



Photo: Chris Leschinsky

IT WAS A TIME NOT MUCH DIFFERENT FROM TODAY.

The nation was in recession. Major industries – banking, housing and automotive – were in trouble. And high unemployment made for a tight job market.

The year was 1981 and Charles Harrington (“Charlie” back then), the valedictorian of his high school class, was preparing to graduate from Cal Poly with a degree in agricultural engineering. He knew where he wanted to work, but he didn’t have a job.

After much persistence and getting to know the right people, Harrington was offered an associate engineer position at Parsons, an international engineering and construction company. One month later, the oil industry collapsed and Parsons was forced into layoffs. He’s still not sure how, but Harrington was spared.

“There was a lot of luck involved,” Harrington recalled.

It took more than luck for this Cal Poly grad to ascend to the post of Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Parsons, which now does more than \$3 billion in business with 12,000 employees. From his first job as an engineer, he rose through management positions and became the founding president of its Commercial Technology Group. In 2006, he was elevated to executive vice president, chief financial officer and treasurer of the global company and, in 2008, he was appointed chief executive officer, adding the role of chairman of the board of directors later that year.

Harrington came to Cal Poly from his family’s rice farming operation in Live Oak, Calif., and admittedly didn’t know anything about agricultural engineering when he arrived. But, as he says, he soon learned “it was made for me.”

With coursework that prepared him to be a generalist, and the hands-on approach, Harrington found that everything he discovered in the classroom had an immediate application. He was, he thought, preparing to join the family rice-growing business. But, during his junior year, a Parsons representative came to campus and Harrington saw a video that featured Parsons-built ice roads in the arctic. He was sold. Parsons was for him.

Harrington said his Cal Poly agricultural engineering education prepared him to fight for that first job offer – and to keep his job when times got tough. “What Cal Poly and ag engineering taught me was this: You can compete. You just have to work hard. There is no challenge you should shy away from.”



Paul & Joselyn Reed at Newport Beach circa 1988

ENGINEERING SUCCESS FROM HARD TIMES

By Adam Jarman



Charles & Diane Harrington

Shy away, he doesn't. Nor does he allow his team to do so.

Take, for example, this Parsons project. During the 1960s, the United States Army produced and stockpiled VX, the dangerous nerve agent developed for chemical warfare, at the Newport Chemical Depot in Indiana. Production was subsequently disbanded, leaving a hazardous supply of the toxin and a great challenge for the nation.

In 1999, Pasadena-based Parsons was awarded the contract to design, build, operate and ultimately dismantle a facility to disarm 1,973 tons of these chemical weapons. They developed a high-temperature, high-pressure, water process and earned patents for the work.

"This is something to be proud of," he said, pointing to the innovative spirit. "It's just chemistry and really creative people. Find us challenges the world is struggling with, and we just shine."

Don't forget to look ahead and dream with your comrades, he added. "There are a lot of fancy names for it, but we spend a lot of our casual time as a team, thinking and discussing the future."

Of course, Harrington didn't just find a career at Cal Poly. Like so many others, he also found the classmate who would become his wife. Diane Walls ('81 OH, '83 MA-Ag Ed) and "Chuck" Harrington, as he's now known, met while serving on the School of Agriculture Student Council. He represented the Agricultural Engineering Society, and she, the Ornamental Horticulture Club.

They began dating and were fast friends with another Cal Poly couple, Diane DeMesa ('80 OH) and Russ Reed ('81 AgBus). Both couples married. Over the years, the four have stayed close and watched their families grow. In time, the Harringtons' daughter, Josclyn, and the Reeds' son fell in love and, too, were married. The Harringtons have three children: daughter Josclyn Reed (now an engineering grad), daughter Rhiena and son Chase.

On campus, Diane Harrington was the quintessential enterprise project student. She worked with geraniums and begonias, horses, sheep and goats. Like so many others, these projects were her life. "You felt you could do almost anything," she remembered.

She came to Cal Poly to study horticulture with the dream of becoming a high school horticulture teacher. After bachelor's and master's degrees from Cal Poly, she lectured briefly at Cal Poly, then taught for seven years at Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, and became the first woman to be elected an officer in the California Agricultural Teachers' Association.

For young professionals today, who face a job market like the one he first entered, Harrington said: "Follow your dreams, be aggressive and let the rest play out."