

## John Keller, B.A. '94 *by Myeisha Thompson*

As a UB student in the early 1990s, John Keller, B.A. '94, never envisioned that his fascination with modern American history would lead him to the White House. But as an archivist with the National Archives and Records Agency (NARA), which maintains the 11 existing presidential libraries, he finds himself surrounded by artifacts that are a part of American presidential history.

"People get confused when they hear the word 'library,'" says Keller, who describes the facility as "a museum and archives with various exhibits." As an archivist for the audio/visual collection of the William J. Clinton Presidential Library in Little Rock, Ark., Keller fields requests for photos and video footage of anything related to the Clintons' lives from 1993–2001. "We mainly get requests from production companies, authors and scholars who are doing research for documentaries and books," he says.

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"But anyone can contact us. I once had a teacher request pictures of Socks and Buddy [the Clintons' cat and dog] for a student's project on presidential pets," he laughs.

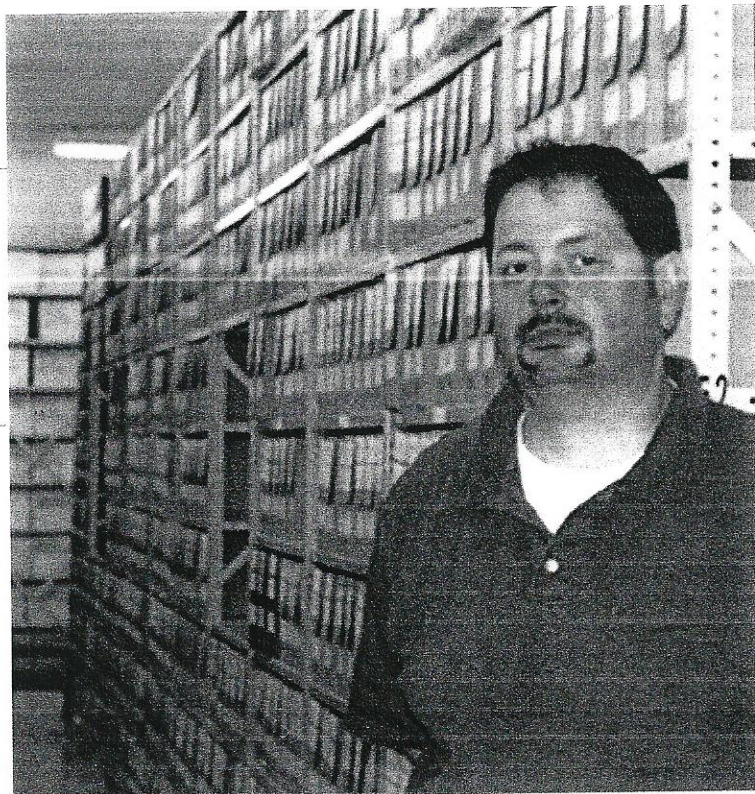
The presidential library system began in 1939, when then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt donated his personal and presidential papers to the federal government. Later, the Presidential Records Act of 1978 deemed government property any presidential records that document the constitutional, statutory and ceremonial duties of the president. In addition to documents and multimedia taken directly from the White House, the individual libraries often receive donations of personal items from presidential family and friends.

Keller's path to the NARA began with an interest in World War II while in high school, after which he enrolled at The Community College of Baltimore before transferring to UB's History program. His undergraduate degree in hand, he worked as an administrative assistant in UB's Academic Resource Center while pursuing a graduate history degree at Morgan State University. At the advice of a classmate who worked for the NARA, Keller applied for and accepted a position as an archives technician in the agency's Still Picture Branch, which handled the preservation of the government's official photographs.

In 1996, he took a similar position on the presidential materials staff. In what Keller describes as more of a "front-line" job within the NARA, he worked closely with the White House Office of Records Management to coordinate the transfer of various documents, photos, video and gifts related to Clinton and his staff.

"We made routine, almost daily visits to the White House, where we might get one of the president's coffee cups or a priceless gift from a foreign head of state," he explains. When the 42nd president left office, Keller was promoted to the position of archivist for Clinton's presidential materials project (which would later become the William J. Clinton Presidential Library).

Even though the Maryland native's work with the approximately two million photos and 375,000 minutes of video from the Clinton administration is an important part of historical



*John Keller, B.A. '94, audio/visual archivist for the William J. Clinton Presidential Library*

preservation, he considers his role to be a public service. "We work hard to fulfill every request," says Keller, who prides himself on a level of customer service that he feels is "unmatched" among government agencies.

Most recently, Keller lent his research efforts to the editors of both Sen. Hillary Clinton and Bill Clinton's autobiographies. "It was hard work, but it's good to see your research come out in the finished product," he says.