James Nowick and John Dumas planned gift will create endowed chemistry chair

The gift will also create an endowed chair in the UCI School of Humanities.
Wednesday, July 02, 2025
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UC Irvine Physical Sciences Communications



John Dumas and Professor James Nowick enjoy the view in Gordes, France during Nowick’s sabbatical at the Institut des Biomolécules Max Mousseron in the spring of 2023.

Picture Credit:
John Dumas

Since beginning his academic career at UC Irvine back in 1991, James Nowick, now a Distinguished Professor of Chemistry, has always strived to give back to the university. In the early 2000's, he helped his parents set up a small endowment in the School of Physical Sciences. When he was chair of the Department of Chemistry a decade later, Nowick and his husband, John Dumas, regularly hosted dinners in their home for the department's faculty and spouses. They did this not only to get to know their colleagues better, but also to support a collegial culture in the department that fosters cooperation and collaboration.

Now, Nowick and Dumas are continuing their legacy of giving back to the school by planning to leave their entire estate to UC Irvine. Their generous planned gift will create endowed chairs in the School of Physical Sciences Department of Chemistry as well as the School of Humanities.

Nowick earned his bachelor's degree at Columbia University, where a solid grounding in the liberal arts through the university's renowned Core Curriculum program complemented his undergraduate education in chemistry. Meanwhile, Dumas completed his undergraduate degree in English with a concentration in Medieval Studies in 1994 as a returning student at UC Irvine. Dumas started his studies in Massachusetts, where he and Nowick first met in 1986.

"I'm greatly enthusiastic about the sciences," said Dumas, who was the first person from his family to attend and graduate from college. "And James is greatly enthusiastic about the humanities."

The couple's planned gift will create an endowed chair in the Department of Chemistry, as well as an endowed chair in Old or Middle English and/or medieval studies in the UC Irvine School of Humanities.

The endowed chemistry chair, to be created posthumously through Nowick and Dumas's legacy gift, will help recruit or retain top faculty. "Chemistry research is expensive," said Nowick, "and an endowed chair in chemistry can help support a research program and recruit excellent people. The planned gift for the endowed chair is recognizing that over the years the field changes, it's very dynamic, and there are different areas of importance and different areas of need."

Nowick described how his field of chemical biology didn’t exist when he started his faculty career, and that he wants the planned endowed chair to embrace the dynamic nature of his field.

“Faculty, particularly faculty who’ve been with the university for a long time, love this place, and care about this place, and this is a chance for us to show our commitment to the future, knowing there are specific areas you can make an impact,” said Nowick.

The planned gift reflects Nowick and Dumas’s values for both the sciences and the humanities. “The pursuit of knowledge is a fundamental human good,” said Nowick. For both of them, their hope is that the planned gift fosters in the physical sciences what he sees as a very human trait: curiosity. That includes curiosity for the kind of science that can make a positive difference in people’s lives, but also just a basic, playful curiosity about how the world works.

One example Nowick points to is how one of his colleagues, Professor Gregory Weiss, made headlines when he and his lab devised a way to ‘unboil’ an egg. It was a fun project that stemmed from playful curiosity – but it also has practical applications in biotechnology and the development of protein-based medicines.

For Nowick and Dumas, it’s that kind of research that signifies how human curiosity as a force in and of itself can lead to discoveries with applications that nobody anticipated.

“Simple questions can lead to much more serious things,” Dumas said.

Nowick agrees: “These types of ideas cross-fertilize, and lead to bigger things,” he said. “The things that sound silly may end up being very important.”

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