Ticket to Cornell
Scholarship aids first-generation students

“ANY PERSON...ANY STUDY” was the phrase Jennifer Wheary ’92 remembered most after a bus trip from her home in a Pennsylvania coal mining town to visit Cornell when she was a high school junior. She had not heard of Cornell before a local Rhodes Scholar sponsored a tour for high school students from the area. But that day she learned about Cornell’s breadth of courses and the financial help the university would provide if she gained admission.

One bus ride and 20 years later, Wheary and her husband, Paul Walker ’93, have demonstrated their appreciation for their Cornell education by endowing a scholarship for first-generation college students.

“I wouldn’t have thought that Cornell was a possibility for me,” Wheary says, recalling her first visit to campus. “But a few things really attracted me. The financial aid office said, ‘If you can get in, we will work with you to make it happen.’ They spoke with such strong conviction, and I was always amazed by that partnership and commitment.”

As an undergraduate in the College of Human Ecology, Wheary took to heart Cornell’s “any study” promise and developed her own curriculum. She also holds MS and PhD degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Today, she is a senior fellow at Demos, a nonpartisan public policy research and advocacy organization in Manhattan where her research focuses on demographic change, educational access, and economic opportunity.

Paul Walker, whom Wheary met days after graduating, is a managing director at Goldman Sachs. He studied physics at Cornell and later earned his MS and PhD in physics from the University of Illinois. He emphasizes that both he and his wife owe much of their personal and professional success to their Cornell education and to their families.

“Our access to Cornell gave us a lot of opportunities,” says Walker. “When we realized we were capable of making a large gift, we decided to extend to others opportunities that had been extended to us.”

The couple funded the Constance A. Wheary and Joy Youtz Scholarship to honor their mothers, who strongly encouraged their pursuit of college and advanced degrees. Wheary, like her two older siblings, is a first-generation college graduate. Their family relied on their father’s working-class wages at a coal company. Both Wheary’s and Walker’s families emphasized the value of higher education.

“A long stream of people has made Cornell work throughout its history, and plenty of people made it possible for us to attend,” says Walker. “We felt a responsibility to join that stream so that we can keep something going that was very valuable to us.”

Adds Wheary: “We both realized we wouldn’t have achieved this much without the foundation Cornell gave us, especially the ability to problem solve and to interact with people of all different types and experience levels. Cornell taught both of us to ask good questions, and that has served us incredibly well. Making the plethora of ideas and opportunities at Cornell available to somebody who clearly has some spark but would not otherwise have the financial resources to attend is an exciting possibility for us.”

The first Constance A. Wheary and Joy Youtz Scholarship award will be awarded for the fall 2007 semester.