



January 24, 2011

NR11010

News Release

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NMCC receives \$1.2 million private gift to support growth of alternative energy education and training

Aroostook County - The inspirational life story of a self-made man and philanthropist who achieved great success in Silicon Valley, and the parallels drawn to the educational opportunities provided to students in Aroostook County to achieve their dreams, have paved the way for a \$1.2 million dollar gift to Northern Maine Community College.

Officials with NMCC and the NMCC Foundation today announced one of the largest private contributions ever given to a community college in Maine and the largest donation to date to an Aroostook County higher education institution. The gift is provided by California resident and Presque Isle native Mary Smith in honor and memory of the life of her late husband Rodney Smith, a native of England, who, despite an impoverished youth and incredible odds, achieved extraordinary success in the United States as a businessman and pioneer in the semi-conductor industry.

“My husband came from an environment where he could never have dreamed of achieving the heights of success that he realized in his lifetime. This might be true of many of the students who begin the journey toward achieving their life’s dreams by attending Northern Maine Community College,” said Smith in a statement read by her attorney Richard Engels, NMCC Foundation Board member and immediate past chair. “Rodney was a philanthropist who believed very strongly in giving to those less fortunate who were working to better their lives and those of their families and communities. He also respected greatly the fact that I loved the area of northern Maine where my roots are. That is why I believe strongly in the work of the College and want to support its efforts in improving the lives of people and the economy of the region, while paying tribute to Rodney’s amazing life in a meaningful way.”

The Smith gift will be put to immediate use and is directed to projects designed to support the emerging green energy industry in the region and state. NMCC President Timothy Crowley announced that the College will use the funds to establish the Northern Maine Center for Excellence in Alternative Energy Training and Education, a project that had been conceptualized by college officials in hopes of finding funding resources. That project will be fast-tracked, as will the purchase of \$650,000 of instructional equipment which will allow for the expansion of NMCC’s wind power technology program. This equipment will allow the College to double its enrollment of first year students in the program from 18 to 36, to better serve the student demand for the program as well as industry needs.

“We have begun the work needed to support the economic vitalization of this region by building a solid education program focused on the use of renewable energy,” said Crowley. “This profoundly generous and most appreciated investment by Mrs. Smith toward that goal will have significant impact on our ability to help Aroostook County build the infrastructure and workforce needed to ensure alternative energy is key to unlocking the future economic potential of the region. By bringing the education and training needed for the use of renewable resources that are abundant in this region under one roof, we can respond to the demand, as well as make the best possible use of our resources to educate the public and the workforce of the future.”

Although College officials intend to announce further specifics of what projects will be initiated and which purchases will be made with the large gift in the near future, the intention is to utilize \$500,000 to support the establishment of the Center for Excellence. NMCC will develop the facility at a recently renovated 7,800 square foot building located nearby the campus on Skyway Street that was formerly used by the Presque Isle Public Works Department.

The College had previously made arrangements with the Presque Isle Industrial Council to lease the facility beginning this spring to provide additional classroom and lab space to both accommodate the record number of students enrolled in the building trade programs and new initiatives within those programs to incorporate curriculum in alternative energy. The donation will allow for development of the center concept and for the purchase of needed technology and equipment to ensure students have training opportunities that will be most effective toward creating a new industry in the region and moving it forward.

“During his lifetime, Rodney Smith was instrumental in advancing the high-tech electronics industry in Silicon Valley. This gift in his honor will serve as a catalyst for the development of yet another promising sector that holds significant potential for northern Maine,” said Brian Hamel, chair of the NMCC Foundation Board of Directors. “The students, faculty and staff of the College, as well as the people of Aroostook County and the State of Maine, are the direct beneficiaries of this wonderful gift that will have a lasting impact on the economic development of our region”

Rodney Smith was born in Oldham, England and grew up in a very poor working class neighborhood. He attended an Anglican school where a teacher noticed his brilliance and insisted that he study to prepare for the 11-plus exam. He excelled and received a scholarship to an exclusive private school.

Despite his ability to meet the academic rigors at the school, the young Mr. Smith felt he didn't “fit in” with the wealthy upper class students, a sentiment compounded by the stark reality of insurmountable fiscal challenges, a two hour train commute, and no time or place to study. Under mutual agreement with the school it was decided that he would leave.

At loose ends after leaving the school and with no parental guidance, at age 16, Smith enlisted in the British Army to be a student in the Army Apprentices School at Arborfield. The Apprentices School was established within the British Army to train young soldiers in specialized technical trades. Smith finished his service in the Army's Royal Corps of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME). Through the support of the British Army he received his degree in electrical engineering.

At age 27, he left the British Army and made his jump "across the pond" to the United States where he began working for General Electric on the east coast. After a short time with G.E., Smith headed to California to work for Fairchild Semiconductor, where he spent 13 years, becoming the general manager of the company's second largest division. In 1983, he was hired by the founders of the Altera Corporation to serve as the first CEO. Altera is the leading company in innovative custom logic solutions and invented the world's first reprogrammable logic device in 1984. Smith led the company to great success for two decades before retiring on January 1, 2001.

In December, Mrs. Smith directed a \$50,000 contribution to NMCC for the purchase of technology and equipment for the wind power technology program. Those funds were used, in part, to purchase a new multimedia interactive programmable controller unit. The donation was given in memory of her husband and her parents, Hope and Robert Akeley, both of whom were born and raised in central Aroostook County.

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Northern Maine Community College Foundation Board Chair Brian Hamel (left) and Richard Engels, NMCC Foundation immediate past board chair: listen as NMCC President Timothy Crowley announces that the College will establish the Northern Maine Center for Excellence in Alternative Energy Training and Education through a \$1.2 million gift made in honor and memory of Mr. Rodney Smith.



Mr. Rodney Smith



Future site of the Northern Maine Center for Excellence in Alternative Energy Training and Education.