Haverford Township Historical Society

Hidden in Haverford: A Graduation Gift Turned Thanksgiving Gift



In June 1949, 22-year-old Denyse Culver received a gift for graduating nursing school at the College of Mt. St. Vincent in New York. The ornate sterling silver crucifix—crafted by the popular religious artifact purveyor Creed Rosary Company—was personalized on the backside with her name in looping text along the vertical portion of the cross, and the date along the horizontal.

Who gifted it to her is not anymore known. It may have been her devout Catholic parents or brother, James, who was in the seminary. Perhaps it was her maternal aunt, who was a nun, an uncle, who was a priest, or another religious uncle—Brother Denys—for whom she was named.

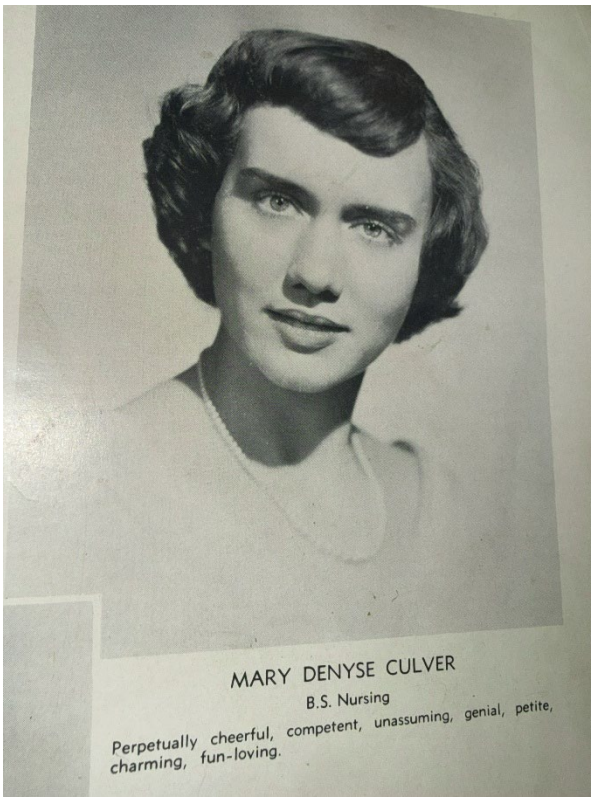
Sometime between 1956, when Denyse and family moved to 511 Kenmore Road in Havertown, and 1962, when they headed south for Baltimore, her gift was lost. For more than 60 years, it lay undisturbed in the grass of a public park in Haverford Township. Now, the gift once meant for Denyse is a gift for her whole family.

Mary Denyse Culver was born in Onedia, New York to Agnes and James Culver on October 20, 1927, less than two weeks after Babe Ruth and the Yankees swept the World Series. According to her daughter, Dee Seipp, she chose to go by her middle name, because “in those days, every girl had the first name of Mary.” Denyse became “Denny” to her friends, and for the remainder of her long life, “Nici” to family.

Seipp—the oldest of five siblings—remembers when her family moved to Kenmore Road in the Penfield section of the township. She and the other two oldest siblings attended school and were confirmed at the nearby Church of the Annunciation on Brookline Boulevard.

“I remember riding my bike down the church stairs,” Seipp recalled. “No helmet in those days. Johnny the cop was there every day to make sure we walked safely to school, and I’m pretty sure we walked home for lunch.

“Those were the days your mother would say goodbye in the morning and off we would go on our bikes to return at lunch or dinner. Maybe my mom went chasing after us with her rosary, and that is when she lost her cross. Or, more likely, one of us took it.



This photo is from the College of Mt. St. Vincent yearbook. The cross Denyse lost in Havertown was gifted to her shortly after graduating in June 1949.

“We would ride across busy streets to nearby parks and of course put pennies on the railroad tracks to see how flat they would get. We would have milk delivered in glass bottles and fight for the cream on the top when it was cold. There was another large family next door in the corner house—lots of trouble making there with my brother and those boys.”

Her father, Thomas Barnes, was an engineer who specialized in concrete. She remembers him building an ice rink for them in the winter on the patio, when they weren’t ice skating on Kelly’s Pond at Cobb’s Creek. He switched gears on his projects as they welcomed two more children, finishing the attic into bedrooms to accommodate everybody. On the Fourth of July, he would decorate the kids’ bikes in red, white and blue for the celebrations at the local park.

“Secretly, I think he was the one who wanted the prize,” Seipp said.

Their house had a set of in-and-out swinging doors from the kitchen to the dining room. Her mother, then a nurse for more than a decade, would help the local pediatrician give the neighborhood children their vaccines right there.



Denyse Barnes, née Culver, pictured in her nursing uniform. She worked as a nurse until age 72.

"She would line up the neighborhood kids and us in the kitchen, and one by one we filed in to get our shot in the dining room," Seipp said. "Then out the out the other door."

The family moved from 511 Kenmore in 1962, settling in Baltimore. As children grew older and moved away, Denyse continued her nursing career. She taught new nursing aids in pediatrics, managed a home health agency and for a long time was employed in a retirement facility and nursing home. She worked into her early 70s, stopping professionally only when her duties called her to fulfill the role of caretaker for Thomas, who had suffered a stroke.

"She was an old school nurse and wore her cap with pride," Seipp said.

Yet her career did not define her whole person. A lover of the outdoors, Denyse enjoyed hiking, boating, biking and cross-country skiing. She traveled the world but found the most comfort at her Adirondack summer home—or "camp" as they call it in those parts. She had purchased the camp in Eagle Bay named "White Spruce" with her brother when their father had passed. He lived their full time, while Denyse vacationed there into her 90s. Her family still owns and maintains "White Spruce," vacationing there whenever they can.

In her later years, Denyse loved to read, play bridge, tend her garden and dote over her family, which had expanded to include nine grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren. During Thanksgiving 2024, at age 97, she raised a toast and commented how she hoped to be at the table the following year. She passed away that February.

Just before Thanksgiving 2025, her silver cross was found in a Havertown park. It's inscription and location informed an Ancestry.com search, where marriage records revealed Denyse's married name of Barnes. From there, an obituary provided the names of her children, and through social media, Seipp was tracked down and the pendant was returned to her. Weeks later, she brought it to Thanksgiving dinner to show to her surviving siblings, telling them the surprising story of its recovery and return.

"They were amazed and touched. Nici was indeed with us, and will be this year, too."

Hidden in Haverford tells local history stories through the lens of artifacts either found in or associated with Haverford Township. If you have such an artifact that you would like to be considered for this series, please contact HTHS volunteer Kenny Ayres at kayres8@gmail.com.