“Joel Conarroe requires no introduction, but he enjoys them. Mr. Conarroe (rhymes with Camaro, the automobile) was sired in Pennsylvania, born and raised in New Jersey, and survived adolescence in Florida. After college and graduate study he has held, with varying degrees of success, a mulligan stew of positions, including soldier, sportswriter, editor, professor of English and department chairman at Penn, and executive director of the Modern Language Association…. He stepped down as dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Penn to return to Manhattan as the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation’s third president.”

Those words, as their wry and humble tone might suggest, were penned by Joel Osborne Conarroe ‘56 himself, as notes for a person who once introduced him as a speaker at the Century Club in New York City.

Joel’s has been a career of the life of the mind, grounded in the pragmatic ways and means of arts and letters making their way in the real world. This balance of ideas, action and leadership was evident early in Joel’s Davidson career. He was a member of Sigma Upsilon creative writing honors society and of the Davidsonian staff; a Men’s Tennis Team player and a Phi Beta Kappa class president; listed in Who’s Who and a member of the Omicron Delta Kappa honorary service organization.

After Davidson, Joel received his M.A. in English from Cornell University and his Ph.D. in English from New York University. He taught at the University of Pennsylvania and also served there as chair of the English Department and dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, as well as taking a leave of absence to lead the Modern Language Association.

Later, as president of the Guggenheim Foundation, Joel found himself at the epicenter of all things arts and letters in America, and often the world. His long success in that position was due not only to his own soaring passion for the arts, but to his personal devotion to the written word. This included not only his published words, but those penned by his own hand, one note at a time to the widest possible variety of individuals he met there from 1979-2002. After retiring from the Guggenheim, Joel was president of the PEN American Center in 2003-04. He has written and edited books and essays about American poetry and fiction, including his hallmark work Six American Poets. He has received honorary degrees from Rhodes College, Tulane University, the University of Maryland, and Davidson College (1987).

At Davidson’s sesquicentennial in 1987, Joel delivered a speech, “In Praise of What Endures.” He said: “I for one largely credit whatever I have achieved during my first semi-centennial to the love of
learning, the passion for service, and the sense of community that were instilled in me during four life-changing years on this beautiful campus.”

In recent years, Joel has had occasions to bring all that back home once a year to alma mater. In 2001, an anonymous donor established the Joel Conarroe Lectureship, and two years later a named professorship in his honor. Professor of Hispanic Studies Mary S. Vasquéz is the inaugural holder of the professorship; many famous authors have come to Davidson as Conarroe Lecturers and personal friends of Joel. They include Joyce Carol Oates, Michael Cunningham, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Annie Proulx, Michael Chabon, Russell Banks, Margaret Atwood, W.S. Merwin, Edward Hirsch, Robert Caro, Don DeLillo and Charles Wright ’57—and Joel himself has been present to offer one of his trademark introductions for all of them.

Joel Osborne Conarroe, for taking your love of learning, your passion for service and your sense of community out into the world; for your lifetime of creative and tireless efforts to share those attributes we share with you for the greater good; and for continuing to reflect those values personally back into the campus community that instilled them in your own life, we the Alumni Association of Davidson College are proud to award you the Distinguished Alumni Award.