You never know how far your experience studying abroad will take you.

When the University of Surrey in the south of England celebrates the 50th anniversary of its bioengineering program this fall, the historic role of a Spartan Engineer will be part of the festivities.

John R. Thome, a Michigan native, was an undergraduate mechanical engineering student when he became the University of Surrey’s first exchange student from Michigan State in 1974. That quiet, yet exclusive role is currently part of a display at the university in England.

“The year I spent at the University of Surrey was a very enjoyable and challenging year as the first student in this program from Michigan State University,” Thome is quoted in the “Open Borders” exhibit at Surrey. “I lived on campus and had a great time.”

Located in Guildford, United Kingdom, the public research university has 15,000 students and specializes in science, engineering, medicine and business. The university was chartered in September 1966.
Thome said playing on the university’s basketball and tennis teams quickly cast him into campus life and gave him new friends.

He returned to Michigan State and completed his bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering in 1975. He then accepted a UK grant and earned his PhD at Oxford University in 1978, and returned to Michigan State as an assistant and then associate professor of mechanical engineering.

Since 1998, Thome has been a faculty member at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology or Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne (EPFL) in Switzerland. He is a professor of heat and mass transfer, focused on two-phase flow and heat transfer research. Thome directs the Laboratory of Heat and Mass Transfer at the EPFL, where he has a research staff of up to 20. He is also the director of the Doctoral School in Energy.


His awards include the J&E Hall Gold Medal from the U.K. Institute of Refrigeration (2008), the ASME Heat Transfer Memorial Award (2010) and the Nusselt-Reynolds Prize (2016).

“T’ve had the opportunity and desire in my career to live and work abroad to extend my experience beyond engineering and this is certainly based on my first experience at the University of Surrey in the then new MSU exchange program,” Thome added.

Related Website: Thome's Heat and Mass Transfer Laboratory in Switzerland
MSU Engineering Education Abroad Program
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