

Living the Dream

Celebrated as a businesswoman, politician, and culinary wonder, Joan Specter, '56, establishes a scholarship that honors friendship and the life-changing power of education.

By Natalie Missakian



Joan Specter, '56, can't recall exactly how much tuition cost when she attended Southern, but she remembers it being "ridiculously low" — maybe \$20 or \$30 a semester — and to her that seemed like a lot.

Specter, wife of the late U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter (D-Pennsylvania), was a newlywed and had come to New Haven so her husband could attend law school at Yale. The couple had very little money and was living on Whitney Avenue in the Quonset huts, a tract of prefabricated two-family homes often used by the military to house soldiers during World War II.

"They were tin-roof buildings with one floor, and the walls were paper thin. You could hear everything your neighbor said," Specter recalls. "One family lived in the front of the hut, and another family lived in the rear. It was a wild experience, I can tell you that."

It was there that Specter met Louise Jongewaard — everyone called her "Dode" — who lived next door and was also attending Southern while her husband studied at Yale Divinity School. Bonded by similar circumstances, the two women quickly became friends.

"We were very poor. We had no money. But we had a house — a good ol' half of a Quonset hut — and we packed up every morning and went to school," Specter remembers. "And we felt like we were the luckiest people in the world that we could get a college degree for so little money."

So when Specter established a scholarship at Southern in December 2012, she decided to name it the Joan Specter and Louise (Dode) Jongewaard Endowed Scholarship in honor of their friendship and their pursuit of an affordable education. The money is earmarked for undergraduate students who are in good academic standing and demonstrate financial need.

"I gave a gift to the school because they gave me a gift. They gave me the gift of education — an affordable education — and it was wonderful," she says.

Specter started at Southern in 1953 (she already had one year at Temple University under her belt), when the school was known as New Haven State Teachers College and was still located on Howe Street. Hers was the first class to graduate from the new campus, which bore little resemblance to the Southern of today. "They had just one building and no auditorium, and we graduated in this big open field, sitting on folding chairs," Specter remembers.

After graduating with a liberal studies degree, she returned to Philadelphia and earned a master's in food and design from Drexel University. Her husband would go on to serve 30 years in the U.S. Senate, the longest of any Pennsylvania senator. Specter, meanwhile, made a name for herself as a dessert maven and successful businesswoman and later launched her own political career as a four-term Philadelphia city councilwoman.

While in graduate school, she met her cooking partner and together they opened a culinary school. As her reputation in the culinary world grew (she also wrote a food column in the local paper and had a food-related radio show), she was approached by

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a local entrepreneur who wanted to start a dessert business and asked Specter to develop the product.

"I said, 'Well, what do you have in mind?' and he said he was interested in pies," she recalls. "So I said, 'Sure. But it will take me a while to figure out what I want to do.'"

Specter tested recipes and came up with the two signature pies that made her — as one Philadelphia Inquirer food writer dubbed her — the queen of the local pie trade: the candied walnut apple and the double chocolate mousse. In 1977, she opened her bakery and started selling pies to local restaurants. The business grew into a wholesale food distribution company and by the late 1980s, her gourmet frozen pies could be found in restaurants and upscale food markets across the country.

A few years into her business venture, she was approached to run for the Philadelphia City Council. She won the 1979 election and was re-elected three more times.

Upon leaving politics, she worked for more than a decade as a fundraiser for the National Constitution Center, a museum located across from Independence Hall and dedicated to educating the public about the Constitution. Now retired, she lives in Philadelphia and has two sons, Shanin, who is an attorney, and Steve, an MD who has a doctorate in nutrition, as well as four grandchildren, one of whom attends Yale. She still keeps in touch with her friend Dode, who lives in California. "We talk on the phone all the time," she says.

Specter's words of wisdom to Southern students and graduates are simple: Keep your mind open and say yes.

"That's what I did in my life. What did I know about running a bakery? Or being a city councilwoman? I mean, really?" she asks. "There are lots of possibilities out there. Just because you went to school to be a teacher, doesn't mean you have to be a teacher. You can be anything you want to be. You just have to really want to be it."