

## **Eugene 'Gene' Coyle — a Horatio Alger Start in NYC, Later a Darien Town Father**

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**Date :** June 28, 2016

Eugene "Gene" Coyle, a half-century resident of Darien, died at home on Monday morning, June 20. Loyalty was his hallmark. He ended a 50-year career at Time magazine in 1993, and since then has devoted most of his time to his family and to the public affairs of this town. He was an ever-faithful U.S. Marine since the day he enlisted in 1945 at the age of 16.

He died after a seven-month illness surrounded by his two daughters, Nancy Coyle-Downs and Laura Coyle, his three grandsons, Connor, Hunter and Gannon Downs, and his sister, Mary Ann Miller. He is also survived by his brother, Joseph Coyle.

A wake will take place on Thursday, July 7, from 5 to 8 p.m., at the Edward Lawrence Funeral Home, 2119 Boston Post Road. A funeral mass will be held at 11 a.m. on Friday, July 8 at St. John's Church, 1986 Post Road.

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— [an obituary](#) from *Edward Lawrence Funeral Home*

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Gene Coyle's adult life got a storybook head start when he was 14. He happened to be passing a private home not far from his own Bronx home when the front door opened and an elderly woman rushed out, pleading for his help: Her husband had suffered a stroke in his bath and his wife was not strong enough to prevent him from drowning.

Gene followed her into the house and managed to move her husband to a bed. An ambulance arrived and he was saved. The grateful mother took Gene's address and he went home.

Soon a letter arrived from an executive at Compton Advertising, a large mid-Manhattan agency, inviting him to visit. The executive thanked Gene for helping save his father and proposed that he consider either a mailroom job at Compton or possibly a copy boy post at Time Magazine, where his brother was a senior editor. Gene opted for Time and started work while still in high school.

After a stint in the U.S. Marines, he started his professional career while attending Fordham University at night. He earned a B.S. in history and journalism. At Time, his trajectory went from copy boy to editorial layout artist to picture editor and finally to worldwide editorial operations director.

While holding down a full-time job at Time and going to college at night, Gene took on a distraction that almost immediately turned into his one true love: Joan Washburn, who worked alongside Gene as a Time picture editor.

He moved so fast, asking for date after date, that she thought at first that he was unhinged. Before long she began to see this young man who stood before her so earnestly: a suitor so smitten that she could do no less than take him seriously. They were married at Joan's parish church, St. Thomas More, on East 89th Street in Manhattan, on June 10, 1957. The marriage was performed by Gene's cousin, Terence Cardinal Cooke.

On that date, at age 29, Gene had successfully acquired what would prove to be his three lifetime loves: the U.S. Marines, Time Magazine, and Joan de Got Washburn. This last union, between the boy from the Bronx and the girl from Park Avenue, was the deepest, and inevitably led to another unwavering attachment: Darien, where the couple moved in 1966 with their two little girls, Nancy and Laura.

When he retired from Time in 1993, Gene looked back fondly at his 50 years at the magazine, based in

Rockefeller Center, long the heart of Manhattan's throbbing media hub. But Manhattan itself held no charm for him. He resolved that from that moment on, he would go there only when absolutely necessary. Darien would do.

In the nearly quarter century since his retreat from Gotham, Gene became one of Darien's town fathers. He served most of this time as a member of the Representative Town Meeting. He sat on the Town Government Structure and Administration Committee and on the Ethics Committee.

He was a tireless commentator on the town budget as well as single issues like senior housing. His thoughtful and often pointed letters showed up regularly in the Darien Times. He was for a time president of the Republican Club of Darien and served on the Darien Republican Town Committee.

Through it all, his Marine Corps association held a place in his heart that only another Marine might fully appreciate. As Gen. Robert B. Neller, commandant of the Marine Corps, put it recently when commemorating the death of Marine Pfc. Harold Schultz, one of the Iwo Jima flag raisers: "To Marines it's not about the individuals and never has been ... What they did together and what they represent remains most important."

As retirement from Time approached, Gene became active in the Marine Corps League and began what was to become a three-decade dedication to raising funds for wounded Marines. On any given Saturday for years, Gene and other league members could be found outside Palmer's Darien, collecting for the cause. Fund-raising events at times brought in several times their goals thanks to exceptional turnouts.

And those turnouts were at least in part due to the regular showing of the flag by Gene and other Marines at public events and patriotic parades. On those thrilling occasions when the Marine Corps Band travelled from Washington to visit the area, the community was drawn into the mystique, and gave accordingly. All the donations he received from couples whose weddings he performed as a justice of the peace went for wounded Marines.

Gene could recall his days as an active Marine in the late '40s as if they had only just ended. For a long profile that appeared in the May 24, 2013 issue of the Darien Times, Gene poured out details to the Times's David DesRoches.

Gene entered the legendary Parris Island, S.C., basic training school just as World War II was ending. For him as for many other young recruits then, the timing of their service would become a lifetime's regret — that their superb training and matchless *esprit de corps* would never be tested in real combat. Gene felt that this was all the more reason to support, tirelessly and lovingly, those Marines who came home wounded from subsequent wars.

In short time, Gene became an expert with a pistol, and was appointed an instructor in small arms to new second lieutenants at Quantico, Va. He left the Marines when his time was up and moved on to the world of words and pictures at Time. But in 1950 he was called up again as a Marine reservist when the Korean War

broke out.

This time he applied for tank training and soon became a tank commander stationed at Camp Lejeune, N.C. But just as he was preparing to ship out to combat in Korea, his father, Hugh, died in New York and Gene was recycled out of war's way. He recalled his mother's words to David DesRoches: "Your father's dying saved your life."

When Gene returned home, it took a while before his instincts as a weapons instructor subsided. Recalls Mary Ann: "He would take me onto the roof of our apartment building where there was an old fridge. He would pad it with newspaper and I would use it for target practice with a pellet gun. He also taught me how to lie on my belly if I ever had the occasion to fire a rifle. I was 10."

Perhaps the most dramatic recognition of Gene's service to the Marines came not long after Joan's death in early 2013. It came, as reported in the Times, from Tweed Fox, co-founder of the Wounded Marine Fund: "You, sir, amaze me, in that in the middle of your loss you can reach out and help our wounded heroes. It is people such as yourself who make these selfless acts, that overwhelm me and, frankly, bring me to tears."

The occasion for this tribute was the recognition of Gene's call through the Darien Republican Town Committee for funds for wounded Marines in Joan's name.

Anyone wishing to donate to this cause may send a check to: Lock City Detachment #910, 75 Old Colony Road, Stamford, CT 06907 203-561-5767

To those who knew Gene well, all the recognition of his public and patriotic service obscured the growing intensity of his love for and service to Joan. "This was his greatest love, and it never wavered," says Clifford Van Voorhees, a cousin of Joan's and a Darien resident with his wife Kathi.

As Joan's health began to deteriorate more than two decades ago, Gene felt blessed by one thing: that, in retirement, he was able to take full-time care of her. Some family members believe that they can date Gene's own physical decline to Joan's death and the sudden ending of his most sacred duty.

By this time, daughter Nancy and grandson Gannon had moved from Spokane, Washington, to provide the family support that even Gene was beginning to need. In the last months of Gene's life, it was Nancy and Gannon who maintained a 24-hour-a-day watch over him. Gene's condition became a townwide concern. Family members were queried constantly for news of his condition.

Another of Gene's lesser known gifts was his outsize sense of hospitality. Through the years, first in the little house on Holmes Avenue, and then in the big house on Echo Drive, guests came and went pretty much as they liked. On some summer nights, every bed and sofa in the house was taken.

Gene's geniality never flagged. He had the gifts of a politician without the motives. Once, when Gene and Joan were living in Montreal working on an experimental Canadian edition of Time, Richard Clurman, the chief of all Time-Life correspondents, came to town to meet and greet the movers and shakers of political

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and business life. He booked the Presidential Suite at the Ritz and hosted a lively crowd. Afterward, he turned to a colleague and asked: "How come this was my party and everybody thought Gene Coyle was the host?"

To those many Darienites who knew Gene, this was a pointness question.