

## THE GORDON RESEARCH CONFERENCES

### Background

Almost every year from 1951 on, José was invited to participate in a Gordon Research Conference. The first was one that Dr. Sam Gurin sent him to in order to forestall any likelihood of his being present at what was to have been the forthcoming "big announcement" that they had cured cancer.

Back in 1931 a chemistry professor named Dr. Neil E. Gordon, then on the faculty at Johns Hopkins University, organized these conferences that were to bear his name. His purpose was to bring together a group of scientists at the frontier of research in a specific field and permit them to discuss in depth, with minimal outside distraction, all aspects of the most recent advances in their area. In this way he hoped to stimulate the exchange and directions for research. Convinced that scientists often got distracted at conventions by sightseeing, theater, tours, and local diversions, the organizers eventually moved these meetings to remote villages in New Hampshire. Here, in small towns often containing nothing more than one street and a general store, participants found there was little to do but present ideas and devote full uninterrupted time to discussing them.

Each particular meeting was restricted to those who had made a name for themselves in that specific research area and published in that field. Attendees came from all parts of the world, but attendance was by invitation after one submitted a request to attend. All participants were required to sign an agreement that they would refrain from disclosing anything new that developed as a result of their discussions until after publication. What resulted often developed into new important findings on the very cutting edge of that particular specialty.

For both housing and conferences they used boarding school facilities empty during the summer months. Meetings were held in different villages throughout New Hampshire, and in each a different specialty was highlighted. Topics changed weekly, with some one hundred different specialties every summer. Meetings began on Sunday night and continued into Friday morning, after which charter buses returned the delegates to Boston where, from Logan Airport they all headed back home.

José found the meetings stimulating and challenging. He made many contacts there, getting to meet scientists in both academia and industry. Several invitations for him to come give talks and to observe scientific establishments grew out of these contacts. From the group in academia he derived many useful ideas still in their formation that he could refer to in his teaching lectures, and also slides for demonstrations. With the group in

industry he was able to sit down and discuss research in a way that would have been awkward otherwise; it would have been unfeasible, for instance, to simply walk into a chemical company and request an audience for such a purpose. Some of these discussions led to research grants (one from the Smith-Kline and French Pharmaceutical Company proved especially useful to him). It got to be that after his first meeting in 1951, he continued to attend at least one and sometimes even two conferences almost every summer until the year 2000.

### **Early Conferences Attended**

At the time of his first conference in 1951 Josy was pregnant with Malva. Since she was already in her fourth month Dr. Bachman, her obstetrician, said he would allow her to travel. They went by car that first year, José doing all the driving both ways (she was still trying to gather the courage to apply for her own driver's license).

It was at the conference in 1951 that they met Professor Lindestrom-Lang. A few years later he would arrange for José to come to the Carlsberg Laboratory in Copenhagen to spend a Fulbright research year with him. But at that 1951 conference they got to know him only as one of the lecturers. They found him to be not only a highly respected scientist (he was well known in scientific circles and had been in the running for a Nobel Prize), but also an extremely delightful personality. Multi-talented in art and music, he was adept at drawing quick caricatures, taking no more than a minute or two, that captured uncanny likenesses to his subjects, and he was highly accomplished at the violin. In addition he was charming, fun loving, and slightly mischievous. Along with a three or four Nobel Prize winners also present that year, he sang, clowned, cavorted, told jokes and performed in a spontaneous madcap program that some groups put on the very last evening of the conference following the traditional closing-night lobster dinner.

Getting to and back from the meetings sometimes proved adventurous and even bizarre. In 1961 Josy and the children accompanied José. They drove all the way from Philadelphia, leaving home in their two-door station wagon with the back window of the car nailed shut. (Their garage back home still had not received the part sent for a week earlier that was needed to move the window up and down). That whole trip, which continued after the conference as a family vacation in Canada as far north as Quebec, they had to move suitcases all the way from the back of the two-door station wagon in and out through the front door. Getting to the conference, they found themselves for several miles, shortly after crossing from Massachusetts into New Hampshire, on a bumpy, stony, twisting shadowy

dirt road that they would refer to for years to come as "The Improved Highway", a name inspired by the sign identifying its entry. At the meetings that year Josy and the children occupied themselves with various activities, including hikes and a country fair, while José attended the lectures.

Later, when the children grew older, just Josy would sometimes go along with José to the conferences, where she relaxed, caught up on her reading, and sometimes mingled with one or two other attendees' wives while he attended lectures. At one such meeting in the early 1970s, she and José went canoeing with a group of other participants during one of the daily afternoon breaks. Josy, inexperienced and at the front of their two-man canoe, rowed with such vigor that the boat capsized, landing them in the waters of the Connecticut River. Not realizing how very deep it was at that point, she (fortunately without success) tried to touch bottom with her toes, all the while reassuring José, frantically bobbing in the water beside her, to remain calm while three rowboats of other participants converged on the spot to rescue them. That evening at supper Roy Vagelos, one of the researchers present (later to have the Chemistry Building at University of Pennsylvania named for him and his wife), approached their table and, with a flourish, presented them with a gift copy of the novel he had just finished reading – *Deliverance!*

Grateful to the two Swedish delegates who had pulled them out of the water, Josy impulsively offered them a ride back to New Haven which was after all, she reasoned, on the way back to Philadelphia. What she failed to realize was that stopping off here and circling in unfamiliar territory trying to find the local bus station for them caused her and José to add an extra hour to an already grueling nine-hour drive back to Philadelphia. Some lessons get learned the hard way.

In later years after Marty married and moved to the Boston area, José and Josy would set out from Philadelphia on Friday instead the usual Sunday morning to spend time with him and Madeline before continuing on to the conferences. On their trip home they would again arrange to spend a few hours together in Boston before boarding the plane back to Philadelphia.

### **Getting To The 1999 Conference**

The summer of 1999 was one of the hottest in memory. On this trip they got uneventfully as far as about a half-mile from the border between Massachusetts and New Hampshire. As usual, Marty and Madeline had driven them, after a weekend in Boston together, to a special bus stop at Logan Airport, and now the ride to Meriden, New Hampshire, the locale of the conference, had just half an hour more to go.

Suddenly, right before crossing over the state line, the bus broke down. A hose carrying coolant to the engine had sprung a leak. Pulling over to the side of the road, the driver called Boston to send another bus. Then he insisted that everyone get off.

"It's too dangerous inside here," he insisted. "This whole thing can blow up."

Grumbling, the thirty passengers filed off the bus onto the open road. There they remained standing on the shoulder of Route 93, the main north-south New England turnpike, under the blazing sun in the 103-degree heat for what turned out to be three hours. Several complained that they had medications to take, and others offered them candy and bottles of soda that they happened to be carrying. There was no shade anywhere. The heat was scorching, the only breeze coming from the cars whizzing past.

Finally at 7:30 the replacement bus rolled up. It had left Boston two hours before, but it had taken all this time to get through weekend traffic. By the time they got to Kimball Union Academy in Meriden it was past eight o'clock. The attendees still had to take their luggage out of the bus (so it could return immediately to Boston), register, and then find their rooms for the week. Five o'clock was when they had been expected, and the cafeteria was now closed, the conference already under way.

There was no place to get food – the only store in the town (the general store) was closed for the night. Famished, the exhausted travelers, all thirty of them, trudged down to the dining hall.

"I can't serve you anything," the manager told them. "Dinner's over. We're closed till breakfast tomorrow morning."

"But we haven't had anything since lunch," they protested, "and we've been standing on the highway for three hours!"

"Sorry, union rules," he insisted.

Through the open door they could see a few waiters in the kitchen, still wearing aprons, sitting around a long table eating.

"Wait a minute," José called out. "You have a freezer here, don't you?"

"Yes," answered the manager warily.

"Then you must have ice cream."

"Sure, I can give you that," he replied.

A cheer went up from the weary travelers.

"And I see," José continued, pointing beyond to the waiters, "that they're eating chocolate cake. Can't you spare some of that, too?"

"Oh, all right," came the reply.

So thirty hungry people got ice cream and cake for supper that night. In their hungry and exhausted condition, they agreed that nothing had ever tasted so good.

The following year, when José and Josy would return for the next Gordon Conference (this time after their earlier calamitous taxi ride from home to the Philadelphia Airport) the dining room manager would recognize them from the previous year.

"Say! How ya doing?" he called out as they now entered the dining hall. "I got more ice cream and cake for you this year!"

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José and Josy recounted the story to Marty and Madeline as they passed through Boston several days later on their way back to Philadelphia. But their current misadventures turned out to be far from over. After the bus from the conference arrived back at Logan Airport, they went with Marty and Madeline to lunch at a restaurant nearby. There were still a few hours left before boarding the plane back to Philadelphia and they decided that, since it was too hot to do anything active, they would go to an air-conditioned movie. Marty chose a film none of them had ever heard about ("Run, Lola, Run!") simply because it was the only one playing near the airport that fit into their schedule. Surprisingly it turned out to be excellent, allowing them to get back to the airport in time for the six o'clock flight. But when they reached the airport again they found the place so jammed with travelers that they could barely get inside the door.

"It must be because it's Fourth of July Weekend," Josy guessed.

But she was wrong. Apparently just an hour before, lightning had hit the radar tower in New Hampshire that controlled traffic signals as far away as Boston. No planes were being allowed to land or take off for the next twenty-four hours.

Stunned at the news, they quickly decided to make the best of the situation, glad in a sense that it gave them extra time together. Madeline suggested that they go to a fancy local restaurant named Ambrosia for supper, then drive back to their home in Andover. Here, suitcases in tow, José and Josy stayed the extra night, enjoying the added time with the children despite the confusion and even though it meant missing a Mexican Association party back in Philadelphia the following afternoon.

On the plane back home the next day, U.S. Air moved them from coach to first class, which meant wider seats, and, instead of a bag of peanuts for lunch, they each got a sandwich and a glass of wine! But when

they landed, it turned out that Philadelphia Airport also was overflowing with people. The storms of the night before had disabled air-traffic all along the Eastern Seaboard, and last night's planes from as far south as Florida and as far north as Canada were landing in quick succession one after the other. The place was crowded as they had never seen it before.

Josy phoned their Havertown cab company for a taxi, and was told one would arrive in about half an hour. But when they stepped outside the first cab they saw, with dozens of people converging on it, was from the Havertown company. To everyone's amazement, their own included, the driver singled them out, motioning for them to enter the cab while refusing the numerous other travelers pushing ahead of them. Inside the cab they heard him call on his phone, "Yes, I've just picked up Mrs. Rabinowitz."

Amazed that had gotten there so fast, Josy asked as he pulled away from the curb, "How did you know my name?"

"Don't you remember me, Mrs. Rabinowitz?" he smiled "You used to teach me back at Lambertton in eleventh grade! The other lady who called for this cab an hour ago will just have to wait!"

### **Getting To The Year 2000 Conference**

For the meeting in the year 2000 (Metabolic Pathways, Enzymes and Co-Enzymes) Josy called for a cab as usual the night before to take them from home to the Philadelphia airport. Since take-off time would be 11:30 A.M. she asked for a ten o'clock taxi.

"Give us a fifteen-minute window," the taxi company requested. "How about ten to ten fifteen?"

"Fine," she agreed.

The next morning by 10:15 the cab had not yet arrived. Then at 10:20 the phone rang.

"We'll be there shortly," a voice assured them.

Five minutes later a cab pulled up. The driver happened to be the same woman who had driven them to the train station a few weeks earlier when they had gone to New York. They recognized her immediately. Of medium height, muscular, with a mop of blond ringlets that shook vigorously as she talked, she was overly friendly and extremely vocal about her own personal history.

She was the mother of two teenage children. Recently she had been treated for kidney cancer, having had one kidney removed. But she loved driving a cab, she insisted, claiming that it kept her busy, active, and feeling good. It was important, she explained, that she drink water constantly, but otherwise she was fine.

As soon as they got installed in the back seat of her cab, their luggage in the trunk, she swerved the car around so fast that the wheels screeched, and sped down Juniper Road. As she drove, she continuously waved a bottle of water around in one hand, steering with the other. Hearing that José and Josy were both teachers, she slowed down the cab to a snail's pace and asked for their advice on how to raise her sixteen-year-old daughter.

"How do you raise a teenage girl these days?" she demanded. "That girl is driving me to distraction with her 'looney' behavior."

The cab crawled along as she overwhelmed them with details of her daughter's escapades while José, noting the time and getting more and more nervous by the minute, kept glancing pointedly at his watch. Suddenly, after about only ten blocks, she lurched the car forward and without signaling pulled abruptly into the parking lot of a Wawa food market. Grinding the cab to a halt, leaving both passengers quivering, she sprang out of the car shouting, "I've got to go to the bathroom. You don't mind, do you! Don't go anywhere." And with that she disappeared. Dumbfounded, they stared at each other, speechless.

It took five minutes before she was back. Rushing out of the store, clutching the water bottle in one hand and her keys in the other, she cried out as she hopped in, "They know me in these places. I only have one kidney!"

Behind the wheel once more, she assured them that they were doing fine time-wise, even though the airport was still several miles away.

"I know a short cut through Darby," she announced, swinging into traffic. Almost hitting a truck, she picked up her narrative just where she had left off. As the cab bounced along they heard more examples about the perils of raising teenagers in today's world.

Suddenly pulling the cab to a halt, she groaned. Ahead of them lay the tracks of a railroad line, the warning signal lights flashing.

"A train's coming," she notified them. "See – the gates are up. We can't get through here."

José glanced again at his watch. They had barely twenty-five minutes to make their plane.

"I know this routine," she continued. "It takes a full twenty minutes till the train gets by. But don't worry. I know another short cut," and here she careened the car into reverse, shaking them up again. "We'll take a couple of back roads."

They zigzagged in and out of narrow streets, several unpaved, others no bigger than alleys. Some came to a dead end where they had to back up and try a different route. Finally, bouncing heavily, they emerged on Lindbergh Boulevard.

"We're clear!" she shouted, "This'll get us to Island Avenue. Once we're up the ramp there, it's only ten minutes to the airport! You got plenty of time, don't worry!"

Just then an enormous truck weighted down with chopped-up tree trunks came lumbering into the lane ahead. The chunks of wood were huge, many over three feet in diameter. Nothing was tied down. Everything bounced around on the back of the truck, and the taxi had to keep swerving back and forth to avoid a collision with pieces of wood that came flying back at them. As the truck bumped along ahead of them, enormous chunks of wood and cut branches kept flying off, dropping into their path, several hitting the front of the cab. It took several blocks before the truck finally got out of their range and turned off Lindbergh Boulevard onto Essington Avenue.

They all sighed with relief. The road before them was now clear. Just ahead lay the incline up to Island Avenue. They bounced along and began climbing the ramp. Then, close to the top, the cab began to shake, wobbling from side to side.

"I don't know what's wrong!" the driver cried. "I think we've got a flat!"

Pulling abruptly to the side of the road, she sprang from the car and, mindless of the heavy traffic whizzing by, ran around to the back.

"Yup, I was right," she called out returning. Climbing into the front seat, she announced, "I can give you two choices. Either I can phone for another taxi, but God knows when it'll get here," and she shrugged meaningfully, "or I can run across the highway over there to the K-Mart – see it, back of that parking lot-- and I can buy us a can of Fix-A-Flat – "

Without waiting for a reply, she sprang from the cab, locking the door behind her, windows shut, air-conditioning off. Staring in disbelief they watched her race to the side of the highway and then proceed to climb the fence that separated the main road from an adjacent parallel street. Jumping over the fence, oblivious to traffic whizzing by in all directions, she plunged in and out among oncoming cars, then tore across the huge parking lot beyond, disappearing behind a small building. Inside the taxi, José and Josy stared at each other aghast. It grew warmer by the minute while they waited, unable to believe what was happening to them, praying that none of the oncoming cars speeding by outside would hit them.

Several more minutes went by. Then suddenly she was back, waving a can of Fix-A-Flat in one hand and her water bottle and keys in the other. From inside the cab, windows steamed up, they watched as she leaned over, pumping from the can into the tire. Seconds later she pulled the door open.



"I shouldn't have locked you in," she apologized. "You must be suffocating. I got it fixed, though."

Racing the engine, she roared the cab out into traffic. "We're O.K. now," she assured them

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than the taxi began to lurch again.

"I should have gotten two cans," she muttered, pulling over to the side once more. "Now I'm going to have to stop in a garage to get air."

Grabbing her handbag from the seat beside her, she began to flip through it.

"You got any quarters?" she demanded. "I don't have any change."

Helplessly José fished through his pockets, handing her several coins.

At this point Josy asked, "Don't you think you can get us to the airport first and *then* stop for air? We're going to miss our plane."

"O.K. I can do that, At least I can try, but you still have ten minutes," came the flurried answer. Dropping the coins into her bag, she restarted the engine, slowly steering into traffic. By now they were on the road parallel to the airport. The car wobbled more and more uncontrollably as they went along at a snail's pace, other cars whizzing past them, horns honking at this teetering wreck blocking fast-lane traffic. Weaving precariously from side to side, they finally pulled to a halt at the door of Terminal B. By now it was twenty-five after eleven.

Jumping out, they grabbed their luggage, hastily paid the driver, wished her Godspeed, and dashed into the building. Suitcases rolling behind them, clutching their hand luggage, they raced over to the counter of U.S. Air to present their tickets. Ahead of them stood a line of thirty people waiting.

In despair, mumbling apologies, they pushed their way to the guard at the head of the line.

"You'll never make it," he shook his head when he saw their tickets. "They've boarded already. Pier B, Gate 18. Run up the escalator! Take your luggage on board with you! It's your only chance!"

Frantically they raced for the escalator. At the entrance to Pier B Josy rushed through the electronic monitor without incident. José, however, set off the alarm as he went through.

The guards came running, required that he hand over his keys, his change purse, his ballpoint pens, but the alarm still kept ringing every time he tried to go through.

"Maybe it's your buckle – take off your belt," one of the guards instructed. Sure enough he now got past, having to hold his pants up with

both hands. Then while he put his belt on again, they heard the alarm on the baggage ramp go off again as one of his suitcases slid through.

"Go hold the plane," he shouted to Josy, while the guards proceeded to open all his bags. It finally turned out to be a small flashlight which he always carried with him on trips that was causing the commotion. Josy dashed down the long hallway toward the gate at the very end of the pier, José, his belt not fully buckled, limping after her.

At the gate they got stopped by the attendant there. All the passengers had already boarded. But when Josy tried handing her the ticket, the attendant refused to take it.

"You can't get on with that bag," she told Josy. "It's too big. It won't fit in the overhead rack. You'll have to go back and check it."

"No way," Josy retorted.

"Well, you can't take it on like that," came the firm reply.

Standing in the doorway just outside the plane, Josy proceeded to open the suitcase. With everyone staring, she began to transfer item by item from the big canvas bag to the smaller one. Underwear, pajamas, slippers, personal belongings all came out. People gawked as they passed by. She was sure everyone inside the plane was also looking out and watching. It was not a moment she cared to remember.

Finally she succeeded in narrowing the large suitcase down enough to satisfy the attendant, who then let them pass through into the plane. Weary, chagrined, and out of breath, they slumped into their assigned seats. Once there, they deliberately buried their noses into magazines to avoid stares from the other passengers.

They became aware that it had begun to pour outside. Rain came cascading down in torrents, while thunder and lightning flashed beyond the windows. Before long the captain's voice came over the loudspeaker.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he announced. "Welcome to U.S. Air Flight 587. Because of the heavy weather outside, we will be delaying our take-off for another fifteen minutes!"

After all their rush, it turned out that the fifteen minutes dragged into an hour and a quarter, after which the plane finally took off!

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Later that same evening, as if anything more could go wrong, Josy had one extra adventure. After the opening Sunday night dinner, she returned to their room after José left for the first evening's lecture. Remembering that she had promised to call Marty and Madeline after

arriving, she tried to use her cell phone inside the cottage and found it impossible to even get a dial tone. Forgetting that she had already flipped the locks on both doors of the room, she went outside, made the call, and then found herself locked out. There she stood on the lawn outside the cottage in bedroom slippers, not a soul in sight to ask for help.

Wondering what to do next, she suddenly remembered that the cottage two buildings away was used as an infirmary. Tramping down the road in her bedroom slippers and bathrobe she knocked on the door. To her great relief, the woman who answered the door had a spare set of keys and offered to accompany her back to the cottage to open the door for her. As they walked back together, Josy regaled her with an account of all that she and José had experienced getting to New Hampshire in their latest visits.

On hearing all this, the lady gasped in astonishment and, awe in her voice, murmured earnestly, "And after all that you still keep coming back?"

### **Looking Back**

'So why *do* you keep going back year after year if you have so much trouble getting there?" people sometimes ask.

"Well, because we get an extra chance to visit Marty and Madeline," Josy replies. "And because these conferences are very special – a real experience for José. It's an honor for him to get invited.

"We meet really interesting people from all over the world. And José learns about the latest developments in his field and the most advanced information about ongoing research."

"And besides," she adds wryly, after thinking it over some more, "in spite of it all, it's really a lot of fun."