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Shea Stewart

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SpaceX Veteran Joining UM to Connect Engineering School with Industry

Darin Van Pelt takes position with university after almost 20 years in aerospace industry

FEBRUARY 4, 2020 BY SHEA STEWART



Darin Van Pelt takes in the view from Pikes Peak. Van Pelt is the School of Engineering's new director of engineering engagement. Submitted photo

OXFORD, Miss. – Darin Van Pelt (BSME 01) has joined the University of Mississippi as director of engineering engagement, focusing on industry engagement for the **School of Engineering** and working closely with the **Center for Manufacturing Excellence**, or CME.

Van Pelt spent more than 18 years working in aerospace engineering, most recently as a co-founder of ABL Space Systems, a company that develops rockets for the small satellite industry.

Before that, he spent nearly a decade with SpaceX, the company founded by Elon Musk that designs, manufactures and launches advanced rockets and spacecraft.

In 2019, though, the Mississippi native and **Ole Miss** graduate began talking with UM officials about an on-campus job opportunity. Van Pelt wanted to use his experiences in engineering to better connect the university and its students with companies involved in industry, from aerospace innovators to shipbuilders.

"I think the biggest thing I enjoyed in my latter time at SpaceX and when founding ABL was the chance to influence and mentor," said Van Pelt, a Long Beach native. "The most impressionable point in a young engineer's time is at school.

"This position is very enabling – trying to be a connector and creating new opportunities for the engineering students and faculty we have here. Once high school juniors and seniors see the successes that Ole Miss engineers are starting to have, then they will want to come here, too."

Beyond the student aspect, Van Pelt will be responsible for assessing connections between UM and industry in Mississippi and elsewhere, forging new links with industry, bolstering current relationships and using those associations to enhance student experiences while also benefiting industry partners.

"This is a completely new opportunity for the school," said Dave Puleo, dean of the School of Engineering. "Although we certainly have interactions with industry, they have not been coordinated. Consequently, Darin will be planning and implementing an integrated approach to engaging industry with the school. This engagement will span students, faculty and staff.

"Connecting with industry is important for the School of Engineering and CME to fulfill our missions.

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Campus Briefs

Students Learn 'Real Politics' in Washington, D.C., Winter Session

OXFORD, Miss. – Eleven University of Mississippi students spent their winter break learning about the people who work behind the scenes of the American government in Washington, D.C. Lead by Jonathan Klingler, assistant professor of political science, the students of Pol 391: Applied Politics met not with candidates, but with the people who make candidates'

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Young Alumna Gives Back to School of Accountancy

OXFORD, Miss. – Stephanie Jennings Teague, of Chicago, sees her commitment of \$100,000 to the Patterson School of Accountancy's new building at the University of Mississippi as a means of saying "thank you." "It is a way to show a small token of my appreciation to Ole Miss, the faculty and staff, and the accounting

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Ole Miss In the News

Reuters: Keep an Eye on the Money Supply

U.S. inflation roller coaster prompts fresh look at long-ignored money supply By Michael S. Derby NEW YORK – The amount of money sloshing around the U.S. economy shrank last year for the first time on record, a development that some economists believe bolsters the case for U.S. inflation pressures continuing to abate. The Federal Reserve's

Considering our roles in education, research and service, we need to prepare engineers and computer scientists to join the 21st-century industrial workforce, develop new technologies that are manufactured for societal benefit and contribute expertise to assist with industry-relevant problems.”

Less than two months after graduating from UM, Van Pelt joined Lockheed Martin. While there, he worked as a propulsion engineer, supporting the fleet ballistic missile program. He also earned his master’s degree in aeronautics and astronautics from Stanford University while working for the company.

He joined SpaceX in 2007, starting as a propulsion systems engineer, rising to a manager of propulsion systems and working on projects such as the company’s reusable Falcon 9 rocket.

“It’s always been an engineer’s dream ... to fix and design and tackle new challenges being proposed by leadership and the system they are designing while also trying to defeat physics,” Van Pelt said of his time at SpaceX. “As an engineer, that was great. Always something new, something different to work on.”

Seeing an opportunity to build a rocket focused on delivering small satellites – about the size of a refrigerator as opposed to a large satellite, which can be as big as a delivery van – to space, Van Pelt formed ABL in 2017 with other SpaceX engineering leaders.

Not long after, he returned to UM to speak to students about his work on rocket systems, one of the few times he had been on campus in years.

“It was cool to come back to campus and share some of the lessons I’ve learned,” he said. “One of the big things I said in that presentation was (to) embrace the opportunity to fail and learn and try again. Don’t be scared.”

Witnessing the new energy around UM engineering with [the hiring of Puleo](#), and CME’s work in educating students in modern manufacturing and [its connections to industry](#), Van Pelt decided to return to his alma mater when the opportunity presented itself.

“I’m excited about being back in Oxford,” he said. “People say, ‘the Ole Miss family and community.’ It’s real. There is a sense of family here, and I’m excited to help it grow.”

Enthusiasm about what UM students and faculty have to offer and, in turn, what industry needs from its newly hired UM engineers will be part of Van Pelt’s initial focus. He also will work to increase the university’s role as a driver of economic development and, working with [University Development](#), broaden the university’s outreach to the numerous current and potential industry partners across the state and region.

“The School of Engineering should continue to be a source of advanced learning, a catalyst for innovation and an engine for economic growth for the people of Mississippi,” said Ryan Miller, associate director of external operations for CME.

“These things, in no small part, provide a foundation for an enhanced quality of life for our students and the people they encounter as graduates. Darin’s role will be crucial as he will serve, alongside others, to see to it that the university continues to focus on these things.”

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