

### *Superstite Italiano = Italian Survivor*

“Italia”, a word which conjures up a harmonious bond between body, spirit and soul. “Italia” a word which means international haute couture, design, architecture and, even more so, a unique way of life. “Ars vivendi”, the art of living and enjoying life is the phrase my grandmother lives by. Born in Calabria, Italy in 1920, she is the second oldest sister of four.

She was named Vincenza LaRotunda. Vincenza means conquering in the Italian language. This name most certainly fits her very well given her trying and tough life she has led thus far. She is my paternal grandmother and my father was her second born son. She and I are very close and talk often. She supports me in all of my decisions and has always been the greatest woman, along with my mother, in my eyes.

After all my great aunts were born, my great grandparents decided to move to the United States. When they arrived my grandmother distinctly remembers the language barrier that they faced. My grandmother and her sisters didn’t know how to speak English very well, but to survive in this foreign land, they learned very quickly. They settled in New York City and were very poor. Not speaking the language and having no money forced all the girls to work and eventually enroll in school.

My grandmother’s first day of school in the United States was awkward. She had learned enough conversational English to get by and to register for school. When the teacher was calling roll, my grandmother was listening intently for her name. Her teacher read down the list of names, names that were easy to pronounce, and “American”

as my grandma would say. When the name Vincenza LaRotunda came up, the teacher looked around the room for the new girl; the girl with dark brown hair, deep brown eyes, and asked her to pronounce her name. After the correct pronunciation was given, the teacher gave my grandmother a look of disapproval. The teacher responded by saying “Yes, Vincella”. My grandmother repeated her name again, this time slower. The teacher responded again with Vincella, saying “this was the American way of saying it”. From that day on, my grandmother’s name became Vincella because nobody cared enough to take the time to learn the name. My grandmother does not care about the unwilling name change now, but it did affect her greatly as a child. She said from that day on, she knew she was in a country that would not accept her rich, proud, Italian heritage. “The English, the Irish, the Germans, they all said my name how they wanted to say it because it was easier for them to say”. “They didn’t care that it wasn’t my name, they didn’t care that they were insulting me” says my grandmother.

My grandmother is five feet tall, has dark brown hair, has a size five foot, and is very petite. The interview was conducted over the phone due to the fact that she lives in New Jersey. She was at home during this interview and was seated in her living room until a topic came up that she felt strongly about; then she was up and pacing throughout her home. When asked about the gender disparities growing up, she replied that she didn’t see any. Growing up with four sisters, she didn’t have any other male encounters in her house besides her father. “Chores had to be done, food had to be cooked, laundry had to be folded, schoolwork had to be finished, and prayers had to be said” says my Grandmother. It did not matter who did the chores, male or female, they had to be

completed. “My father cooked and cleaned just like us women, he was part of the family and the family always sticks together”.

I asked her about dating and what they did as females for fun in their free time. In their household, if one of the girls were going to go on a date with a boy, another sister had to go along. There were no exceptions. My Grandmother recalls, begging her sister to come along or else she would not be able to go. My Grandma always thought that her parents never really trusted anybody enough to take their daughters’ out. She always wondered why she couldn’t do anything on her own. This way of thinking has affected her outlook on other people and her perception of trust. She knew it was for her own safety but looks back on the issue now and remembers not ever having a sense of independence growing up.

Her economic status was very much like everyone else around them. Everyone was poor and she doesn’t remember money ever being an issue compared to the other families. She worked in a dress making factory in Brooklyn, New York while attending high school. She worked alongside many other women and also men. She felt gender played a role in her work experience. The men were always allowed to take breaks throughout the day and she felt the men had the upper hand in the factory. This always made my grandmother mad because she always believed that men and women were the same. In her house, the men respected the women. They would always seek advice and approval of the women on issues and ideas they sought up. When asked if she thought her ethnicity played a role in these thoughts, she said sure. “Italians have a different way of thinking than the rest of the world”. “Family and religion is everything to an old Italian

family, and I don't see that anymore in other ethnic backgrounds here in America". Her life, views, and religious beliefs, have all been shaped by her rich Italian background. Most of this interview was spoken in Italian. It's who she is and how she thinks. Being a woman has not affected her greatly. Being Italian has.

My grandmother joined the CYO committee after she graduated from high school. She was working full time for a garment industry when the CYO was sponsoring a dance at Mount Carmel Parrish in Long Branch, New Jersey. At this dance is where she met my Grandfather, William Cittadino, another Italian man from New York City. They eventually married in 1944. He was in the Air force and fought in World War II which kept him away from home for most of the beginning of their marriage. My Grandmother recalls being very lonely and scared that he would never come home. She wrote him everyday and saved all the money that she could. When he finally came home they started their family with a son. "Becoming a mother is the greatest feeling in the world" says my Grandmother. Having her first son changed her life forever and she now moved into the mother role. When asked how she wanted to raise her children, she responded by saying that she wanted her son to live the life that she had lived. I was surprised to hear that because most people say that they want their children to have more than what they had. My grandmother wanted her son to learn the hard lessons of life, that life is not fair and that he will be tested and tried in all aspects of his life. She wanted him to treat people equally and respect where they came from. He was to work hard and never forget his family or where he came from. She never gave birth to a female, but she said that if she did, she would not raise them any different than her sons. "Women have a hard enough life just being women today, no need to baby them". "They need to be stronger,

more aware and more confident in themselves than ever before” says my 87 year old grandmother. I asked her why that is. She responded in saying “because families are not as strong as they used to be, girls today have more body issues and insecurities because of men”. She can see the divorce rate in today’s families and thinks it’s a sin. She sees the images on television and in the magazines and newspapers of women and how they are supposed to look. She believes in the independent woman and the woman who can take care of her family all the while taking care of herself. “For if you can’t take care of yourself, you can’t take care of another”, says my Grandma.

Three more sons were born, the second being my father. They lived in a house in Long Branch, New Jersey until all of the boys went off to college. My Grandmother worked in my Grandfather’s factory until she was in her fifties. She had dinner on the table every night, all hand made and recipes fresh from Italy. She was very proud that she raised four sons and worked at least forty hours a week. This has taught her discipline, and given her children the independence that she always wanted as a teenager.

My Grandfather passed away in 1994 from pancreatic cancer with my Grandmother by his side. She was devastated and would cry for days. He was her backbone and her best friend. Still to this day, my Grandmother tears up when she talks about her husband. His picture hangs on the wall in her house where they lived for many years together. Her role of a wife was now gone, but the role of a mother was still there and ever strong. She was now also a Grandmother of five grandchildren. She no longer worked but found joy in golf and other activities.

September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, a day that none of us will ever forget, especially not my family nor my Grandmother. Her role of a mother was taken away that day when two of her beloved sons, one, a father of two, were killed in the World Trade Towers. My uncle Anthony worked in the north tower and my uncle Joseph in the other. Nothing could have prepared us for that day. Nothing can ever bring my Grandma peace. While there are many things that have shaped my Grandma's life when she was growing up, to her, this has been the most life changing experience and has changed her insights about being a woman. Tragedy struck 3 years earlier with the sudden death of her youngest son, Carmello, in a car accident and now this; three of her sons and her husband gone forever. My father is the only one left. He and my grandmother have stuck together and have held our family together. She talks about the feelings of emptiness, of anger, of sadness and of guilt. She has always said, "God, please take me instead; bring back my sons and my husband". What is it like to be a woman in your situation I asked her? She politely responds, "I wouldn't wish this pain on any filthy man that walks this earth". She says that being a woman, being a mother, being a caregiver to your children is a constant role to be filled, but when your children are taken away from you, that role is gone. It hurts to know that you will never help them again. They will never ask you for your opinion.

The thing in life that gives her the greatest peace and satisfaction is to make her grandchildren happy. She now has the role of a father to my cousins who have lost theirs on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. She has become the all purpose role model to my cousins. Age has not slowed her down and it never will she says. She is Grandma to some but one of the strongest women alive to many. Her purpose in waking up in the morning is to make sure that all her grandchildren know they are loved respected and have made Grandma

proud. My father calls her every morning on his way to work; her role of a mother is still very much alive.

To understand Vincenza Cittadino's life, one must understand the Italian culture. One must appreciate the undying love that a mother has for her children and the strength it takes to bury three of them. Being a widow has taught her that she can make it on her own. She has learned to budget her own money and to not let anybody take advantage of her. Social conditions have shaped her life from birth. She has overcome many hardships in her life and being a woman rich in culture, pride and faith has helped her to survive. She did not have to cross race lines but race does not matter when it comes to family she says. She says that "family is family and love is love". "It doesn't matter if your black, white, or any other color, we all must strive to keep on going as strong women and never forget where we came from".

I did not learn any new information regarding my Grandmother's life through this interview but I did learn how being a woman through her eyes has changed her life. I sometimes forget to remember that she is a woman, not just my Grandmother. She is not superwoman all the time and has feelings, opinions, and perspectives just like I do. Having gender roles to fill and then having those roles taken away from you unwillingly has never been anything I have gone through.

As I say goodbye to my Grandmother and the I love you's are exchanged, she stops and says, "Women today have it harder than I ever did Kristen". "You women have so many expectations to meet; we weren't expected to go to college and to work and to pay for everything". I politely laughed and said, "Its all relative Grandma, we have things

that you didn't have to do and you had things that we don't have to do". I think life has changed for women, in some ways better and in other ways more demanding. Women today have more rights than in my Grandmother's day but we have more double standards with men and body image issues than they ever had.

In nome del padre, e del figlio, e del fantasma santo. Amen. In the name of the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen, is what she says and tells me to call her tomorrow.