The Story of the Mordes-Conway Scholarship at Hopkins School
By John P. Mordes, MD

The John P. and Elizabeth Conway-Mordes scholarship at Hopkins was established to commemorate a tenacious commitment to education by two ordinary first-generation Americans.

The scholarship was established in December, 2005 by me, a member of the Hopkins Grammar School Class of 1965, and my wife Regina, better known as ‘Sunny’.

The story begins in a three-family house at 429 Poplar Street in Fair Haven where I lived from 1950 to 1969 with my parents, by brother Robert, my father’s parents, and his dowager sister Regina. It was an extended family of a kind not often seen today. The neighborhood was largely populated by the children and grandchildren of immigrants, largely Irish, as was my mother, and Italian. My father was by geopolitical ancestry part Lithuanian (whence the last name) and part Belorussian, but ethnically Polish. In the 1950s, when I was growing up, it was a very decent place where everyone had a job and, while no one was wealthy, no one was poor. My father worked as an electrician for the United Illuminating Company. We were all Catholic. I spent nine years with the Sisters of Mercy at St. Francis School. The nuns said I was destined to attend Notre Dame High School, if they could not cajole me into the priesthood. Fair Haven Junior High School was reputed to be a rough place that everyone who could should avoid.

The connection to Hopkins (and I’ll call it HGS out of fond habit) came about through my father’s comfort with electricity. To supplement the family income, he started an appliance repair shop called Jay-Mor Electric in our basement. It was an era when you fixed a broken toaster, mixer, or iron rather than chucking and replacing it. He became the go-to person for local appliance stores whose customers needed things fixed. Eventually he became more independent and well known. He added a personal pick-up and delivery service. Some of his customers were Yale faculty and Hopkins parents. Sometimes he brought his kid along for the deliveries in the evening.

Dad had the gift of gab, and as he recounted the story to me much later, he liked to talk the kid up and show him off. Some of his customers told him about HGS and suggested he have his kid apply. No one in our neighborhood had heard of the place, least of all me. My first Hopkins memory is being driven up the hill to take yet another IQ/admission test and being interviewed. By whom I was interviewed I cannot recall and how it went is a blur, but in the end, I was admitted on a generous scholarship, supplemented by a ‘work-scholarship’ that added courses in floor polishing, language lab setup, and athletic field maintenance to my curriculum. When I told the nuns, in particular Sister Henrietta, the school principal, that I was to attend Hopkins in
lieu of Notre Dame, they were aghast. Catholic kids from Fair Haven did not do this. My eighth grade classmates were puzzled. Hopkins? I made up a story about it being Johns Hopkins High School.

My four years at Hopkins were wonderful for all the reasons anyone associated with the school knows well. Coming out of working class Fair Haven and the tutelage of nuns, however, the transition was jarring. These were all gentle, well-spoken people, students and faculty (and janitors) alike. I quickly perceived that this was a huge opportunity. I was not going to disappoint my father, who had arranged this all, nor my mother who feared my corruption outside the confines of the Church. Arguably I did not disappoint them, moving on from HGS to Harvard College, then Harvard Medical School, finally becoming a Professor of Medicine.

All this came to pass, if not entirely, then in great measure because some folks at HGS decided that they should reach out to kids in places like Fair Haven and provide them and their families with the resources that could lead to better things. That turned the advice some kindly customers gave to my father into reality. It amplified the stoic efforts of the good nuns to turn their charges into successes, though in ways they perhaps never imagined.

A Hopkins scholarship, the Lineweaver Scholarship as I recall, helped make HGS possible for me and made mom and dad very proud. So when circumstances allowed, there was never any doubt that Sunny and I would establish a scholarship fund to make someone else’s aspirations a reality, and that is what we have done.

But whence came these imaginative parents who sent me to Hopkins and gave their names to this effort. Sadly, the story is incomplete because they seldom spoke about themselves and I was not the clever historian I ought to have been. What there is to recount, however, may nonetheless interest some future student supported by the funds or an archivist of the school.

Photo 1. Alexander and Eva Mordes with son John in 1918. To the right is Eva’s brother ‘John Madison’ who willed the house in Fair Haven to her.
Dad was born in Ansonia, CT on January 24, 1917. There was a large Polish-speaking community there at the time, and his parents, Eva Matusevich and Alexander Mordes, emigrated there in the late 1800s from eastern Europe (See Photo 1).

About Alexander we know almost nothing. He came from Lithuania and passed through Ellis Island. Eva was from Lipniszki, Belarus. In the fluidity of borders at the time, both were ethnically Polish and spoke Polish but did not live in Poland. Her parents’ home is still there. She never mentioned them. Alexander worked for decades at Winchester Firearms, one of the major employers in New Haven during its industrial heyday. There is a story that he made a significant contribution to a manufacturing process but never received credit, leaving him embittered.

When my father was around 5, they bought a farm in Storrs, CT. It was hard work (See Photo 2).

The farmhouse is still there, modernized and part of a suburban subdivision now. My father, his sister, Regina, and a brother Joseph grew up on the farm and my father and aunt recalled the times as happy ones. Joseph died in childhood having choked on a Cracker Jacks toy and undergone unsuccessful surgery to remove it. The family grew crops, raised farm animals, and delivered milk to neighbors in a horse-drawn wagon. Dad attended a one-room school in Mansfield, CT (See Photo 3).

That all came to an end with the Great Depression. The farm was lost to foreclosure and the family moved in with the Janowski family on Blatchley Avenue in Fair Haven. A short time later, Eva’s brother, who owned a house at 429 Poplar Street, died and bequeathed it to her.
Dad and my aunt both graduated from Hillhouse High School in 1935 where, I believe, he met my mother. Neither went to college. Dad cut a dashing figure (see Photo 4), worked out with weights, worked various jobs and somehow became able to afford cars. One was a green 1939 convertible Oldsmobile that survived for decades. I remember riding in its rumble seat. Mom and dad frequented the Winchester Club, a popular social venue, and it’s possible they may first have met there rather than at school. With war looming, he enlisted in the Army in 1940.

Elizabeth Cecelia Conway was very nearly the same age as her future husband, born on April 24, 1917. She was by many years the youngest of 6 children. She was born at 751 Winchester Avenue and lived there until her marriage in 1946. Her friends knew her as Betty. Her father was from Colchester, CT. We don’t know much about him other than that he was always called “The Major.” When his ancestors came to America, what he did for a living, and how he became The Major are not known. I have no memories of him, but do know that he live on Front Street in Fair Haven. Mom’s mother was Mary Margaret O’Connor of County Clare. I have not found her immigration documents, but she must have emigrated around 1890. Mom was a lovely young woman as you can see in Photo 5. Sadly, few Conway family photographs from my mother’s youth have come my way.

Dad was never sent abroad during the war because of chronic seborrheic dermatitis that resulted in recurring abscesses that could appear anywhere at any time. It was only in his 50s that an antibiotic was found that largely stopped the abscess formation.
During the war he eventually came to serve as a drill sergeant.

Throughout the war he kept in touch with my mother, excitedly describing airplane flights to various army assignments. On July 17, 1946, a year after the War ended, they married at St. Mary’s Church on Hillhouse Avenue (Photo 6). My mother’s brother David was best man. David was the only member of that generation of either family to go to college, eventually getting an MD degree from Columbia. For many years he was an obstetrician at St. Raphael’s Hospital. His solitary success and relative wealth were a source of family friction at times. The newlyweds honeymooned in Canada (Photo 7).

After the war dad took a job with the United Illuminating Company, the local electric utility, as a member of a ‘line-gang’, a crew that climbed poles to install and service wires. It was dangerous work; he often talked about his friend Billy Rabb who was electrocuted and died at the top of a pole. With a natural talent for electrical work, dad soon moved to transformer maintenance, an assignment with a lot of autonomy that he held for decades. During the final years before his retirement the company took note of his exceptionally sharp vision. They gave him the job of inspecting their very high voltage transmission lines for cracked insulators, failed cable insulation, and encroaching brush.
Mom worked a traditional housewife (Photo 8) until my brother and I were grown. She then secretly took driving lessons, got a license, and then went to work as a clerk at the First New Haven National Bank. She loved to dance and go out with friends from the time of the Winchester Club. She always had a Manhattan before dinner at a restaurant. We frequently went to Webster Square for pizza. Dad had oysters too. We also went to the Putnam Grill near the train station on special occasions. They years were kind to them, and they aged gracefully. Like many families, they left Fair Haven in the 1970s and moved to 4170 Whitney Avenue where they lived until 1990.

Photo 8 shows a picture of mom and dad dressed up to attend a Christmas party in 1960. Photo 9 is a Christmas portrait of the family in 1962. Photo 10 shows mom and dad on one of their infrequent vacations away from New England, here to Bermuda in 1970.

Dad loved to drive me from Fair Haven to HGS early every morning. He would pick me up after school too, when he could. The car was a 1959 Oldsmobile that he kept in mint condition all his life. Eventually that car found its way to Jay Leno’s Garage in Los Angeles (a long story for
another time), and Jay made a contribution to the scholarship fund!

Dad enjoyed talking to the faculty he might encounter while waiting for me on the Hill. He did have the gift of gab. Seeing me graduate as valedictorian was a very proud moment for my parents.

Over the years mom and dad revisited the school on several vacations. Photo 11 shows them on campus in 2000 on the occasion of my 35th reunion.

But the really happy HGS moment for the two of them occurred when the school held a special ceremony to acknowledge their scholarship (See Photo 12). Many faculty and members of the class of ’65 attended. I could tell that my parents were moved if not actually astonished at the expressions of admiration and gratitude.

Mom and dad both endured their share of medical issues, but in general enjoyed good health until well into their 90s. Dad died on December 18, 2009 and mom on April 21, 2012, just a few days shy of her 95th birthday. They both slipped away peacefully of old age more than anything specific. They rest in peace at the top of the hill at St. Mary’s Cemetery on Whitney Avenue in Hamden. They are not far from where they lived at 4170 Whitney Avenue, where they had moved after leaving Fair Haven.

Their images live on here and their spirit lives on in you who are the recipients of their scholarship.

_Fugit tempus. Ars longa, vita brevis._