

John D. Backe

Miami '54

Oxford Cup Roll No. 059

John D. Backe, *Miami '54*, has fashioned a spectacular career as a business executive, beginning with a marketing position at General Electric Co., continuing to the presidency of CBS Inc. In 1981, Mr. Backe left CBS and founded The Backe Group.

The Backe Group is a management company which invests in and manages companies in the broadcast, communications technology and publishing fields worldwide. Based in Wayne, Pa., its divisions have included four television stations, a technology company specializing in equipment for film and television production, a portfolio of consumer and trade magazines, a chain of community newspapers, a mass market paperback book company and a division specializing in the publication of legal books and journals. Over the years, several of the original companies have been sold off.

Today, Mr. Backe owns and operates a mass marketing paperback publishing company and a magazine publishing company in New York, and an advertising agency in Philadelphia. He is also a general partner in a New York-based investment group that invests in communications properties.

Mr. Backe is a native of Akron, Ohio. As an undergraduate, he was vice president of Alpha chapter. After graduation from Miami with a marketing major and an Air Force commission, partly financed by an ROTC scholarship, Mr. Backe trained as a fighter pilot. He was then transferred to the Strategic Air Command as a B-47 bomber pilot. Three years of Air Force active duty had matured him, and he was quoted as saying, "I went through some hairy experiences, so I guess maybe very early in life I learned a lot about myself . . . some men go through life and they're never really challenged, or they step away from some real challenges, and they never understand what it's all about."

Following Air Force active duty, Mr. Backe spent nine years with the General Electric Company, rising through various marketing and management positions. He began in the aircraft nuclear engine department in Cincinnati, and was later transferred to the small aircraft engine department in Lynn, Mass., where he became GE's lead negotiator with the U.S. Air Force for all engine contracts and development programs. He concluded his tenure with GE in the computer department in Phoenix, Ariz.

Mr. Backe entered the publishing industry in 1966 when he was recruited for the marketing department of Silver Burdett, a textbook division of General Learning Corporation (a joint venture of GE and Time, Inc.) In less than two years he was president of Silver Burdett, and in another year he was president of the parent company.

In 1972, Mr. Backe was asked to represent all American publishers at a UNESCO conference in Cairo, Egypt. The following year, he was recruited to CBS Inc. to lead the publishing group. In three years, he had increased sales from \$150 million a year to more than \$400 million; profits had moved from a yearly deficit to an excess of \$20 million. By 1976 he was elected president and chief executive officer of the giant multimedia conglomerate.

In four years as president, Mr. Backe was credited with reestablishing CBS as the leading television network. He was responsible for the initial CBS corporate strategic plan, which for the first time defined the corporation's overall goals and identified new technology areas in CATV video text and Home Video. He put in place a CBS School of Management for developing and evaluating executives, established the CBS Sports Division, and expanded CBS into the production of feature films.

Mr. Backe earned an MBA from Xavier University and has been awarded honorary doctorates from Miami and Xavier. He has been a faithful supporter of Beta Theta Pi, and the communication area of the Foundation and Administrative Office has been dedicated in his honor.

He and his wife Katherine, a Miami Kappa Kappa Gamma, reside in Bonita Springs, Fla., and Princeton, N.J. They have two children, Kimberly and John, and six grandchildren. Mr. Backe continues to be a licensed multi-engine pilot who owns and operates his own Beechcraft King Air 200 aircraft.

— Thomas C. Olver, *Central Michigan '98*, editor, *The Beta Theta Pi*