Like the calm aftermath of a chemical reaction, after all the bubbling and smoking has stopped, Dr. Harry Edwards speaks slowly, with composure stemming from hard work and deep thought.

Born on October 6th, 1939, Edwards was always interested in chemistry. His father, a chemical engineer, bought him chemistry sets. When he was 17, he prevailed upon his father, a chemist, to get him a summer job at the chemical plant where his father worked. “It was kind of dangerous, actually,” Edwards recalls about the job, in which he tested samples to make sure they met specifications.

Coupled with his love for chemistry was a love for learning. “I knew I wanted to be a professor in high school, and my classmates would call me professor, I hope for good reasons!” He attended college at Nevada Southern College, which had one building. He soon ran out of classes to take there, so he transferred to the University of Nevada – Reno (UNR) “I flourished at UNR,” Edwards remembers, “There were eight or ten faculty members in chemistry who gave lots of individual attention. It was like going to a fancy private school but with all the benefits of a state school.”

The education was so good that, when Edwards went to the University of Arizona for graduate school, he passed his qualifying exams the first time he took them. During his four years of doctorate work, Edwards had the opportunity to accompany his advisor on two trips to Colorado State University. “So when I was close to finishing at Arizona, [CSU] offered me a job, but not in chemistry,” Edwards smiles, “In mechanical engineering.”

“It may seem strange,” he admits, “but actually mechanical engineers need to be highly proficient in thermal sciences.” So, why Fort Collins and CSU, instead of a job in chemistry? “I saw Fort Collins as a desirable location: college town, high desert climate, and I ran out of time. I had to have a job. I had a lovely wife and a 2 year-old cat to support.” The switch from chemistry to mechanical engineering was “not difficult, but I had to learn how to be a good listener, to be kind to people and patient, to encourage people. These were skills I had to learn on my own.” Such skills would carry Edwards through his job as an assistant, associate, and then full professor at age 36.

Edwards’ goals when starting were simply to be an effective professor, balanced between teaching, research, and service. In teaching, “my style changed because my attitude changed. I had to learn that I was there to serve students and to help them learn, rather than to dictate my point of view.”

Edwards was involved on some very interesting research projects with multidisciplinary objectives. He studied ways to mitigate coal dust explosions in mines and manage possible fires on orbiting spacecraft for NASA. He was active in the Air and Waste Management Association and the American Chemical Society, as well as serving on local city boards involving air quality control, citizen reviews about police officers, natural resource advice, and climate action plans. Edwards also was the director of CSU’s Industrial Assessment Center for ten years, which provided assistance to manufacturing companies in the community. “I found a niche and did well in it,” Edwards explains.
Ultimately, Edwards struck the balance he was striving for, a feat not many of us can claim. When asked what he wishes he’d known earlier in his life, Edwards shakes his head, “Nothing. I think the things I had to learn, I had to learn the hard way.”