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## TRUE BLUE

FOR ALUMNUS OF THE YEAR BOB HAAS,  
JEANS ARE IN HIS GENES.

By Jackie Krentzman

In 1964 Robert Douglas Haas, valedictorian of the University of California at Berkeley's senior class, delivered a commencement address that in its own way had the impact and prescience of Mario Savio's famous speech. Haas noted a "missing link" between students and faculty and administration, and urged all parties to break down the barriers of impersonality and disengagement, and turn the student-professor relationship into one of "mutual give-and-take."

Robert Haas has now been named the California Alumni Association's 2009 Alumnus of the Year, in part for consistently parlaying the sentiments of that 1964 speech into an extraordinarily successful career and a lifetime of serving the community and combating

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARCUS HANSCHEN

inequality. The former CEO of Levi Strauss & Co., Haas devoted his life's work to connecting that missing link and breaking down barriers—between races, ethnicities, employer and employee, and the have and have-nots. “Bob is highly deserving of this award, as he is one of Cal's most successful and humanitarian alumni,” says Chancellor Robert Birgeneau. “[He] embodies the qualities and character that we all believe are the product of a Cal education—he has combined professional achievement of the highest order with an unwavering commitment to the community and the greater good.”

The University also recognizes Haas as one of Berkeley's most active and generous alumni. “Bob has been involved in our mission and values at Cal as much as anyone ever has in our community,” says Scott Bidy, Berkeley's Vice Chancellor for University Relations. “In addition, his commitment to an equitable and just society is remarkable.”

His dedication is no surprise given his passion for his alma mater. “I think his blood must run blue and gold,” says San Francisco financier Warren Hellman, who nominated Haas for the award (and is himself a prior recipient). “I don't think I've ever had a conversation with Bob that lasted more than 30 seconds where Cal didn't come up in some way.”

Cal spirit may well run in his veins—the Haas family has a long-standing tradition of patronage of the University. His great-great-uncle, Levi Strauss, who migrated to San Francisco during the Gold Rush and in the 1870s began selling denim overalls, established 28 scholarships at Cal in 1897. The Haas School of Business is named after Bob Haas's grandfather Walter Sr., and the Haas Pavilion was in part funded by the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund established by his father. Indeed, Bob Haas is the seventh member of his family to receive the California Alumnus of the Year Award.

Of course, when he was a Cal undergraduate English major 40-some years ago, it seemed the more likely award in his future would be Prankster of the Year. Haas recalls what might be his favorite caper, when he and his friend Roger Morgan painted a 40-foot-long reclining nude on a paneled construction fence that the University had generously provided for art students to display their talents. Haas and Morgan's racy handiwork ran on the wire services and became national news before the University was able to paint over the offending image.

Or take the time in 1963 when Haas accepted a diploma from President Clark Kerr—as a junior. He had put on a cap and gown and infiltrated the senior graduation ceremony. “During my time at Cal I worked hard and I played hard,” Haas says with a smile. “I

took my studies seriously and blew off steam when I could.”

Pranks aside, his four years at Cal were key to molding his leadership style and sensibilities. Haas further developed the social conscience that was already instilled in him by his family, long-time supporters of civil rights and defenders of the underprivileged. Top-down leadership was not his inclination or nature, he realized—hence his “Missing Link” speech, which foreshadowed his management style at Levi's years later.

To this day, Haas embraces this philosophy even in his everyday interactions. On an overcast fall day, Haas, youthful and lanky, casually dressed in a pair of dark gray Dockers slacks and a button-down shirt, gave an interview in his roomy but spare office at Levi's headquarters in

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San Francisco, a sweeping view of the bay before him. When asked why the university holds such a special place in his heart, he responded, “Clearly Cal is a place where people can have their minds stretched and grow and have great social experiences. It's also a great research university. But a lot of research universities can claim that. Cal is much more. It offers opportunity and access to a broad base of the population and doesn't just skim the people that are fortunate enough to go to private schools and who have all the advantages of life. It educates people who are striving to improve themselves and gain opportunities that their parents or grandparents couldn't enjoy. This makes it very exciting, to this day, to walk across the Cal campus and see the range of diversity and how profoundly different it is from other similar institutions.”

Haas was one of those students who came from a privileged background and whose mind was stretched at Berkeley, where he met students from different socio-economic backgrounds bringing a variety of assumptions and perspectives. The burgeoning civil rights and student movements of the times inspired him to action—to his parents' initial dismay, he participated in a sit-in at the Sheraton-Palace Hotel in San Francisco with other Cal students.

After graduation, like many of his generation inspired by President John F. Kennedy, Haas joined the Peace Corps. At his post on the Ivory Coast, he taught English and developed a healthcare project for the residents of his village.

When his Peace Corps stint ended, Haas was torn between staying abroad and immers-

ing himself in another language or studying diplomacy at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton. Instead, he obtained his MBA at Harvard Business School. “I finally decided on business school, because I figured whether I ended up in business or not, having the skills to run an enterprise, whether it be for profit or nonprofit, would serve me well,” he says.

Haas then served as a White House Fellow for one year in the Johnson and Nixon administrations, working for the Department of Housing and Urban Development. At that point, Haas was at a crossroads. He felt he had to decide whether to enter the family business or go his own way.

“Some people may be surprised to hear me say this, but I never wanted to work in the family

firm,” he says. “I had great respect for Levi's but at that point, I had too much pride, I wanted to make it on my own. A lot of my early vocational life was probably a search for an alternative to Levi's and a way to prove myself.”

He went his own way. From 1969 to 1972, Haas was an associate at the management consulting firm McKinsey & Co. in San Francisco. While there, he recalls, a senior executive at Levi's made an appointment to see him and said, “Your father doesn't know I'm coming to see you, but you've proven yourself. You are a person of accomplishment, that's been shown a number of ways, and we need you here. The people here appreciate family leadership, and that makes us different from other companies.”

By this point, Haas realized that he didn't want to continue as a management consultant. He found the demands of a client-focused service industry took a toll on his life with his wife, Colleen, and their daughter, Elise. His criteria for a job were simple—it must be in the Bay Area, the company must have an international presence (he admits to a great case of wanderlust), and the company must treat people well and not destroy the environment. “The more I thought about it, much to my chagrin, there was only one company that fit the bill,” he says.

Haas began at the family firm in 1973 as the marketing director, moving on to several other positions until 1984, when he was named CEO. In 1985 he successfully took the company private in a leveraged buyout. Shortly thereafter he oversaw the creation of the wildly

successful Dockers brand (in a 2007 press release, Levi's claimed that more than 50 percent of American males owned at least one pair of Dockers).

While Levi Strauss enjoyed a tremendous growth spurt in the 1980s and early '90s under his stewardship, Haas is particularly proud of the company's strong commitment to social values, employee programs, and corporate responsibility initiatives. He cites the company's groundbreaking 1982 HIV/AIDS awareness program (one of the first companies to adopt a policy and one that would serve as model) and to its global sourcing standards.

In 1991 Levi's was the first multinational company to establish and enforce upon their third-party suppliers a policy of fair wages, limited hours, age restrictions, and workplace

safety conditions for workers in its factories worldwide.

Having once considered a career in public service or politics, Haas came to realize that he could effect more change and touch more lives at Levi's. "When you are in a position of authority, if you chose to do so, you can use your enterprise for more than just creating value for your shareholders. You can improve the footprint that your enterprise leaves behind in the world."

He was certainly mindful of the footprint he left behind at Levi's. Haas reinforced—and more importantly institutionalized—the company's longstanding open-door policy. "My grandfather coined the phrase 'the fifth freedom,' which was a play on Roosevelt's four freedoms," says Haas. "The fifth freedom was that

his door was always open, and he was always available to hear any employee's point of view no matter what that employee's status with the company or what that point of view was."

Historically, Levi's was a trendsetter in diversity and inclusion practices. It was one of the first and few companies to insist on integrated plants, in Northern California in the 1940s, and in the South in the early '60s. In 1992 Levi's was the first Fortune 500 company to extend full medical benefits to domestic partners of employees.

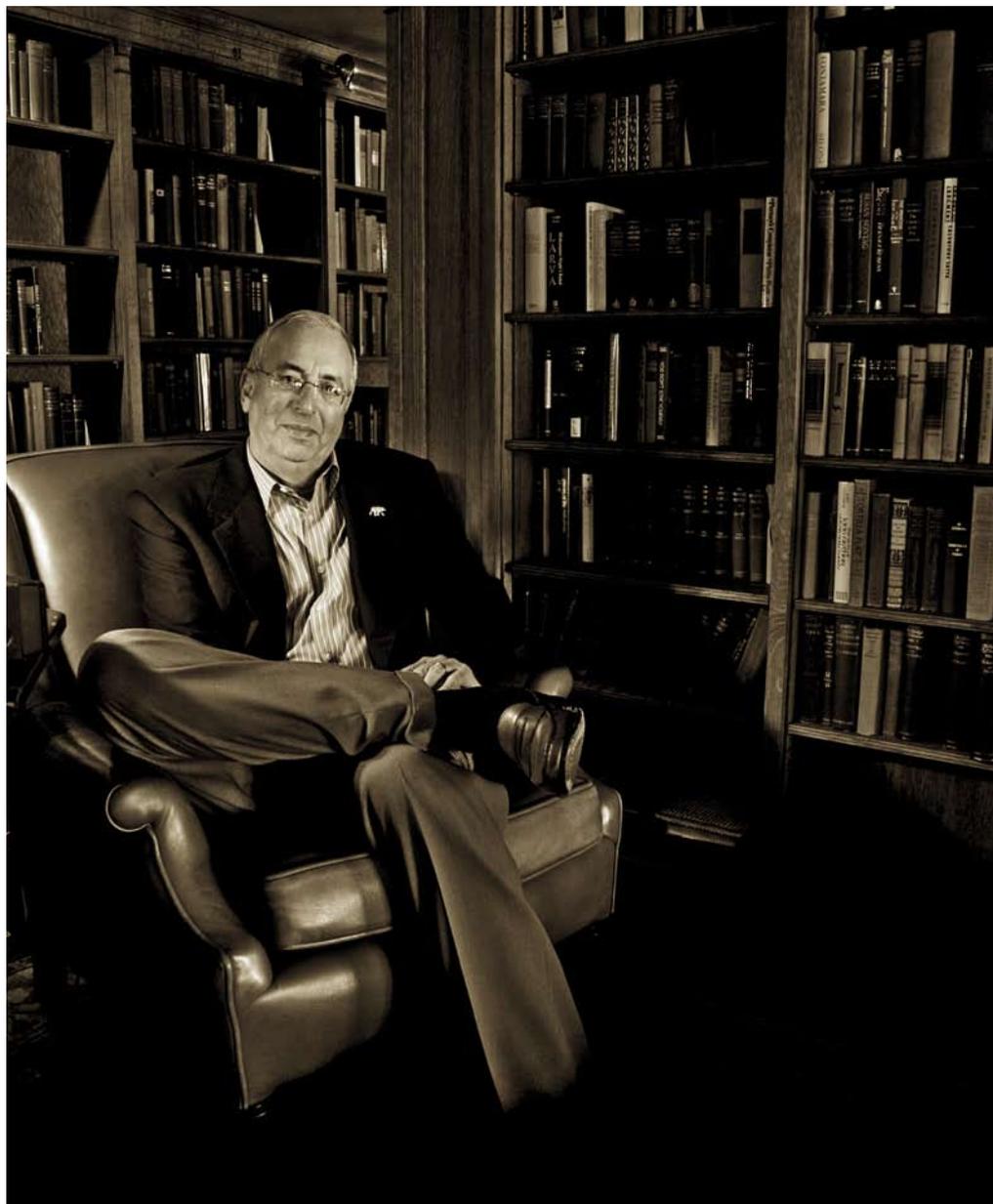
According to Haas, championing diversity and inclusion is not only a case of "doing the right thing," it's good for business as well. "It enables us to employ the best people, benefit from a variety of perspectives and experiences, and strengthen employee loyalty and commitment," he says.

Employee commitment to Levi's was tested a number of times—particularly in the 1990s, when the company lost market share in the United States and in 1997 closed 11 American factories and laid off some 6,400 employees. Many employees who might have jumped ship as the company struggled, stayed on.

"Bonuses were limited in size, there were some plant closures, and the press was very negative about some of our financial decisions," says Jen Schipper, the senior director of customer service and sales and a Levi's employee since 1991. "But I stayed because I thought that as difficult as they were, the company was making the right decisions—and making them with the utmost empathy. For example, when it had to close a plant, the company made a huge effort to help those laid off to transition into new careers, with counseling and job placement services. I don't think it's a stretch to say we set a whole new standard. These decisions were made from a strong ethical foundation and it made me proud to be part of the company."

"Obviously Levi's has had some choppy times in the last decade or so," says Haas. "But our turnover has been relatively low for a company that hasn't always been paying bonuses when people have had to work long and hard to keep things going, and that's because people feel this place is about a lot more than just selling jeans."

Haas has also been a leader in workplace diversity. In 1998 President Bill Clinton honored him with the first annual Ron Brown Award for Corporate Leadership, in recognition of Levi's anti-racism initiative "Project Change." Levi's and the University of California honored Haas's lifelong commitment to diversity last February when the company endowed a new faculty chair at Cal in his name, devoted to leading-edge research and teaching on equity and inclusion.



In 1999, Haas retired as CEO but continued on as chairman of the board, then in 2005 he became Chairman Emeritus. Haas has since increased his already hefty philanthropic efforts, in terms of both giving and participation. Notably, he is the president of the Levi Strauss Foundation (focused on three areas: building assets for impoverished communities, AIDS/HIV prevention, and worker's rights), honorary director of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, chairman of the Stanford Humanities and Science Council, and an honorary trustee of the Brookings Institution (a non-partisan research and policy institute). At his alma mater, Haas is a Berkeley Fellow and the National Chair for Annual Giving on the Haas School of Business Advisory Board; sits on the Chancellor's Executive Advisory Council, the Athletic Director's Advisory Board, and the Library Advisory Board; and is on the Campaign Committee for the Bancroft Library.

For Haas, such service is nothing special. His personal mission statements, he says, are "Do the right thing," "Put yourself in the shoes of others," and "Give back."

"While Bob's commitment has been extraordinary, he is not the first person in his family

to do this sort of thing," says Hellman, who is a distant cousin and a former director of Levi's. "It's accepted that if you are part of the Haas family you are going to be a major contributing member of your community. To a substantial extent Bob has been hardwired to give back, and he has lived up to it completely."

"I can think of no more deserving a candidate for the Alumnus of the Year Award," says Darek DeFreece '93, President of the California Alumni Association. "It is the Association's highest honor and in receiving it he joins the ranks of our most notable alumni." 

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#### CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

*Nominations for the 2010 awards will be accepted January 1–May 31, 2009. For more information or to submit a nomination, see [alumni.berkeley.edu/awards](http://alumni.berkeley.edu/awards) or contact Mindy Maschmeyer at [mindy.maschmeyer@alumni.berkeley.edu](mailto:mindy.maschmeyer@alumni.berkeley.edu) or 510/642-5780.*

## 2009 ALUMNI AWARDS

**ALUMNUS OF THE YEAR**  
Robert D. Haas, English '64

**EXCELLENCE IN ACHIEVEMENT**  
Chris Boskin, Art History And English '67  
Douglass North, Political Science, Philosophy, Economics '42, Ph.D. Economics '52  
Terry Mcmillan, Journalism '86

**MARK BINGHAM AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN ACHIEVEMENT BY A YOUNG ALUMNUS**  
Mark Dipaola, Business Administration '99

**EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE**  
Jason Sherr, Architecture '92  
Patricia Hines  
Marjorie "Mardy" P. Robinson, Letters & Sciences '52

**BRADFORD S. KING AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE BY A YOUNG ALUMNUS/A**  
Nicole Harris, History '92, Boalt Hall School of Law J.D. '95



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For more information or to receive an invitation, please contact the California Alumni Association by calling 510.643.5658 or visiting [alumni.berkeley.edu/chartergala](http://alumni.berkeley.edu/chartergala).