On the value of his technical education: “Being a nontraditional (older) student . . . IHCC was a great launching pad for me. . . . The small class sizes, knowledgeable instructors and in-depth, hands-on training provided a great knowledge base and confidence in my abilities.”

Bill Holtkamp did not plan to study lasers and electro-optics. After graduating from high school, he first studied welding. However, upon graduating, he found that his job opportunities were limited as the economy was in a downturn. He then decided to go into farming with his dad. Though farming full-time for eight years, he had always had a strong interest in electronics and finally decided to go back to school.

Bill Holtkamp

Bill chose Indian Hills Community College (IHCC) to study laser and electro-optics, so he began the electronics program while continuing to farm part-time. Bill explains the outcome of his decision to enroll at IHCC: “Being a nontraditional (older) student, growing up in Iowa and attending IHCC was a great launching pad for me.” He found the coursework and the required studying very difficult. He explains, “It was both exciting and challenging to absorb that much information.”

He began his studies in IHCC enrolled in the electronics program, but his interests gradually shifted toward lasers and photonics. “President Reagan’s focus on developing a ‘Star Wars’ defense system and the United States’ fascination with laser technology (such as the 1986 Liberty Weekend lighting the Statue of Liberty with a Copper Vapor laser) piqued my interest.” It was at that point that Bill decided to change his course of study and join the laser electro-optics program. He explains that this program shared the same core classes as the electronics program, so the time that he had already spent at IHCC did not go to waste. Bill highly values his time at IHCC. As he says, “The small class sizes, expert instructors and in-depth, hands-on training provided a great knowledge base and built confidence in my abilities.”

Bill believes that photonics offers an exciting future to students interested in the field, because new applications are discovered every day. Bill believes that students should pursue their interests. He recognizes that a technical degree can be intimidating, but he believes that if a student is interested in photonics, that interest will drive the student to succeed in the required coursework.

Bill’s passion for photonics drove him to succeed: in 1988, he graduated at the top of his class with an associate degree in laser/electro-optics technology. Upon graduating, he immediately began his first job in the field as a technical sales engineer. Bill explains that even though earning his degree gave him the skill set to work as a technician, he was immediately drawn toward sales. One of his proudest career achievements was when he was the vice president of worldwide sales for Multiwave Photonics. He explains, “Although everything was a team effort, my responsibilities included establishing a U.S. corporate office, identifying value-added laser applications, redefining our laser product offerings, identifying and engaging new target customers, upgrading the worldwide distribution network, and successfully growing the business.”

Bill’s work in the photonics industry has allowed him to see and experience much of the world. He has lived in Germany and travelled extensively throughout Europe and Asia, but he is most fond of living in the San Francisco Bay area, where he now resides. In his current position as director of sales for Coherent, he manages a ten-person
team. He explains that at Coherent, he has “settled into the largest laser manufacturer in the industry and enjoys being part of the team.” He is looking toward the great opportunities that the future is bound to present.

*Bill lives in San Jose, California, with his wife Mary, and twelve-year-old son, Jason. Because his wife grew up in Athens, it has become a tradition that the family spends summer vacation in Greece. Bill enjoys spending quality time with his family, traveling, running, and bicycling.*