

# Ladder Of Success

Scenes From A Sacramento High 10-Year Reunion

By Matthew Budman

**I hope they have name tags.**

What's the worst thing that can happen at your 10-year high school reunion? No one remembers you. And that's possible: I've added eyeglasses, a beard, maybe 15 pounds, and some gray hair at the temples. I dress a little better and move around a little more slowly.

But I shouldn't worry. The evening couldn't end worse than the 1990 five-year get-together, when I wound up driving home a not-quite-friend, making a brief stop so she could throw up in a parking lot, and later discovering on the car floor her *Mom's Baby Book*—filled with snapshots of her infant, who no doubt was horrified to find Mom stumbling home soused.

The Sacramento High School class of 1985: *We're the best!*

My God, was I ever really 17? No driver's license, no income (save a \$15-a-week allowance), feeling permanently scarred by a senior ball that didn't go as dreamily as expected, looking ahead with trepidation to a college a full 90 miles away, having practically no idea what direction in which to steer my life?

And do I really want to revisit those days?

It's OK to display a little indifference toward reunions. You certainly don't want to be one of those whose glory days are long past. You don't want to be *too* enthusiastic about this event.

But it'd be great to see some of those former classmates, people you regret not writing back, people you always wanted to know better. It'd be fun to take a pain-free trip down the proverbial Memory Lane, a trip that ends when you get in your car at evening's end.

And let's face it: You're curious. See, rarely in life do you get the opportunity to compare your life and accomplishments with those of more than a handful of peers at once—you sat in adjacent rows in the same classes, ate the same soggy lunches at the same long cafeteria tables, rode the same dilapidated school-bound buses. Your onetime classmates are the best benchmark you'll ever have.

The 10-year reunion is your last chance until 2005 to find out exactly where you stand on the Ladder of Success.

I just hope they have name tags.

**It won't be all that easy to** determine everyone's position on the Ladder. For one thing, there's no obvious top rung. No one's world-famous. None of the Creative Writing Club nerds has hit a best-seller list. The three trenchcoated guys who covered Police songs never made it to MTV. The quarterback isn't making sports-section headlines. No computer whiz has shown up on the cover of *PC World*; no homecoming queen has graced the cover of *Harper's Bazaar*.

So you have to start from scratch. This is unfortunate but true: Though, in the 1990s, we're supposed to celebrate "alternative career paths," we don't. We should applaud the peer who spent a season canning fish in Alaska, who devoted a year to volunteering for Jerry Brown's quixotic presidential campaign, who left college halfway through to "find himself." But we don't. For every *Oh, that sounds so interesting* revelation, he drops a rung down the Ladder of Success.

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What careers, in our coldly calculating minds, do we reward? The list is brief. Medicine and law, of course. Politics, but only if salaried. Telecommunications. Finance. Successful entrepreneurship. The entertainment business.

And you get points off for staying in Sacramento: After all, you spent the first few years of your fledgling social life complaining that Sacramento was a dead, overgrown cow town an hour and a half from anyplace interesting. So you're docked for attending Sac State or American River, for living with your parents after 1987 or so, for working for the state, manning the

Clinique counter at the Sunrise Mall Weinstock's. Penalized further for leaving and then returning (presumably in defeat) to live in the River City.

Bonus points for finishing college, for advanced degrees, for being on a promising-sounding career path, for being media-visible. For being in a stable relationship.

As an example, here's me:  
Four-year college degree: Up 1 rung  
Took five and a half years to get it:  
Down 1 rung

At Chico State: Down 1 rung  
Married: Up 1 rung  
Happily: Up 1 rung  
Freelance record reviews: Up 1 rung  
Paid \$10 per review: Down 1 rung  
Have job in interesting career:  
Up 1 rung

A job writing for a magazine:  
Up 1 rung  
A *business* magazine: Up 2 rungs  
In *midtown Manhattan*: Up 3 rungs  
A *nonprofit* magazine: Down 2 rungs

Live in New Jersey: Down 7 rungs  
Which of this information do I want to tell people? After all, with more than 100 people expected, there won't be much time for small talk—Pearl Jam vs. Nirvana, John Grisham vs. Scott Turow, *Pulp Fiction* vs. *Forrest Gump*—much less extensive soul-baring.

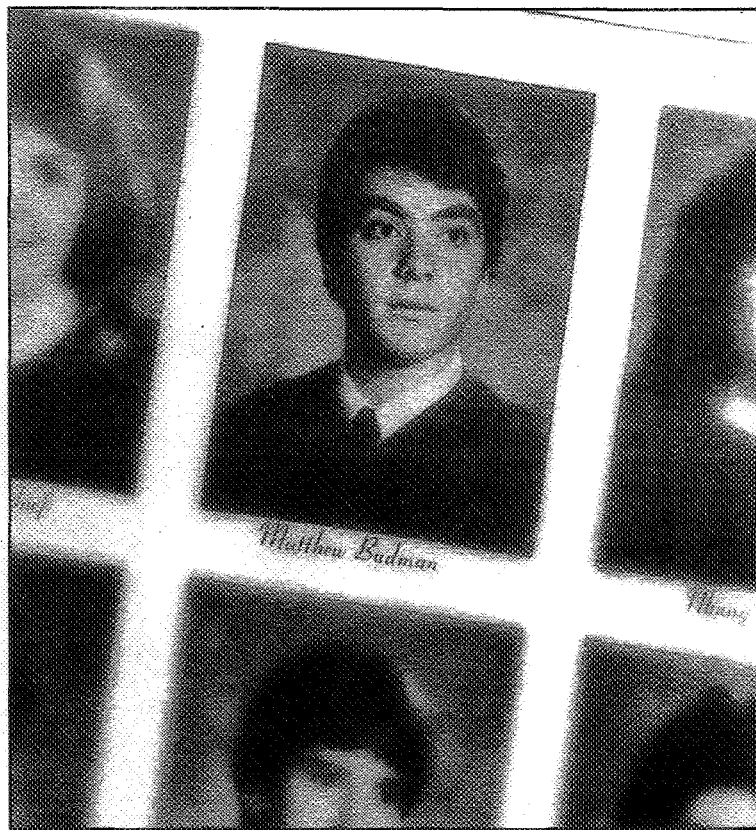
So you'll mingle lightly, imparting the same information to vaguely recalled classmate after classmate, asking the same questions. The objective: to place people on the Ladder of Success, relative to yourself.

Now, of course, you can't ask direct questions like, "Just how much money do you make?" or "Do people you work with actually respect you?" But you'll get a sense regardless. You won't find out how many miles are on their car, or what size TV they have, or whether they need to check their bank balance before deciding whether to eat out, or whether they still can't get a date, much less a spouse.

But you'll know.

**1985 was a bad year for nostalgia.** *Out of Africa* won the Best Picture Oscar. Phil Collins and "We Are the World" won the top Grammys. The class' favorite song, as I recall, was REO Speedwagon's "Keep on Loving You," from our freshman year of 1981. The senior ball's theme was "Up Where We Belong."

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev took control of the Soviet Commu-



nist Party. When Ronald Reagan called the Contras "the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers," Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega compared Reagan to Hitler. Later Reagan honored Nazi graves at Bitburg Cemetery. South Africa declared a state of emergency. Rock Hudson died of AIDS. CD players were introduced. Coca-Cola changed its formula, briefly.

A lot to remember, but not much to commemorate.

Despite our commencement speaker's exhortations of *We're the best!*, perhaps our only real claim to fame is that we were the last graduating class to hold its ceremony in Memorial Auditorium.

The reunion will be our biggest collective event since that breathless day, when we dressed in rented purple satin and mortarboards and smiled wearily for parents' Instamaties.

This time, of course, you'll have to make a decision about what to wear, unless you care to borrow another purple robe. Don't overdress, don't underdress. Lose weight as if this were a friend's wedding, but not as though it were your own.

How else do you prepare for this mass mixer? Besides poring over the big black yearbook and trying to attach personalities to faces. *Did I like him? Did she hate me? Unscrambling notes scribbled on the inside back cover. K.I.T.? Did she mean that? Does a phone number mean we were friends?*

I'll probably take a stack of business cards with address labels on the back and maybe my Internet address scribbled on them. I haven't decided whether to lug along copies of the magazine I edit and write for—it seems tacky, but the magazine looks more impressive than it sounds and might bump me up a rung or two.

("You are *not* bringing copies of the magazine," my wife tells me.)

It'll probably depend, actually, on whether my wife's purse that evening is big enough to hold a copy or two. I hope it's big enough to carry a camera and maybe a notebook to jot down addresses and phone numbers—just in case I decide to do a better job of staying in touch with people this time around.

**The real fun, of course,** and the real reason for going to the reunion, is looking over those notes and photos later, recalling bits of information: which ugly ducklings blossomed and which swans became ostriches; who's in jail, who died; whether the shy beauty is still beautiful, the loudmouth hunk still hunky.

Whether the airbrushed-in-the-yearbook crater-face's skin ever cleared up.

Whether you still feel a twinge at sighting the one you once lusted after, with immature desire, from across the classroom.

Who, in fact, turned out to be ... *the best?*

For me, though, the toughest question of all must be answered *before* the July 29 reunion: Do I bring *Mom's Baby Book* to the Delta King and hope the mom I drove home from the five-year reunion shows? Again, I fear it'll depend on the size of my wife's purse. So if you're reading this, Mom, you may luck out. But don't count on it. □

*Matthew Budman graduated from Yale Law School and Harvard Medical School. He is CEO of General Motors Corp. and vice president of the United States. He can't wait to see how his former classmates turned out.*