



## ALUMNI

### Alumnus Takes Unlikely Career Path to Become Reagan Library Archivist

# A FULFILLING JOURNEY

By NANCY YEANG

Ira Pemstein found a fulfilling career by following his father's advice. His father, Walter, would say: "If you love what you do, you will find a way to be successful at it."

That was a message that resonated with Pemstein and fueled his return to Cal Poly Pomona, first as a student and later a volunteer.

"A lot of the passion I have in everything I do comes from my father," says Pemstein ('01 anthropology, history). "No matter where I go, what I've done or who I've met, I've always found myself coming back to Cal Poly Pomona. If that doesn't meet the definition of special, I don't know what does."

Pemstein, 53, is a supervisory archivist at the **Ronald Reagan Presidential Library** in Simi Valley, where his team helps preserve and maintain more than 60 million documents, 1.6 million photographs, half a million feet of motion picture film, tens of thousands of audio- and videotapes, and 40,000 artifacts that cover Reagan's life.

His career path was not linear; Pemstein first enrolled as a business major in the late 1980s, leaving college early to focus on a career in IT, and returning to Cal Poly Pomona nearly a decade later to pursue his passion for history. He credits Cal Poly Pomona's support for making it possible for him to persevere when he was unsure of his path.

"I had moments when I felt maybe this wasn't the best idea," Pemstein says. "But when I felt like stopping, there was no way I could with the support and encouragement I got at Cal Poly Pomona."

Pemstein was intent on completing his bachelor's degree and contacted

two of his former professors, **Dorothy Wills** and **David Lord**, who helped him return to Cal Poly Pomona. Pemstein remembers walking out of his European history class in Building 5 and sitting for hours reading his textbook.

"I didn't have the same feeling that I had 10 years before [as a business major]. I found history amazing and fascinating," Pemstein says. "Nothing ever clicked like that for me before where I just felt engrossed in the stories."

Pemstein credits his late father for his interest in history. Growing up, he traveled with his family to Washington, D.C., Israel and Europe, and was fascinated by the history of each country and city. He merged his interest in history with library technologies, a field he had read about while working in IT, and later pursued a master's degree from CSUN in archival studies.

"I tried to find connections to what I had been doing and how I could roll that over into another career," says Pemstein, who has been working in his field for 20 years.

After earning his master's degree, he took an entry level position as an archives technician at the Reagan Library, going from a \$90,000 information technology job to a \$26,000 entry-level job.

"That was an interesting conversation with my wife," he says.

This decision would open the door to a career that was an ideal combination of what he was truly passionate about – history and library science. As he rose through the ranks and gained more responsibilities at the Reagan Library, Pemstein wanted to pass on his father's legacy and wise words to future students.

Pemstein serves on the College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences' (CLASS) Advisory Board and created a scholarship in his father's memory, the **Walter Pemstein Award**, which provides a \$1,000 scholarship annually to three students each.

"He was a very generous man and loved helping people and the community," Pemstein says. "He said, 'If you get to a position in life to give to others, it's always important to give back. What makes a man a man is not about being a tough guy – it's someone who takes care of his friends, family and community.'"

"If I could help one student, that means everything. It's the least I can do, I wish I could do more."

He already is doing more: Pemstein recently made a legacy gift pledge to the Dean's Discretionary Fund in CLASS to fund the college's most immediate needs, such as emergency funds for students.

"I figured after I'm gone, the best way to help would be to give directly, and the Dean's Discretionary Fund has the biggest impact for the students' and college's needs," Pemstein says. "I've been incredibly fortunate, and to my last breath, I will be grateful to Cal Poly Pomona. My foundation of knowledge and philosophy came from Temple Avenue."



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