Simmons College Scholarship Appreciation Brunch
Remarks by Oluvia Cohen-Cutler ’75, ’00HD, Corporator
Sunday, March 25, 2007

I have been waiting quite a while to deliver this talk…and I’m not referring to the fact that I was invited to speak at last year’s Scholarship Appreciation Brunch and had to wait until this year to actually attend. It is fair to say that I have been waiting a lifetime to have the privilege of making this kind of speech. A speech of tribute, thanksgiving and love. And while I am grateful to each and every one of you in attendance today, especially my oldest and dearest friends, Janice Goldstein and Mary McCabe, I am most grateful to my parents, Josephine and Ernest Cohen, for the life that led me to endow a scholarship in their name. I would like to tell you a few stories this morning.

The first story is about my mother, born Josephine Benkendorf in Vienna, Austria in 1919. She was born to a very aristocratic family, filled with doctors and lawyers, educated and cultured people. Of course, in 1938, when Hitler invaded Austria, none of that mattered; what mattered only was whether or not you were a Jew. My mother was one of the lucky ones. In 1940, at the age of 21, she left her mother, her birthplace, and everything that was familiar to her to travel to Boston. Her route was somewhat unorthodox. She traveled from Vienna east across Europe, Siberia and Japan; she boarded a Japanese freighter in Kyoto, crossed the Pacific ocean, docked first in Honolulu and then San Francisco and took a train from San Francisco to Boston. She did not speak one word of English. She had the $3.60 in her pocket that she was permitted to bring out of Austria and two gold link bracelets; one she sold link by link for money to live, one I am wearing on my wrist today. She never saw her mother again.

My mother was a survivor. So was my father, Ernest. He grew up in a small town in the north of Germany called Meppen. His family had lived there for nearly 400 years before the advent of the Nazi party, were respected merchants and landowners. After the night of broken glass, Krystallnacht, my father and his older brother were sent to Sachen Hausen concentration camp. My grandfather was able to negotiate the release of his sons with the promise that they could show the Nazis how to run what had been a prosperous family business for generations. My father was released, and given a grace period to get out of Germany. My father’s journey was as convoluted as my mother’s; he spent nine months in England, living with kind strangers, waiting for papers to come to America. He arrived in Boston in 1941. He never saw his parents again. His mother, Julie Cohen, as well as my mother’s mother, Ophelia Benkendorf for whom I am named, were deported and murdered in Auschwitz.

My parents met at a Halloween party in Roxbury. My father used to say “the witches were out,” but in truth they were a perfect match. They each separately arrived in America with nothing but determination to build a life out of the ashes of their families. Despite what happened to them, they were not afraid. They dreamed of a better tomorrow.

I tell their stories, not for sympathy or shock value. I tell their story because every one of us has a unique reason to overcome obstacles and create a better future for ourselves and for the world. My parents’ stories have been the basis of my lifelong motivation to succeed. It means more to me than I can ever say to see their legacy of hope and resolve live on in the recipients of the scholarship in their names.
My parents made a home for me in Newton. My father had a retail store in Jamaica Plain, in which both he and my mother, and later much to my chagrin, I worked. I was an only child and I grew up in a family that was of very modest means in every way except for the unconditional love and support I received, which meant more than money. My parents were thrilled when I was accepted to Simmons. I was too, and even though I worked summers and after school since I was 12 years old, there was the ever-present worry about whether or not I’d get enough scholarship, grant and work-study money every semester to continue on. I always did. Some unnamed donor believed in me without knowing who I was; I received grants and scholarships to supplement the money I earned and saved and received an education that my family could not otherwise afford. By believing in me, when I was only 18, Simmons nurtured the belief, first planted by my parents, that there was simply nothing that I could not accomplish. I want to make sure that new generations of Simmons women know that someone believes in them, I believe in them, and because of that they must believe that there is nothing they cannot accomplish.

Last year, I was sent a letter from the recipient of the Josephine and Ernest Cohen Memorial Scholarship. Her name was Wei Wong, and this is part of what she told me about herself:

“Outside of my academic pursuits, I work three jobs in order to fund my tuition and school related expenses... I work at the Graduate School of Library Science in admissions, at the Registrar’s office, and at UPS at Logan Airport....my family consists of my parents and my younger sister and brother...my father is retired; he used to be a chef and a tailor by trade. My mother works as an electronics assembler, but she was a pharmacist in China. My parents worked hard to raise me, guiding me in life and teaching me new lessons every day. They influenced my work ethic positively so that I could go to a good school and obtain higher education... please accept my thanks and appreciation for your scholarship, which has helped me with my educational goals. I hope to be able to offer the same generosity you have offered me to young people to their education someday.”

Needless to say, I was overcome by this young woman’s story, so reminiscent of my own family’s journey, and my life as a first-generation American.

Recently, I received a letter from this year’s recipient, which, quite literally, caused me to burst into tears in my kitchen in Los Angeles:

“My name is Danielle Kendra Connall and I am 26 years old. I am a senior at Simmons studying Marketing Communications, where I commute from my home in Rhode Island. I am a Dix Scholar, a member of the Simmons honors program, on the Dean’s list each semester, as well as numerous Dept. of Communications awards for academic excellence and design. I work for a distinguished integrated marketing communications firm in Providence, recently promoted to Account Coordinator... I tell you these things not to “toot my own horn”, but to assure you that I am taking full advantage of the education that you have helped me acquire. I feel that my academic achievements are the best way that I can thank someone like you who has helped make a Simmons education possible for me. As a single mother working full-time, words can’t express how much I appreciate every dime of financial assistance. My son Bryce is four years old and is the inspiration behind everything I do. I strive each day to achieve a high quality of life for him, and I can’t tell you how grateful I am to you for helping me get that much closer to meeting this goal.”
It’s easy to see who’s getting the greater benefit from this scholarship. That would be me. These young women are an enduring inspiration. Their stories are a gift to me. I get back so very much more than I give.

So, I leave you with this. When I was a girl growing up in Newton, I used to take the green line to Longwood Station two weekday afternoons to attend religious school at Temple Ohabei Shalom, right down the street. On a really good day, when I had enough time and an extra 25 or 50 cents, I would stop at the newsstand right here in Longwood Towers, and the biggest treat would be a Skybar or a package of Rollos. When I was 15, my parents friends, all of whom were immigrants from Europe, made them a 25th anniversary party, right here at the Veronique Restaurant. And now, nearly four decades later, I consider myself the luckiest woman in the world. I am privileged to stand in this same place as that 25th anniversary celebration with the spirit of my parents present; an honors Simmons graduate, a lawyer, a recipient of an honorary doctorate, beloved by my husband of 30 years and the cherished mother of two absolutely incredible, accomplished young adults whose lives are blessed and limitless in potential. Knowing that through this scholarship I can assist, in even a small way, other young women to realize these same goals is more than I could have ever hoped to achieve.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you very much.