



Jim Finkl and his son, Nicholas Finkl

Heart, Mind, and Soul



“Heart, mind, and soul.” That’s how entrepreneur Jim Finkl describes his family’s relationship with Illinois Tech. Finkl’s father Chuck (ME 1943) and grandfather William (CHE 1918) were the only father-son pair to win the Alumni Medal, the highest honor bestowed by the Illinois Tech Alumni Association. A. Finkl Steel & Co., the company founded by Finkl’s great-great grandfather, is a leading employer of Illinois Tech graduates. Finkl himself was a student in Illinois Tech’s first distance learning course on the William F. Finkl Interactive Instructional Television Network, the predecessor to IIT Online that was funded by his grandfather.

“It’s kind of funny, because IIT had that mode of education 30 years ago—they were 15 years ahead of the curve!” Finkl remarks. The university was a household topic while he was growing up. “Both my grandfather and father were very passionate about the school.” While Finkl’s grandfather William established Illinois Tech’s innovative distance learning program, his father Chuck, an inventor with more than 100 patents, created an endowed professorship, a research equipment fund, the IIT Thermal Processing Technology Center, and several scholarships. His mother Lee was also very involved. “I was very intimidated by IIT,” admits Finkl, who ultimately chose not to finish college, “but I got educated by IIT by proxy through my father.”

Indeed, Finkl, who worked at Finkl Steel and served on its board of directors for 25 years, found that he automatically knew certain engineering concepts thanks to his dad. He also learned from his father and grandfather “that you can do things the right way, the healthy way, and still make a healthy profit.” With that lesson in mind, after his father passed, he and other Finkl family members refused to sell the company unless they could guarantee that every employee’s job would be safe.

Finkl became one of the company’s leading sales people and was responsible for pioneering Finkl Steel’s market in Asia as well as in many other international markets as Finkl Steel transformed into a global business. After the family ultimately sold the company, Finkl embarked on a career as a serial entrepreneur, founding a commercial real estate company, two security companies, and a production company with credits including the films *Desert Bayou* and *Riddick*.

In spring 2017 Finkl’s mother passed away, and he decided to make a gift in her honor to Illinois Tech, pushing his family’s total contributions to the university to more than \$10 million. Additionally, Finkl planted a tree on the Illinois Tech campus commemorating both his parents this past summer. To Illinois Tech’s young entrepreneurs, he has this advice: “A strong moral compass and a sense of honor and duty.... The core value of the person is what makes an entrepreneurial endeavor a success.” ❖