in this very friendly atmosphere. You didn't join a department in those days; you were adopted into it. In the Chrysler Institute, Zeder, Skelton, Breer, and the other Engineering people taught courses on cooling or electrical or vehicle handling. The school was about an hour and a half or two hours a day. We worked the rest of the time in different assignments, so we got our feet wet in all kinds of things. When I went to work in engine design laboratories and vehicle testing, I knew that was my home.

Zeder, Skelton and Breer were all very gregarious, friendly people. Zeder was the salesman. He was the front man, a brilliant engineer. He became vice chairman of the board of Chrysler. Breer was the inventor, the guy who got the brilliant ideas. Skelton was the man who could get the ideas into production. He was the blueprint guy.

One day, I was walking down the hall on the second floor of the Engineering Building, and Fred Zeder and Jim Zeder, his son, were coming the other way. I said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Zeder, good afternoon Mr. Zeder." And they said "Hello."

And all of a sudden I heard a voice say, "Pardon me."

And I turned around, and it was Fred Zeder. He said, "I'm not so sure I've met you." He walked back and said, "My name is Fred Zeder."

And I said, "Well, yes, I met you, Mr. Zeder, at the Institute."

He said, "Oh, that's right. You looked familiar, but I wanted to get your name again."

We talked for a few minutes, and he asked if I was enjoying the Institute. Then he said, "Listen, my office is right down the end of the hall. Any time you have any ideas — you're the future of this Company — you come down and talk to me. If people are giving you a hard time, and you're not getting your ideas across, come see me. We'll talk about it."

Well, I didn't walk down the hall after that. I floated down it. I mean, it was an unbelievable experience. But that friendly, caring attitude is what Fred Zeder, Owen Skelton, and Carl Breer had.