

## SISTER DANIELLE BONETTI, CSJ

I am the granddaughter of immigrants. My father's parents came to the United States in 1902: a peak year in the annals of Ellis Island. They sailed out of the port at Naples, Italy. However, they came from a small town somewhere in southern Italy which has never been identified. My grandparents and their oldest child, my Uncle Bill, arrived in New York and took up residence with my grandmother's brother.

I know nothing of their early years in New York. I only know that they had ten children in all, nine born in New York City, in addition to their oldest who was born in Italy. My Dad was the fifth child.



As I mentioned, my cousins and I know very little of the life and struggles of this large immigrant family. There was always a "reluctance to remember" which we think was tied to their poverty and heartache. We have been able to surmise that they lived first in the tenements in lower Manhattan. My Dad was baptized in Transfiguration Parish which served the "Little Italy" community in the early 1900s. This parish is now a Maryknoll parish and part of Manhattan's Chinatown. We know that they were extremely poor. Both my grandparents worked! My grandmother, in addition to caring for her large family, sold newspapers at a streetside stand and my grandfather drove a horse-drawn cart, delivering altar wine to Catholic parishes.

Sometime soon after the birth of the youngest child, my grandmother died suddenly. My grandfather was left with all the children and very little support and resources. I do know that the four youngest children were placed in Catholic orphanages until the oldest children could begin earning enough money to bring the family back home. The trauma and the deep desire to reunite the family was a turning point for the older children. My Dad's love of family was a motivating factor underlining all of his life choices.

He only finished 8th grade and began working full time, and developed his natural talent for music. By the age of 14, he was a member of a popular dance band, playing saxophone and clarinet. All his money went to the support of his family and to fulfilling his deep desire to bring the family back together. After this was accomplished, he stayed at home supporting the younger siblings through their schooling. He did not marry my Mom until he was 30!

To this day my cousins and I joke about how little we know about the Bonetti family. We only remember our grandfather, who died when we were still young, as an almost silent fixture. We all remember him as someone who was just "there" at family gatherings. However, we know that the strong desire to be family gave our parents a grounding and a loving attitude from which we benefitted and for which we are deeply grateful.

My mother's parents' story is quite different. The Longos, came to the United States sometime around 1880. The whole family came, my great grandparents and their four sons. My grandfather was a young teenager. They were from a little village outside of Palermo in Sicily, Busacquino. When I had the privilege of visiting it very briefly, I was surprised at how rocky, rugged and barren it was. During the 1800s, the people of Sicily were experiencing near famine conditions which drove them to emigrate to seek a better life. They sailed out of Naples also, but in these pre-Ellis Island days, they came to New Orleans.

During this post-Civil War time, the Longo men found work on plantations cutting sugar cane. They then went to Alabama where they worked first in the coal mines and then in the large steel mill as laborers. They moved from one little village near Birmingham to another until they bought property in Fairfield,

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Alabama. Though far from wealthy, they were able to buy homes and had a much more stable life than my father's family.

My grandfather, Anthony, was well into his thirties when the family decided it was time for him to marry! They sent back to Busacquina for the youngest daughter of a neighbor family. She and her Dad traveled through Ellis Island and came to Alabama. She (Mary) married my grandfather, almost seventeen years her senior. They had seven children.

However, when my Mother was about sixteen, in 1927, the steel mill began laying off workers. My grandfather and the two oldest sons traveled to New York to find work. Living with family members who had already resettled in Brooklyn, they found construction work building the subways. After a year of separation, they had finally earned enough to bring the whole family to New York.

Their story from that point on is similar to the story of many other Italian immigrants of the time. They lived in tight-knit Italian neighborhoods and they all rented or bought homes within walking distance of each other. They were active in the Italian parish and celebrated all the traditions. My Mom met my Dad through a friend at work, who was my Dad's younger sister. She, like my Dad, was 30 years old and in a very short time, they were married.

The rest, of course, becomes part of the American story. World War II and the post-war boom broke up all the close family ties and both sides of my family, all seventeen nuclear families, scattered to suburbs of New York City and even to the West Coast. All that my family experienced was so typical of immigrants of that time.

As I write this brief account I was struck with how similar and how different their story is to the story of immigrants today. What ties them together is the deep desire of parents to find a better life for their children. The difference is in the legal "atmosphere." Of course, my family, just like other immigrant groups, experienced prejudice, but there was no stamp of "illegal," no fear of deportation. Their hard work and tremendous struggle eventually led to security and success. They lived in poverty and struggled but they lived without fear. This gave them the possibility and the hope to succeed.

The questions I struggle with now are: *How can we transform today's legal and emotional climate? How can the immigrants' desire to work and find a better life be transformed into our nation's hope instead of being seen as a threat?* It is not a question of space or economy but a question of soul and imagination. *Can we, as a nation, change the legal climate from exclusion to inclusion and look at the long range potential of this next wave of immigrants for enriching the colorful mosaic that is the United States?*

