Everything’s bigger in Texas, from our breathtaking vistas and night skies to the scope of our goals and dreams. When it comes to astronomy, the sky’s most definitely the limit, and Texas A&M University soon will be pushing it, thanks to George P. Mitchell ’40.

Mitchell, a 1940 Texas A&M distinguished petroleum engineering graduate and founder of Mitchell Energy & Development Corp., has taken another pioneering step in his quest to position Texas A&M as an international leader in fundamental physics and astronomy, committing an unprecedented $25 million gift to the Giant Magellan Telescope. Half of the gift has been donated to the Carnegie Institution for Science, while the other half is credited to Texas A&M, bringing Mitchell’s total commitments to the project to $33.5 million.

“This gift not only brings the dream of the Giant Magellan Telescope much closer to becoming reality, but also helps propel Texas A&M and the entire state of Texas to the forefront in the important fields of physics and astronomy,” said Texas A&M President Dr. R. Bowen Loftin ’71.

The GMT’s innovative design features seven 8.4-meter primary mirror segments that together will provide the power of a single 25-meter mirror. It will have 10 times the resolution of NASA’s Hubble Space Telescope, which has served as scientists’ premier source for the most important astronomical discoveries for decades.

To date $255.5 million has been raised in support of the $700 million GMT, set to begin science operations at the Las Campanas Observatory site in northern Chile in 2019. It will be equipped with cameras and other novel instrumentation built at Texas A&M to enable major breakthroughs, such as direct visual images of planets around other stars and the universe’s first galaxies.

Mitchell said he felt compelled to make yet another generous gift to help ensure that Texas A&M’s team of world-class astronomers had adequate time to use the GMT upon its completion — all but guaranteeing that Texas A&M will be at the helm of the highly anticipated new discoveries the gigantic telescope is expected to uncover.

“The GMT is one of the reasons these researchers came to Texas A&M in the first place,” Mitchell said. “Hubble will be out of commission in the next five or six years. More money means more observation time, and it’s important our researchers get that time with the GMT.”

Nicholas B. Suntzeff, director of the Texas A&M astronomy program, said the possibilities for Texas A&M’s future as a premier astronomy research institution are endless, thanks to this gift and the Mitchell family’s generous support of the overall Department of Physics and Astronomy, which totals more than $68 million since 2002.

“This gift will cement Texas A&M as one of the top schools in astronomy and astronomical instrumentation,” he said. “With the GMT and our outstanding faculty, Texas A&M will be the leader in many tremendous new discoveries. The hardest thing to do is to get a project like this off the ground, and Mr. Mitchell’s gifts have made that possible.”

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Seeing Stars
By Shana K. Hutchins ’93

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