

Philanthropy across borders and generations



13 September 2021

ETH alumnus Eric Winkler has lived and worked in various locations around the world. He has always retained his ties to ETH – which has led to an unusual family commitment.

You and your family support ETH's Excellence Scholarship programme. Why?

Life makes us part of a cycle: we receive, we achieve and we pass on the baton. I feel grateful to ETH, as my alma mater, and to Switzerland. In my family, we agreed that we would like to give something back to society. That's why we support talented individuals, who have the potential to achieve exceptional things for the benefit of us all.

How did your family come to support Excellence Scholar Janine Wetter?

It was our younger daughter Louisa who suggested, during a family council, that our family philanthropy should pay more attention to the problem of climate change. We looked at three proposals from scholarship recipients whose studies focus on climate issues. We felt that Janine's research into the effects of climate change on the polar regions was particularly promising.

What memories do you have of your time at ETH?

The thing that's really stayed with me is the energy my lecturers seemed to have. They were so inspiring. The only place I ever witnessed anything similar was at Stanford.

I have particularly fond memories of my first lecture series, "Analysis 1", given by Professor Peter Henrici in the Audimax. His clarity of thought was impressive. Back then at ETH, all the teaching staff were male and they taught with a certain wit or, as the professor for classical theoretical physics used to say, "cum grano salis". I owe my two best mathematical jokes - which I still tell to this day - to the Professor of Numerical Analysis, Eduard Stiefel. My father would have liked to study at ETH, but the family didn't have the money.

How do you look back on the past two years that your family has been supporting a Master's degree student during her academic journey?

It's been delightful! A thought-provoking dialogue developed between us and gave us some insight into the life of a younger person today. And I had the pleasure of reading her informative Master's thesis. I was also interested in the insights into life today at the "Poly", as we used to call ETH. As the father of two daughters, I hope to have given a little moral support to someone who is just starting out on her journey.

Eric Winkler grew up in Hong Kong, the son of a Belgian mother and a Swiss father, and attended grammar school in Davos. He studied physics at ETH, graduating in 1971. In 1979, he founded Ryder Industries in Hong Kong, providing electronics design and manufacturing services. In 2007 he sold the "Saitek" product division (electronic chess games and PC peripherals) and since then has held the position of non-executive chair. He lives in London with his wife Rowena. The couple have two daughters and four grandchildren.

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