“Physics is beautiful,” according to George Elbaum, who holds an undergraduate and two masters degrees, as well as a Ph.D., all from MIT. Although “freshman physics was my nemesis, I had an epiphany while reviewing undergrad physics for the doctoral exam. I said to myself in awe, ‘Physics is beautiful.’ ”

George Elbaum had no intention of going on to graduate school upon completing his SB. Instead, he went to Los Angeles to work in aerospace. But when his employer, TRW, offered him a doctoral fellowship specifically for MIT, “I jumped at the chance.”

“The doctoral fellowship allowed me to select a thesis that was not funded but that interested me and resulted in three very exciting years of my life, so now I want to give this opportunity to some talented graduate students.”

George had been totally inactive as an alumnus — no contacts, clubs, or reunions since leaving the Institute. Then in 1998, an article on a philanthropic project in the local newspaper “awoke me to giving back.”

Because he places such a high value on his MIT education, which “taught me to think analytically; it seemed natural to start giving back through MIT.” Since 1998, George has supported three graduate fellowships and two post-doctoral fellowships in the MIT School of Science. The Whiteman Fellowships, named after George’s mother, Pauline Whiteman, are highly prized by the recipients.

Kristin Burgess (PhD ‘03), has held a Whiteman Fellowship in cosmology since 1999. “My first year at MIT is a bit of a blur. I know I didn’t sleep much; I was taking a lot of classes and teaching a recitation for 8.01 [classical mechanics]. I loved teaching and it was a great experience, although it tended to consume my life.”

Kristin received the Department’s Buechner Teaching Prize in 1999 and the Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award of the American Association of Physics Teachers in 2002. “Being awarded the Whiteman Fellowship made a huge difference in my life. It enabled me to start doing physics rather than just teaching physics.” Kristin spent a week in April at the Magellan telescopes in Chile, measuring the high resolution spectra of distant quasars for her thesis, Early Stages in Cosmic Structure Formation.