I traveled alone on a train from a New York Bronx neighborhood to get to Park. When I arrived in Kansas City, it was a dark Sunday night and the train station was empty, except for Ken Hindman, ’54, who was an upperclassman and there to greet and escort me to Park College.

I remember how very rural and dark the campus looked to me when we pulled up at Woodward Hall, my dorm. I can still smell those woods — there weren’t many trees in the Bronx. I felt like I had just moved to the moon.

— Leo Janos, ’55
In his illustrious career, Leo Janos, '55, created a written portrait of an American hero in the successful non-fiction work, Yeager; and as a speechwriter, he positioned President Lyndon Johnson on the political landscape as a statesman of great vision.

Today, Janos blends colors on canvas instead of words on White House stationery.

companion Bonnie (Parker) Janos, '54.

“Bonnie and I met the day after I arrived at Park, and we went together all four years. I don’t think she understood half of what I said, which is probably very fortunate for me,” said Janos, alluding to his heavy East Coast accent. Apparently, the half she did understand helped form a relationship that led to marriage, three children and two grandchildren.

“Park had extraordinary faculty when we were students,” Janos recalled. “Ethel Lyon, who had headed the English department for more than a quarter-century, had impeccable taste, and we were expected to know and understand the great writers — Hemingway, Wolfe, Faulkner and Fitzgerald — with such familiarity that we could defend why and what we liked about each of them. Miss Lyon is long gone and most of those literary giants are unread nowadays, and I wonder, ’Who will influence the young minds today?‘ Maybe what goes around comes around.”

By graduation day, Janos had formed friendships and memories and had gained scholarly achievement. “There was a real camaraderie on a campus of only a few hundred, where practically no one had a car or the money to go off campus very often,” Janos said. “People formed intense friendships during those four years and grew up together. There was a permanent bond formed that never goes away.

“I remember when Dr. Zwingle (Park’s president from 1947-55) handed me my diploma, he leaned over and whispered something in my ear about the chapel hymnals,” chuckled Janos. “It was his way of telling me he knew I was one of the Nickel boys who sneaked into the chapel late one night and hid all the hymnals in the basement.”

The English major departed Park with his sheepskin in hand and enrolled in graduate school. “What Park did for me was indispensable,” commented Janos. “The University of Chicago’s School of Mass Communications was a waltz in comparison to Park.”

As significant as Park was in his life, it was his involvement as a soldier in the U.S. Army that began a sequence of serendipity career movements. While stationed in Washington, D.C., Janos discovered a place to call home — a place where his writing skills and his risk-taking abilities would serve him well.

Shortly after leaving the Army, he was scanning a newspaper article about the newly formed Peace Corps headquarters to be headed up by Douglas Kiker, former NBC correspondent. The new office happened to be directly across the street, so he walked over to visit with Kiker and two hours later had a job doing public relations for the agency.

In 1965, Janos was hired as text editor for the U.S. Information Agency’s Ameryka magazine, a U.S. government cultural exchange publication with the Soviet Union and Communist Poland, restricted at that time to subscription levels of 30,000. “Ameryka was created to be a showcase for our best artists, photographers and writers,” noted Janos. “We shared our best from Ben Shahn to Norman Mailer with the Soviet Union, and they gave the United States their best in a magazine called Soviet Life (originally The USSR). Our magazine sold out every time; there was a stampede among educated Russians to read writers their government mostly banned. The Russian magazine was pretty well ignored, because it was often dull.”

It was during a planning session for the 25th anniversary issue of Ameryka that Janos decided it needed a pièce de résistance. He proposed an interview with President Lyndon Baines Johnson directed to the Russian people as the centerpiece of the anniversary issue. In preparation for pitching his idea to Johnson’s press secretary, Bill Moyers, he drafted a mock interview emphasizing the similarities between the Russian and American people. Moyers, who also happened to be Janos’ former Peace Corps boss, thought the mock interview was fine as written and approved it for publication. By the time the issue appeared, months later, Moyers no longer worked at the White House and had not bothered to tell the president about the interview he really never gave.

“Johnson just woke up one day in
the center of glowing praise about his reaching out directly to Soviet citizens with warmth and understanding. It made the front page of The New York Times,” Janos recalled, “and won him a glowing editorial, rare in those troubled days.”

The positive reaction to the interview must have felt like gentle and nurturing rain falling on Johnson’s parched ego, deeply wounded by the Vietnam War controversy and endless domestic turmoil. Johnson demanded to know who wrote the words put into his mouth, and a White House search finally identified the culprit a few days later. When found, Janos was promptly routed to the White House and three weeks later was on staff as a speech writer, a position he held until 1968.

The next decade brought a variety of assignments as a Time correspondent, where he first served at the Washington, D.C., bureau; next in Houston as a bureau chief responsible for covering the Apollo space flights; and finally in Los Angeles as the entertainment correspondent. In his various roles at Time, he interacted with many of the world’s most noted celebrities and politicians, including Marlon Brando, Richard Nixon, Robert Redford, Jack Nicholson and Hubert Humphrey.

Janos conversely discovered some camouflaged elements tucked into his prestigious job that taxed him in unexpected ways, including a self-admitted “swelled head” and frequent separations from his family, a situation that found Bonnie acting as a single parent tending to three active little ones.

It was in the next phase of his career as a freelance writer that brought the greatest personal and professional satisfactions. Using his inimitable ability to make interesting reading out of complex details, he wrote Timekeepers of the Solar System for the publication Science 80. The article depicted the activity in a research lab, nicknamed the “Lunatic Asylum” at Caltech, that revolutionized techniques used for precise dating of
lunar rocks and dust. The article earned him the preeminent “American Institute of Physics-United States Steel Foundation Writing Award in Physics and Astronomy.”

In the mid-1980s, Janos authored one of the decade’s biggest best-selling autobiographies, working with legendary test pilot Gen. Chuck Yeager, in what became an aviation classic. He also wrote another aviation book about the spy planes built by Lockheed’s Skunk Works, located in an unmarked building at the Burbank Airport, so top secret that only the president knew all that was on its drawing boards. Janos scowlingly admits to one painful failure — trying to write fiction. He spent a year sweating out a novel that never made it past his desk drawer. “You are who you are,” sighed Janos, “and I’m a nonfiction writer.” A fact he underscored with his insightful profiles written about artist Georgia O’Keeffe, Lyndon Johnson, and actress and activist Jane Fonda. He has also written extensively for The Atlantic Monthly, The New York Times Magazine, People, the Smithsonian, Cosmopolitan and Reader’s Digest and served as the media consultant on the movie productions Cannery Row and The Brink’s Job.

But he has little doubt that it is the Yeager book that will endure. When Yeager was released in 1985, it soared to the top of The New York Times best-seller’s list and retained that spot for more than a year. More than a million copies, in more than 10 languages, have been sold. “Yeager is one of those books that will still be read 100 years from now,” Janos predicts.

Today, at 71, keeping his mind agile is a priority for Janos, who is a member of the Plato Society, a UCLA membership composed of retired persons. He occasionally teaches a course and seminar at UCLA for aspiring authors and still finds time to attend art classes three times a week.

Not too bad of a career — or a life — for a young man from the Bronx who just happened to be a good writer and a risk taker.

It’s All in the Family for Bonnie Janos, ’54

Bonnie (Parker) Janos, ’54, is one of 11 people in her family to attend Park. Her father, Donald D. Parker, ’22, Ph.D., taught history classes at the University for several years, which enabled Bonnie and her sister to experience firsthand the school’s special qualities.

Although she attended a college in South Dakota for a brief time, Bonnie soon transferred to Park, the place she says she was predestined to attend. By doing so, she kept faith with a family tradition by joining her sister, Mary F. (Parker) Rasmussen, ’52, already enrolled.

In addition to Bonnie’s father, his eight siblings graduated from Park: John Parker, ’16; Albert Parker, ’14, Ph.D., Honorary ’50; Malcomb Parker, x20; Kenneth L. Parker, ’21, Ph.D.; Dr. Elliott F. Parker, ’23; the Rev. Edwin Graham Parker, ’15; Norman Neil Parker, ’27; and her aunt, Beulah J. (Parker) McMullen, ’28.