

Western New York Italian American Women Pioneer Professionals

by Sal Martoche

This is a request to the devoted readers of *Per Niente* that arises out of a recent conversation Joe DiLeo and I had about newsworthy and interesting topics for upcoming issues of this magazine. I am asking you, the readers, to, as they say, “hit me with your best shot.”

As first-, second- and third-generation Italian-Americans, a fundamental piece of our DNA is admiration, worship even, for our mothers and grandmothers. We grew up knowing they were the backbones of their families from the time they arrived here. They came from Italy schooled in old world ways, unable to speak English, often illiterate, at least in English. They were lonely, frightened and exhausted, yet they dug in and worked long, long hours to help their families make their ways to better futures.

They sacrificed for their husbands and their children, and often for family members yet to find their way to the magical America. Many of us are privileged and tempted to remember them as living saints.

These are not, however, the women I have in mind today, deserving though they are of our everlasting admiration, love and gratitude. Rather, what hit me between the eyes as Joe and I talked was our failure as a community to recognize and celebrate women, first- and second-generation Italian-American women who overcame the additional and daunting hurdles of being women in what was clearly a man’s world. These are the women who led the way for younger women, showing them how to succeed in a man’s and, often, a non-Italian man’s world. We need to tell their stories to make sure our children and grandchildren know about their accomplishments, what it took to make them who they were and how they found their way to professional and personal success.

As I write this, I remember the line about Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, which readers my age will recall, describing Fred Astaire’s dazzling footwork: “Sure he was great, but don’t forget that Ginger Rogers did everything

he did ... backwards and in high heels.” These are the women whose stories I want to tell: Italian and Italian-American women pioneer professionals. They are doctors, judges, lawyers, musicians, educators, artists, journalists, businesswomen--women who found their own way and served as role models for those who followed. Some of the names that come to my mind are Louise Latona, the first Italian-American female principal; Maryann Saccomando Freedman, Esq., first female president of the NYS Bar Association and the Bar Association of Erie County; Nina Serio Vella, one of the earliest professors of Italian at SUNY Buffalo; Grace Marie Ange, Esq., outstanding attorney; Mary Ann Lauricella, journalist and public relations professional; Lucia Caracci Ederer, first female Italian Vice Counsel of Western New York; Mary Ann Esposito, host of the longest running cooking show on PBS and a Buffalo native; Elaine Sciolino, journalist and author; Jackie Vito LoRusso, business and real estate professional; Renata Giaccobe and Toni Marie DiLeo, two educators and community philanthropists and leaders. I know this list is incomplete, and that’s where I ask for your help.

In future issues of this publication I will try to tell their stories and the stories you tell me. I particularly want to tell the stories of the women of yesterday, from the 1900’s through 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s. The stories of women like the singer Ani DiFranco and the actress Carly Gugino will wait for another day. I invite you to help me by sending me information and suggestions about great women who succeeded against all odds in careers beyond the home and forged the paths for others. Please share your stories and I will write about them as best I can. The more you can tell me, the better my story will be and the more our readers will learn. And I love photographs! Please reply to srmpnm@gmail.com.
