John H. Kroehling (CERE ’48) admits that he planned to major in chemical engineering when he arrived at Virginia Tech in 1942. However, the war and a football scholarship redirected his plans. He spent his freshman year in the Corps and stayed busy with football, wrestling, baseball, and academics. “I was not fond of the military. It was interesting; it was good discipline,” but he recalls suffering greatly for small infractions such as smiling at the wrong time. In the spring of 1943, he answered a summons from the U.S. Army and joined the World War II effort. With the promise of a football scholarship, he reentered school in the spring of 1946, a year when civilians outnumbered cadets for the first time in Virginia Tech history.

Since the chemical engineering department “didn’t want anyone who was going to be tied up with athletics,” Kroehling joined the ceramic engineering department, and he enjoyed himself. Ceramic engineering was a small department, which meant lots of individual attention and an informal atmosphere. “I liked going to school. I liked learning.” He remembers one professor in particular, Dr. John Watson, who taught physical chemistry. He had a habit of writing on the blackboard and erasing almost as quickly. He gave quizzes every day. Now, more than fifty years later, Kroehling regularly uses information in his work that he learned from Dr. Watson.

After graduating in 1948, he went to work for the Roanoke-Webster Brick Company, where he had done undergraduate research studying the use of shale to form lightweight aggregate for making lightweight building blocks. When the company folded two years later, Kroehling moved to Texas to sell refractories and develop new markets for General Refractories. At one point he moved to Canada for three years to sell refractory brick to steel, cement, and copper industries. While living in Canada, he married Joan Zimmelman and they have been together for over 50 years and have four children between them.

He eventually became assistant district manager for General Refractories in Philadelphia, and when his boss asked him to investigate a newspaper ad placed by a chemical company seeking a person with refractory experience, Kroehling answered the ad and received a job offer from DuPont. So, after thirteen years with General Refractories, he accepted the position with DuPont, where he took on a project to study the economics of a new technology to produce refractory materials. Although he determined that this venture was not feasible financially, he was instrumental in developing leftover technology that involved forming aluminum foil into a honeycomb and converting the aluminum to alumina through oxidation under carefully controlled conditions. The resulting configuration was the same as that for ceramic honeycomb. This opened doors for DuPont to provide catalyst and catalytic oxidation systems for stationary sources of volatile organic carbon (VOC) or hydrocarbons, which are solvent vapor pollutants that must not be released into the atmosphere.

Mr. Kroehling worked with DuPont for about twenty years, until DuPont sold this particular business to Engelhard Industries in 1983. Kroehling went with the business since it was essentially his baby, and he spent the next three years designing and selling catalyst modules to builders of oxidation systems.

In 1986, he retired from Engelhard and took a small equity position as a vice president for a Brooklyn company that built the hardware into which DuPont and Engelhard catalysts were installed. For the next five years he sold catalyst modules and catalytic oxidation systems to chemical process plants around the Pacific Rim.
His second retirement came in 1991, and the Kroehlings moved south to Williamsburg, Virginia, where they built a house and an office, and J.H. Kroehling Associates, Inc. was born. The company specializes in industrial pollution control, and Kroehling designs catalytic oxidation systems and represents a fabrication company and a catalyst producer. Of their decision to move to Williamsburg, Kroehling says, "We wanted to live in a university town, and my wife is interested in history." Mrs. Kroehling stays busy doing volunteer work at a medical clinic and at their parish church office. She also works in a church-operated shop that serves the many tourists who visit Williamsburg.

In considering factors that have influenced his work and lifestyle, Kroehling thinks of his parents, neither of whom completed formal education. The children of German immigrants, they were both required to leave school to work. His father left high school at age fourteen and his mother was taken out of school in the eighth grade. "My father was very smart. He was able to take my calculus book and teach himself calculus...I did not get good grades in calculus." His father worked as an instrument maker for Western Electric, now AT&T Technologies, and he received an engineer’s title based on experience. "There was no question that we (John, a brother, and a sister) were going to work as hard as we could to get as much education as we could." Kroehling also inherited a strong work ethic which he has passed on to his children.

One part of his present job is conducting seminars dealing with catalytic oxidation systems. He thinks of himself as an educator, teaching people about the technology that goes along with the product he sells, which he feels is secondary to the educational aspect of his work. He enjoys sharing what he has learned with others.

He has gained a wealth of knowledge and experience over the years. "I strongly believe in knowing as much about your customer’s business as he does.” When he agrees to take on a job, he believes his primary duty is to understand and solve the customer’s problems. "Any equipment I sell him is my responsibility from then on, so that I’m always there if there is a problem.” Part of his job is troubleshooting leftover problems. He does a lot of upgrading and rebuilding where suppliers have sold equipment and relinquished all responsibility. "Never promise anything you can’t back up." He stands behind his product, but first he makes sure that product is dependable and will work for the customer.

Mr. Kroehling currently serves on the Advisory Board for the MSE Department, and he is also a member of the College of Engineering Committee of 100. The Kroehlings have donated money to fund two scholarships at Virginia Tech. They also made a deferred gift to the university to establish two John H. Kroehling Scholarships. Most recently, the Kroehlings made a substantial donation to the VT FIRE building fund. Construction began on the Kroehling Advanced Materials Foundry in March 2010.

In his free time, he enjoys going to the local gym several times a week. But he says he doesn’t really have any hobbies aside from exercising and yard work, because he enjoys his job. "I feel very good about what I do—I like what I do.” Since longevity seems to run in his family, the prospect of a third retirement is probably still some years away.