

TRANSFORMED BY EDUCATION: SAUL K. FENSTER

UP-CLOSE AND PERSONAL



AN NJIT MAGAZINE INTERVIEW

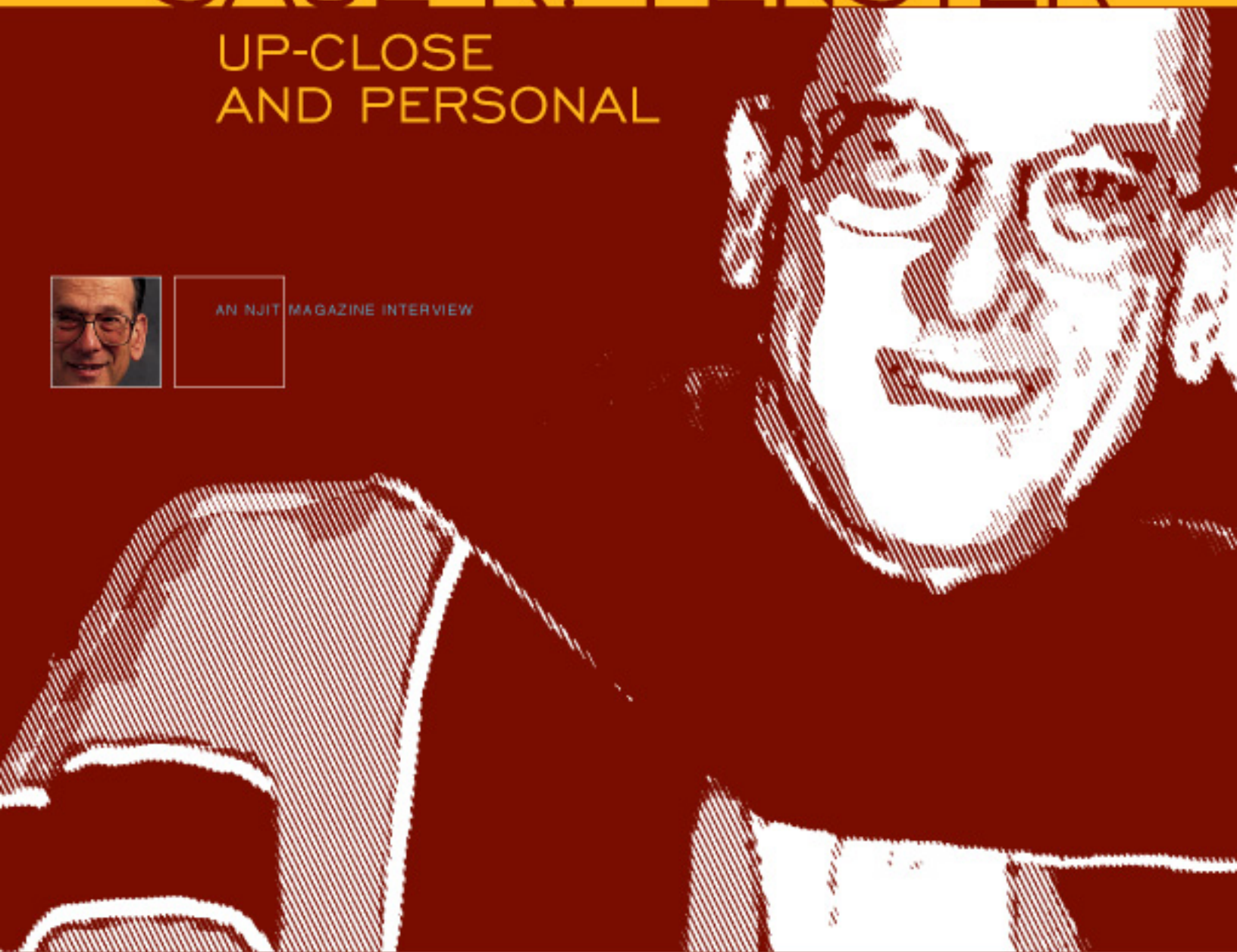
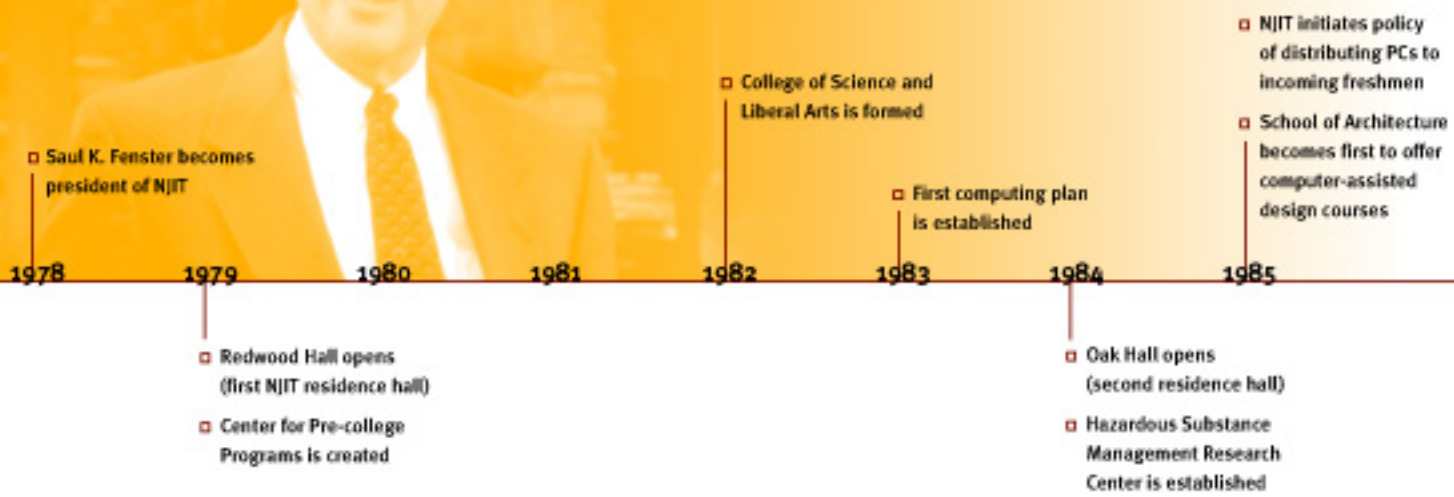
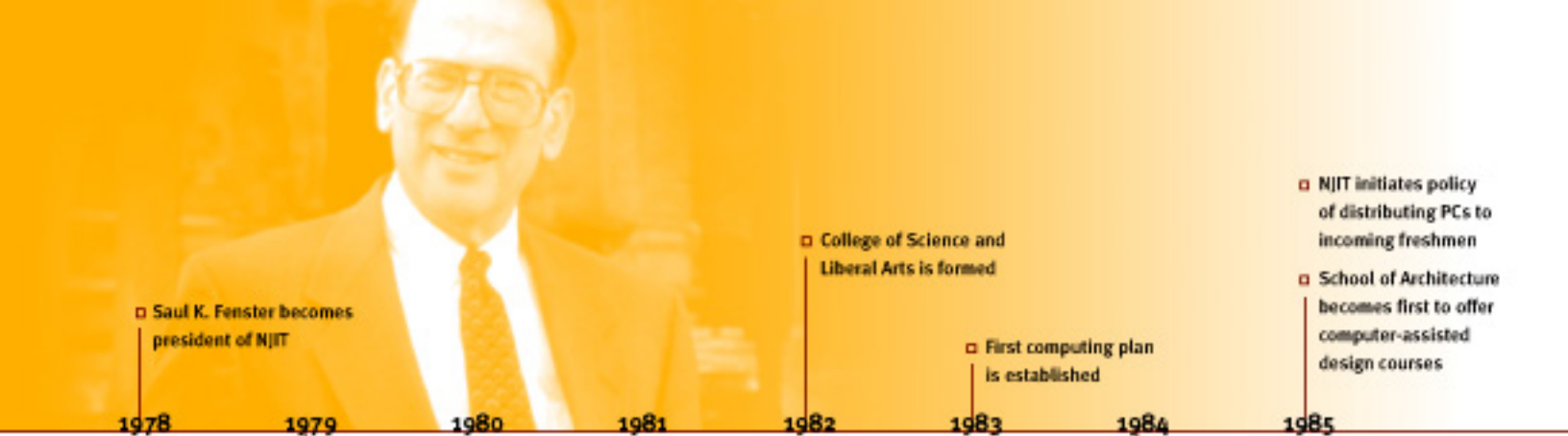


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AS WE BID FAREWELL TO PRESIDENT FENSTER, SHERYL WEINSTEIN, DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC RELATIONS, CAUGHT UP WITH HIM FOR THIS UP-CLOSE INTERVIEW.

Sheryl Weinstein (S.W.): NJIT is often considered a school that transforms lives. What does that mean? Why is it so important to you?

Saul K. Fenster (S.K.F.): Education is power. It offers people an opportunity for fulfillment, for a better life, an opportunity for a better place to live – things that parents want for their children. We have many students here who come from modest circumstances. Some come in through E.O.P. [Educational Opportunity Program]. Imagine what it is to raise a family at an income below twenty-five thousand dollars, and then when the child from that family graduates and gets a job making forty-five thousand dollars or fifty thousand dollars and feels like and, in fact, is a professional. This is ennobling. It is empowering and truly transformational, not only for that kid, but for the whole family. It is the beginning of a new history for them.

S.W.: I understand you also come from a poor family. Can you describe your upbringing?

S.K.F.: I did indeed come from a poor family, measured in dollars. I came from a family with high cultural values: people who were writers, artists, sculptors and musicians, but who, to make a living, had to work machine tools and so on. My

mother was a dressmaker, a garment worker. My father was an upholsterer. Yes, we occasionally experienced unemployment insurance.

I went on to City College. All of the kids there came from modest circumstances. We were a very competitive, high-achieving group of brash kids. The point is that my history there and the histories of so many youngsters here are almost identical.

S.W.: What inspired you to become a professor?

S.K.F.: I always sort of thought of myself as a teacher. You know I graduated college when I was twenty and I went right out of the classroom where I was learning and right into a classroom where I was teaching. That transition was a seamless one.

S.W.: Did you have a mentor?

S.K.F.: There's no question: my doctoral adviser, Gordon Van Wylan. Gordy and I had a wonderful relationship. I named my son after him, which is pretty telling. He is a deeply religious man. He was a great influence in terms of sheer integrity. He had an interest in what you were doing. I had a couple of rough spots and he was the kind of person who would counsel me. Of course, his faith was so powerful; he taught by example. He had many children, but he also had foster children and took in troubled children. Interestingly enough, he



- 1986
 - Virtual Classroom, developed at NJIT, is trademarked
- 1987
 - Center for Manufacturing Systems is established
- 1988
 - School of Management is established
 - NJIT's small business incubator, Enterprise Development Center (E.D.C.) opens its first building
 - Otto H. York Center for Environmental Engineering and Science is dedicated
 - Northeast Hazardous Substance Research Center is established
- 1989
 - Guttenberg Information Technologies Center is dedicated
 - Microelectronics Research Center opens
 - Cypress Hall opens (third residence hall)
 - Electrical and Computer Engineering Building is completed
- 1990
- 1991
- 1992
 - Central Avenue Building opens, housing new library and School of Management
 - Science Park is incorporated
- 1993
 - Albert Dorman Honors College is established
- 1994
 - Carnegie Foundation reclassifies NJIT as a "doctoral II university"

left the deanship of engineering at the University of Michigan to become the president of Hope College, a church-affiliated school in Holland, Michigan. He's a person I've admired all my life, since the day I met him.

S.W.: Was there anyone else who influenced you?

S.K.F.: Well, my parents, of course, Samuel and Rose Fenster. They deserve a tremendous amount of credit. A lot of parental influence has got to do with nurturing in the home – things you don't really spend a lot of time discussing. My parents had a high regard for education. These are people who, under different circumstances, would have been highly educated in a formal way. My mother, for example, wrote novels in Yiddish. She was a writer for the Jewish newspapers. My father was a self-taught painter, sculptor and musician. My uncle was editor of the *Forward*. It goes back to environment.

S.W.: Did you want to become a university president, or did it just happen?

S.K.F.: I have always placed a high value on the challenge and opportunity of leadership. And I think that being a teacher is a manifestation of leadership. After all, if you're a teacher, you stand in front of the classroom to influence. You're not there simply to take a bucket of knowledge and pour it into someone else's head. To lead a group of students who want to become intellectuals or professionals, to encourage them to think deeply

about a problem, to provoke discussion and to come up with solutions – that's what a leader does. That's what a university leader does. For me this was a natural evolution. Shortly after getting my Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, I went into administration and it was just sort of a natural climb from there.

S.W.: What's the value of transforming this school into a research university and why have you pushed that so hard?

S.K.F.: My vision when I came here was really very simple. Public policy in a technology-driven state such as New Jersey ought to dictate that the state have a flagship university like Rutgers, or the University of Michigan, or the University of Florida, or the University of Georgia. At the same time we should have a comprehensive technological research university. Georgia Tech and University of Georgia is one obvious example of this pairing.

The matching of a state flagship university with a state comprehensive technological university is a model that's very important in these states. I thought this was a critically important model for New Jersey. It's really what I wanted to accomplish.

S.W.: Why have you been so involved in the city of Newark?

S.K.F.: NJIT is an urban university. Urban does not only describe location. It represents an organic



relationship between an institution and its environment. If you are an urban university and you have the capacity to do good for the people and community around you, then you have an obligation to do so. There's a very deep conviction about this notion among my colleagues on the Council for Higher Education in Newark [C.H.E.N.]. I think the chief motivation goes back to the notion that we're educators and that we think education is transformational.

That is why NJIT has done so much in the pre-college area. Sometimes the programs help recruit students to NJIT but that's not why they exist. They exist because they change lives. I remember one of the kids from the Newark school system. When we tried to recruit him, he said, "Look, I have the chance to go to the University of Pittsburgh. I want to get out of the environment in which I've spent my whole life." I can understand that. The point is that our pre-college programs provided the opportunity for this young man to do that. I am very proud of that.

Of course, the other aspect is that we want to see more students coming into Newark. Newark is a city in transformation and we want to have an environment here where we attract interest from out-of-state.

S.W.: What experience as president has been the most surprising and unexpected?

S.K.F.: Well I didn't expect to be here for twenty-three years, that's for sure. The job is so exciting,

so challenging in many ways. One year grows into another and before you know it you've got two dozen years under your belt.

S.W.: What's next, personally, professionally – have you thought about it?

S.K.F.: Yes, I have thought about it. I'm actually quite involved on corporate boards and non-profit boards. I have been throughout my tenure here at NJIT. They're going to occupy an increasing amount of my time. And we'll spend a lot of time with our family. I have two beautiful grandchildren, wonderful children. Mitchell Jay is three, and Samantha Rose is six. I want to take the opportunity to spend a little time with them.

You know, I've worked non-stop since the age of sixteen. That's a lot of years. I don't mind slowing down a little bit, but not too much.

S.W.: What do you consider your legacy?

S.K.F.: What many alumni cherish and are amazed at is the physical campus. It offers a sense of place and quality of life. But more important to me are the graduates. We have something like thirty-five thousand living graduates. We have about eighteen hundred graduates each year today. Multiply that by twenty-three, allow for the fact that in the early years of my presidency, the number of yearly graduates was a bit lower, and you still end up with over two thirds of all living alumni. That's the legacy that I'm most proud of. ■