A Window Into A Generous Soul
Alum's life story inspires and teaches

Isaac (Itzik) Barpal (EE and MATH '67) views his recent $5 million bequest commitment to the College of Engineering as a way of giving back for his excellent Cal Poly education, as well as a promise to future generations that they, too, will have an opportunity to learn at one of the nation's finest undergraduate institutions.

Barpal came to the United States – and Cal Poly – in 1964 as a 24-year-old Israeli immigrant with no high school education, limited English language skills and no money. What he didn’t lack, though, were a strong work ethic, determination and a positive attitude that transformed him into a first-rate student and, later, a leader in industry. He was not deterred by what some might consider limitations or obstacles. For Barpal, it just meant working harder and studying longer.

His road to Cal Poly was a circuitous one. Barpal was born in Argentina, where his father died young. His mother raised him until he turned 13. Then, in 1953, she sent him, alone by boat, to live with relatives in Israel.

By the time he reached Cal Poly, he had earned certification as an electrician and had used those skills while serving in the Israeli Air Force and the Merchant Marines.

His story is one of hard work, success, and accomplishments. He is a proud but humble man.

"I believe the reason I have been successful in my personal life and professional career has a great deal to do with the education and values I learned at Cal Poly," Barpal says. "The way people treated me turned my life around. Everyone was so friendly, so incredibly helpful."

While a student in 1965, he married a California girl, and they had a son in 1966. That didn’t slow him down, though. He earned two bachelor’s degrees in just over three years. Then he went on to UC Santa Barbara, where he earned a master’s degree in 1968 and a doctorate in 1970.

Not surprisingly, Barpal, now retired, continued his successful journey up the corporate ladder. He enjoyed a distinguished 22-year career at Westinghouse Electric Corp., where he served in several key capacities, including corporate vice president of science and technology.

Then in 1993 he joined Allied-Signal (now Honeywell) as senior vice president and chief technology officer.

He has fond memories of Cal Poly and his professors, crediting two with having a significant impact on his life: Fred Bowden, head of the Electrical Engineering Department at the time, and Electrical Engineering Professor Alexander Landyshev.

Bowden struck a deal with Barpal, who, after his first quarter, wanted to...
study electrical engineering in an accelerated program available to junior college transfer students. Although he lacked the necessary prerequisites for entry to the program, Bowden promised him admission if he did well in both sessions of summer school that year. Barpal did better than "well," earning all A's.

"Fred Bowden was like a surrogate father to me," Barpal recalls. "He helped me every step of the way."

But he was also tough, Barpal says. "If I had an excuse for something, he would say, "Excuses are for people less capable than you are.""

In addition to his role as a student, Barpal worked as a student employee. He often put in 30 to 40 hours a week as an electrician on campus and was responsible for maintaining the electrical systems of the football stadium.

"They paid me $5 a game to turn on the lights, open the doors, turn on the heaters, and make sure the public address system and scoreboard were working," Barpal says. "I would sit in the booth
with the announcers so that I could solve any electrical problems that might arise and note which lightposts were out so that I could fix them the next day.

"One day, the professor who usually ran the scoreboard didn't show up. I was reading my book, studying, when the announcer asked me to keep score. Now you must remember, I was originally from Argentina, where they play soccer. When someone scores, the team earns one point. So, when a football player scored, I would record one point. I didn't understand that a touchdown was worth six points. I became a football expert in a very short time."

He continued to run the scoreboard for the rest of the season.

Barpal also remembers Professor Landyshev as a mentor and friend.

"He was a Russian immigrant who had been found by American forces during World War II and brought to the United States," Barpal explains. "He drove me harder than anyone. He not only mentored me all along, he insisted I attend graduate school."

At the time, Barpal says, he was "very poor, married with one child," and could think only of getting out and supporting himself and his family. But Landyshev wouldn't take no for an answer.

"He was very stern, but he was right," Barpal says, "and he was there to celebrate with me when I earned my Ph.D." The two remained close friends until Landyshev's death in the 1980s.

Barpal also credits "this great country" for helping him succeed.

"All my dealings in this country were magnificent. Even with my unusual background, I was able to do well in school and move up in corporate America. No one cared what I was, only who I was. The people in this country are incredible. They look for people who can do the best job. It doesn't matter if you are an immigrant, a minority or a female. This is a great country, and we can only make it greater by trying harder and not giving up."

Like his mentor Professor Landyshev, Barpal never took "no" for an answer.

Barpal also funds two annual $5,000 electrical engineering scholarships. One is awarded to a senior with the best overall grade point average; the second is given to a highly qualified applicant with financial need who could not otherwise attend Cal Poly.

The $5 million bequest commitment from Barpal and his wife, Marge, puts Cal Poly's Centennial Campaign figure above the $200 million mark, but, Barpal jokes, he hopes the university doesn't collect too soon.