

Alum's unplanned paths led to prosperity and pandas

By Laura Kriho

Take a pinch of serendipity, add a dash of coincidence and top it with a smidgen of good fortune, and you have the recipe for Janet Romberg Pollack's life. The University of Colorado Boulder alumna and donor is now a narrator at the giant panda exhibit at the San Diego Zoo. But how she got there is a tale of unexpected twists and surprising turns.

Pollack says she always had a strong faith in the universe that things would "work out in the end" and never found the need to have a master outline by which she would rigorously make decisions and chart the course of her life.

"My life has been a series of the next indicated step," she explains. "I've had passion for certain things, but I've never really had plans. Why push when you can ride?"

Pollack graduated from CU-Boulder in 1984 with a degree in international Spanish for the professions, which she describes as a "Spanish degree with an emphasis on business and economics."

She ended up going to CU, not after a meticulous consideration of all of her college options, but as a means of getting an automobile. "My dad said I could buy myself a car if I went to a state school," she says. "At the time, a car was way more important than where I went to college."

Her family lived in Steamboat Springs, Colo. Her father had attended Colorado State University, and her mother, Jane Romberg, graduated from CU-Boulder in 1960 with a degree from the College of Arts & Sciences in elementary education. Pollack picked CU because, "Boulder sounded way more cosmopolitan and hip than Fort Collins."

CU-Boulder was the only school to which she applied, and she got accepted. "I just lucked out, as I did with most of my life, that I got led in the right direction, because Boulder was a great school for me. Not only did I get to buy myself a car, but I got a really good education."

Pollack says she knew on her first day at CU that she had made the right choice. "It was my very first class on my very first day of college, and I had an astronomy class taught by a full professor."

The professor began the class by saying, "My name is Professor Kim Malville, but you can call me 'Kim.' And if you have problem calling a full professor by his first name, then you can just call me 'Your Majesty.'" Pollack said to herself, "I'm going to like this school!"

The universe again steered her right when she moved into the CU dorms. At first, she was upset that she was in an all-girl dorm, but then decided that it was really a blessing. "I discovered that 18-year-old boys are slobs, and they smell," she remembers.



Janet Romberg Pollack is a narrator at the giant panda exhibit at the San Diego Zoo. Photo courtesy of Janet Romberg Pollack.

Pollack enjoyed her time on campus. As with many CU-Boulder students, she felt that college was "more about the people and experiences than it was the classes." She joined Alpha Chi Omega sorority and made many friends whom she still keeps in contact with today. "College should be much more about life. Classes are great, but facts change," she says.

After graduation, she once again looked no further than the "next indicated step." Pollack admits, "I didn't have any idea what I wanted to be after I graduated." She only knew she wanted to move to a place where there was no snow and where she could use her Spanish language skills.

She picked California over Texas, and a friend advised her to move to San Diego instead of Los Angeles. She has lived happily in San Diego ever since. "I love it here," she says.

Her first job after graduation was another twist of fate. "There was a print shop across the street from my first house in San Diego. I took my resume there to be printed, and they offered me a job."

"My life has been very serendipitous," Pollack notes. "If you just keep your eyes open, the coincidences turn into, 'This is the way your life is supposed to go.'"



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The Pollack family: Rachel, Larry, Janet and Ben

Pollack had her eyes open when she met her husband on a blind date that was arranged by a friend she met through activities that were promoted by a video dating service. "So I met my husband because of a video dating service, but not through one."

Pollack was a stay-at-home mom for 24 years. She has two grown children, one of whom also attended CU-Boulder on a full scholarship to the School of Music.

Pollack's serendipitous path did not reduce her obvious work ethic. Among other things, she:

- Sold office equipment, for which she won numerous sales awards
- Taught a gym class for kids at the YMCA
- Served on the board of directors of the Alpha Chi Omega alumnae group in San Diego
- Served as treasurer and president of the House Corporation Board for Gamma Nu Chapter in San Diego
- Served as president of the Sisterhood of her synagogue from 2000-2004
- Became an adult Bat Mitzvah in 2003
- Received the Kavod Award from Temple Adat Shalom, the highest honor they give for service to the synagogue in 2006
- Was named the Sisterhood Woman of the Year in 2008
- Served as volunteer coordinator for the 2006 Biennial of the Women of Reform Judaism
- Served as volunteer coordinator for the Union for Reform Judaism Biennial in 2014
- Wrote the PTA newsletter for many years for her children's schools; she was also named PTA volunteer of the year
- Served as Girl Scout troop leader and service unit manager and worked both Boy Scout and Girl Scout summer camps
- Volunteered in the classrooms and the school libraries of both of her children
- Managed the Temple Gift Shop for 10 years, including purchasing, merchandising and scheduling
- Coordinated and ran the San Diego Jewish Food Festival in 2011
- Played the guitar for services every week during religious school
- Received the Volunteer of the Year award for the religious school in 2013
- Studies the Torah and substitutes for the Cantor and Rabbi
- Goes to the soup kitchen once a month to serve breakfast and make lunches for the homeless

When her husband was temporarily out of work a few years ago, a friend sent her a listing for a position as a narrator at the giant panda exhibit at the San Diego Zoo. With the help of her Spanish degree from CU, Pollack beat out more than 170 other applicants to get the job. "To go back into the job market with people half of my age was a pretty scary thing to do." But, once again, things just worked out.

The San Diego Zoo currently has three giant pandas and is renowned worldwide as a first-class research and educational facility. "It's fun to work with kids and help people have a good time on vacation," she says. "I also enjoy watching people's eyes when they get to see pandas for the first time, or get to touch a lizard or hear a kookaburra laugh."

Pollack and her husband have decided to give back to CU by creating two scholarships for students that will be established as part of their estate after they pass away. She benefited from scholarships when she was at CU, and her son was also aided by scholarships when he attended the School of Music.

"You can only be as strong as the people who stood before you. If someone else was generous enough to do it for me, then I want to be able to give that back."

Pollack's advice to CU students is to be kind to others and to keep an open mind to all options. "If someone gives you an opportunity to step up, then take it, because you never know where it is going to lead."



Janet Pollack poses with funny glasses on her graduation day in 1984. The woman on the left is Barb Keller Richard (Journ '84).

"There is a saying that goes: 'Everything works out in the end, so if it's not working out, then it's not the end,'" Pollack says. "It will work out if you keep taking the next step forward, the trick is remembering that while you're wading through the muck."