

A Degree

DECADES IN THE MAKING

They left Canisius early to pursue professional school. Now years later, these former Canisius students, from the 1930s through 60s, receive their undergraduate degrees from the college they always considered alma mater.

STORY BY AUDREY R. BROWKA
PHOTOS BY TOM WOLF '86

Like millions of parents with college-age children, **James Strychalski, DDS,** was eagerly looking forward to his eldest daughter's graduation from New Mexico Tech this spring. Filled with pride and anticipation, Strychalski planned to travel to New Mexico to see his daughter, Erika, don cap and gown, and receive her undergraduate degree. Commencement day was scheduled for May 17. "No problem," thought the 63-year old Strychalski. Until he learned that he too would have the opportunity – the very same day – to receive an undergraduate degree from Canisius College.

"To be able to receive an undergraduate degree after all these years – 42 years – was truly a special occasion and a lifetime highlight for me," he says.

Strychalski was among several former students who attended Canisius in the 1930s, 40s, 50s and 60s but left prior to completing their four years, in order to pursue a professional degree in programs such as law, medical or dental. In those days, students in the pre-med program needed only to complete three years of undergraduate study to qualify for early admission into professional school; a minimum of two years was required for students in pre-law. As a result, many took advantage of the opportunity, even though it meant they had to relinquish their undergraduate degree from Canisius.

"Basically it was a career decision," notes Strychalski, who departed Canisius in 1960, after three years, to attend the University at Buffalo Dental School. "The opportunity to gain early entrance into professional school was, for me, a time-saving move."

For others, like the **Hon. Matthew J. Jasen,** who attended Canisius from 1933 - 1935, the choice to leave after two years for the University at Buffalo Law School was an economic necessity. "I was at Canisius in the middle of the Great Depression," says Jasen, who was working as a page boy at the Buffalo Library and earning only 20 cents an hour. "I had to work in order to go to school and pay my tuition, which at that time was about \$300 a year. So my decision to leave Canisius early for law school was strictly economic."

"I had no choice but to go into professional school when I did," adds **Harvey B. Cornell, MD, DDS,** who was already married and had

served two years in the Navy Air Corps, during World War II, by the time he came to Canisius in 1946. "I lost those years being in the Navy, and wanted to make up the time and get on with my professional career. Unlike today, back then you could get along without your undergraduate degree."

Whether their decision was based on the War, the country's economic conditions or simply an ambition to begin a career, few students second-guessed their choice to opt out of Canisius early for professional school. Decades later, however, many former students have wondered if – despite their career success – they cheated themselves out of a significant degree, from the college they always considered *alma mater*.

"Not having my undergraduate degree never affected my career," says **Robert G. DiVita,** a prominent local attorney who has spent the past 46 years in private practice. DiVita studied three years at Canisius before leaving in 1954 to enroll in UB Law School. Although he remained a regular at various Canisius events, DiVita says not having that undergraduate degree from Canisius kept him from feeling like a real alumnus. "As I became older and looked back, I realized there is a big difference in attending the college and being an actual graduate of the college. I never quite had a full sense of belonging."

Several former students like DiVita have expressed similar feelings of unfulfillment. So much so that in fall 2002, John J. Hurley '78, vice president for college relations, and academic officials at the college began to explore what would be required to confer undergraduate degrees to students who left Canisius for professional school.

"Throughout the years, I have heard from many non-graduates and their families about their experiences at Canisius and what a great deal those experiences meant to them," says Hurley. "Several have expressed a desire to have that official piece of paper from the college and because so many came close to fulfilling the requirements needed for an undergraduate degree, we wanted to find out if Canisius could give these men credit for courses they took in professional school."

To begin the process, Dr. Jerome L. Neuner, associate vice president for academic affairs, posed the question to the State Education Department.

"It was very important that all the candidates demonstrated a very full and rich professional school experience to compensate for their shortage of undergraduate credit hours," explains Neuner. From there, the College Relations Office began to notify potential candidates by mail.

"I definitely perked up when I read about this opportunity," says **John H. Twist, DDS,** who thought he might qualify for an undergraduate degree, after reading a story in the fall 2002 *Canisius College Magazine*. Twist left Canisius in 1957 after gaining early admittance into UB Dental School. He studied at Canisius for three years and always stayed in close contact with the college but says, "I just thought this was something that would make my experience at Canisius official and complete, and something I should pursue."

In the end, 22 of the 150 potential candidates met the criteria mandated by the State Education Department and were conferred undergraduate degrees. The college presented bachelor of art degrees to the men who left early for law school, and bachelor of science degrees to those students who went on to medical or dental school. And of the 22 people who qualified for an undergraduate degree, 14 of those former students and the family of another, whose degree was awarded posthumously, attended undergraduate commencement ceremonies on May 17. Among them were Judge Matthew J. Jasen, Dr. Harvey B. Cornell, attorney Robert G. DiVita, Dr. John H. Twist and Dr. James Strychalski.

"There were some people who found the idea a bit strange but I really felt it was important for me to physically be a part of the commencement exercises," notes Strychalski. "Sure, this was a difficult decision, but my daughter who graduated from New Mexico Tech that same day – she understood the importance of me wanting to be there to receive this degree. She was very supportive and I am grateful. This was my last hurrah, so-to-speak, and something I will always remember."

How could he forget? Strychalski looks at his degree everyday. He quips, "Forty-two years in the making — my degree is now framed and hanging up at home!" ■

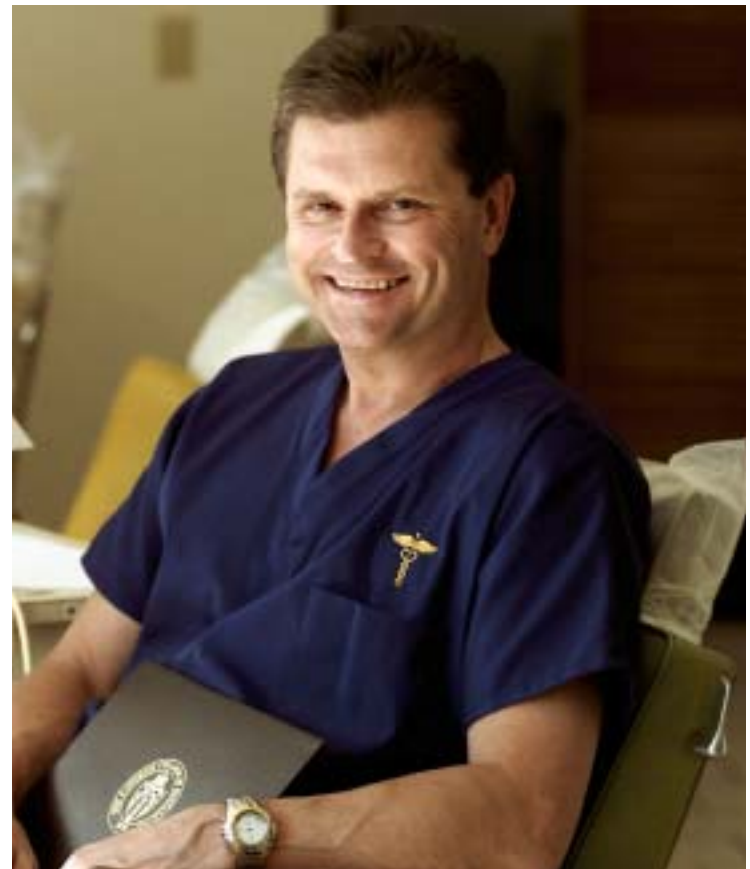
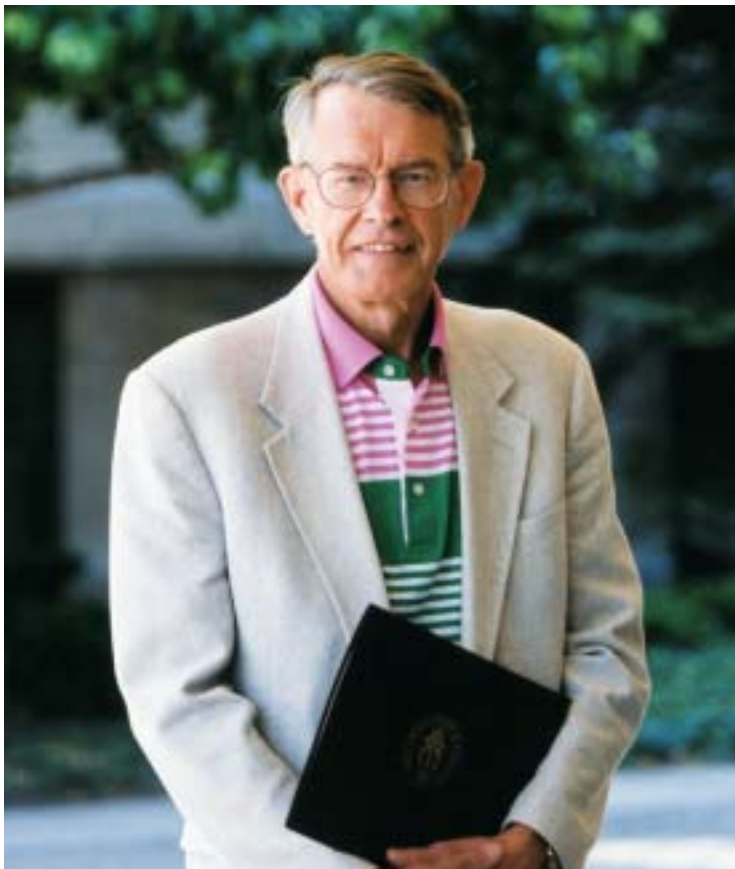


The Honorable **Matthew J. Jasen** spent two years at Canisius, from 1933 – 1935, before entering law school at the University at Buffalo. He served from 1943 – 1949 in the U.S. Army, first as a private and later as a civilian judge in a military government court, in Germany. Following his military service, Jasen returned home and opened the law practice Jasen & Jasen PC, where he remains at today.



Robert G. DiVita, J.D., attended Canisius from 1951 – 1954 before enrolling in law school at the University at Buffalo. Over the past 46 years, he has worked as an attorney in private practice and is currently with the law firm of Ward Brenon and DiVita.

John H. Twist, DDS, studied at Canisius from 1954 – 1957 until he gained early admittance into dental school at the University at Buffalo. After serving two years in the military, he returned home to open a private dental practice in Lackawanna, where he continues to work today.



James Strychalski, DDS, was in the pre-med program at Canisius from 1959-1961, until he left for dental school at the University at Buffalo. Upon graduation, he enlisted in the U.S. military and served more than five years with the Army Dental Corps, before enrolling in a residency program at the University of Rochester. Upon completion of the program, Strychalski opened a private practice in Dunkirk, called Lakeshore Orthodontics and Oral Surgery, where he continues to work today.