

EULOGY FOR JOSEPH PIAZZA

Saturday March 20, 2010

On behalf of my family I would like to thank all of you for coming today to celebrate the life of Joseph Piazza. His circle of life is complete. He reached age 92 on January 16, 2010.

EARLY YEARS

He was born on January 16, 1918, destined to become a member of the “Greatest Generation.” His parents emigrated from a village in Sicily called Termini Imerese – a village on the northeast coast of Sicily on the Mediterranean between Palermo and Messina. He grew up at Morgan Ave. and Olson Highway, the third of the six children of Leonardo Piazza Palotto and Provvidenza Badali - Gus, Sam, Joe, Bernadette, Richard, and Jerry. Joe lived on Morgan Ave. next door to his grandparents Agostino Piazza Palotto who came to America in 1892 and Rosaria Badali who came to Minnesota in 1899 with her 7 year old son, Leonardo, our grandfather. We referred to our great grandparents as Babarani and Mamarani. Their houses sat side by side on Morgan Ave. separated by the large garden Joe’s grandfather tended. His grandparents spoke only Sicilian, no English, and all of the Piazza children learned to speak their parents’ language in some form. Joe shaved his grandfather regularly in the evenings as his grandfather never shaved himself. “Barbers were cheap in Italy”, his grandfather would tell him. His grandfather made red wine in the basement cellar. He would have 5 big barrels of wine in the basement (55 gals each) stacked 2 barrels on top of 3 on their side. He bought Zinfandel grapes from California. Joe’s grandfather was a fruit peddler and when Joe was 13 he would go with his grandfather to peddle fruit to their customers. They would drive the horse and buggy to the Lake Calhoun area. Life was simple and very good. Joe grew up surrounded by his siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles.

He played basket ball at the Wells Center on Olson Highway. He was his mother’s son, a caretaker for her around the house at a very early age. Whatever she needed, he would do for her. He graduated from the Basilica School in 1932. The depression years were his high school years. He attended and graduated from DeLaSalle High School on Nicollet Island in 1936. During his high school years he won a scholarship from the Minneapolis Italian American Civic League to travel to Italy. He met FDR in Washington, DC and then traveled on to the Azores, Gibraltar, Portugal, Algeria, Greece and Venice. He traveled from Venice to Rome where he had an audience with the Pope and then down the boot of Italy and into Sicily to visit his grandmother and cousins, aunts and uncles.

Joe’s first job as a young man was for the Butler Company located downtown in the now historic Butler Building on First Avenue. He packed non-perishable items such as dishware in straw for stores such as Ben Franklin. He was also a student in the business school at the University of Minnesota for two years.

RESTAURANT

In 1938 his father, having returned from a trip to California, decided the family should open an Italian Restaurant and cook spaghetti in the window like he saw them do in California. Joe partnered with Nick Labalestra to start the business at 816 Hennepin Ave. On a cold December 8, 1938, they opened for business and started serving spaghetti. Joe was perfectly suited to this business as he was always a people oriented person – an early proponent of customer service. He built up a business and his reputation was based upon serving his customers. Family worked along side him in the business. Many of you probably remember Gussie Piazza, the family icon and matriarch at the front counter. Downtown was humming and so was the Di Napoli.

WAR YEARS

Joe married Genevieve Ost on July 5, 1941. Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, changed their lives. There is no doubt that the seminal event in Joe's life was WWII. He was drafted into the Army and trained at Fort Snelling. Initially the Army was going to place him on a POW Interrogation team because he spoke Italian, but when he arrived at Fort Snelling and the army discovered his restaurant background, they gave him a gun, made him a Master Sergeant and put him in charge of the Fort Snelling mess hall on the spot! Many soldiers training at Fort Snelling were still living in the shadow of the depression and there was more food to eat at Fort Snelling than many of them had seen in a long time. Here was a man who grew up on pasta, peppers, green pepper sandwiches, caponata (appericchio as the family called it) tomatoes, artichokes, eggplant and lots of salads with celery, lemon and olive oil now put in charge of making macaroni and cheese, powdered eggs, mashed potatoes, lots of meat and who knows what from Spam!! Joe went with his men from Fort Snelling to Ft. Meade, Baltimore and shipped out to Oran, Algeria in March 1943. There would be four Piazza brothers in the military service during the war – Gus, Sam, Joe and Richard.

Joe was part of both the North African campaign and the invasion of Italy. He went from Oran to Algeria; from Algeria to Caserta; from Caserta to Dijon and Dijon to Marseilles. He also spent time in Naples and Nice. In Dijon and Marseilles he managed the officers' messes. They, of course, did not eat spam! When the water supply went dry in the City of Marseilles, city officials simply told Joe there wasn't any water. He told them this was the United States Army and you don't say no to the US Army. He had soldiers to feed. He found a way to get water and the mess stayed open. When the Italian POWs refused to wash dishes and do KP duties, Joe told them they were with the US Army now and they didn't have a choice even if they were Italian males! Joe was stubborn, even as a young man!

Joe surprised his grandmother one day in Sicily when he hitchhiked down the boot across the strait of Messina into Sicily to Termini and walked into her kitchen. One time in Naples while scrounging for shoes for his Italian waitresses, Joe ran into a soldier who had been a bartender at Borklin's Bar, the business next door to the Di Napoli in Minneapolis. Needless to say he brought the soldier back to the mess for a plate of spaghetti! He even made breakfast for Cardinal Spellman at one of his officers' messes in Italy. For our dad, this must have been like meeting "the Pope". I'm, sure he spared nothing when preparing that meal!! He wrote home to Gussie, "Glory be, I found some fresh eggs!" He was gone for four years.

AFTER THE WAR – BOOM YEARS

Joe returned to Minneapolis and the restaurant after the war. Downtown Minneapolis was a happening place. Streetcars crisscrossed the city. The Di Napoli was a stop for many entertainers. Celebrities such as Laurel and Hardy, the Andrews Sisters, Marguerite Piazza (opera singer) and band leader Jimmy Dorsey ate at the Di Napoli. Minneapolis celebrities such as Mpls. Star Journalist Cedric Adams and Twins announcer Halsey Hall were regulars. Rudy Perpich began coming into the DiNapoli in high school and continued coming in during his terms as Governor. Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, Wendell Anderson and Irwin Jacobs were also customers. In later years Jerry Lewis and George Clooney stopped by. Jerry Lewis was looking for "red sauce" and didn't find it at D'Amico's. They called the Di Napoli and sent Mr. Lewis over. The city was the hub of activity as the suburbs had not yet arrived. Couples came downtown to shop, to eat, to dance, to hear the big bands at the Orpheum, RKO, Radio City and Lyceum theatres. Dates came in before the movies or after prom, kids came in after school including all of his children and their friends who went to school downtown at the Basilica grade school and St. Margaret's Academy on both Linden Avenue and Upton Avenue.

His brother, Jerry Piazza, and his cousin, Vince DeLisi, also worked with him in the restaurant. Eventually my brother David and my sister Nancy would join the business. Countless members of the family worked in the kitchen, waited table, bused dishes or parked cars during their adolescent years, including Joe's grandsons Nicholas, Christopher and Timothy. Have Spaghetti Will Travel was Joe's motto. He carried spaghetti all over the city in the blue and white station wagon that read "Cafe di Napoli" on the driver's door. He went to churches, high schools and every year gave a special dinner at St. Joseph's Home for children. He always brought us with him to help serve that dinner.

Joe was respected by his business peers and his business vendors. He did most of his "figuring" in his head and did his inventory by hand. He always knew down to the CAN what was in stock in the restaurant basement. He was committed to his business and did whatever needed to be done – whether it was washing dishes or mopping floors. He was good to his employees and never said no when they needed a ride home or money for an emergency.

Anyone that came to the restaurant and could not afford to eat was given a meal. Joe always picked up the tab for any military personnel or religious who ate in the restaurant.

As the years went by our regular customers would come in with their children and then their grandchildren came and so the family traditions grew and memories were made. Many of you here today have probably eaten there at one time or another or have a favorite memory of being there on a special occasion. Thank you, to all of you!

THE MAN – WHO WAS THIS MAN

When I think of our father, Joseph, I think of a **humble, holy and pious man**. He prayed often. He always carried his rosary with him – the rosary he took to war. He went to church almost daily. His faith was so very important to him. He would come to Friday afternoon Benediction at the Basilica while we were in school there. He always made the Stations of the Cross during Lent. He had a simple belief and never wavered from that faith. He **lived his faith** as he taught his children to do.

He had a strong **work ethic** and passed that on to his children. He gave us our education and our family and by example showed us how to behave.

He was very **charitable**. He believed in giving and was generous to anyone who was in need, especially clerics and nuns. You never got anywhere with him if you complained about the behavior of a nun or a priest in school. They were sacrosanct!

He had a great **smile** and a kind word for everyone. He was caring and never swore at anyone. He was never vulgar. His favorite word was “swell”! He kissed my mother goodbye when he left the house and called her everyday from the restaurant.

He believed in **FAMILY** and was very close to his parents and all his siblings and cousins. He made breakfast for us and drove us to school at the Basilica most mornings. He helped us with homework – especially math which was his strong suit! He took us to the Shriner’s Circus every year. He was not home for dinner every night, but he always found time for picnics with the other Piazza, Orr and Delisi families at our grandparents’ home on Morgan Ave. or at Taylor’s Falls on the St. Croix. He loved to take pictures and had an 8 millimeter camera with the flood lights and every event was captured on film whether you wanted it to be or not!! He loved bowling and pheasant hunting. He had a Di Napoli bowling shirt which he wore until it practically self-destructed. When we had our own boat we traveled north to Crosslake and Brainerd. He loved to waterski and he was still skiing into his 70s—on one ski! He had a houseboat on the St. Croix for a few years and earned his river navigation license of which he was very proud.

He was truly a man of the depression. He could putter like no one else. He never stood still. He saved **EVERYTHING** especially string and “tin foil”. Everything had a place in a jar or in a drawer and everything was labeled. There were jars of hardware and rubber bands. Everything in the garage hung on a rope. He was neat and orderly and that is how our house was run! Nothing touched the floor!!

After Gen died in 2003, he married a wonderful woman who was a long time friend and who has been his companion and a loving spouse during these last years. Dolores has been a caregiver to Dad and we thank you, Dolores, for all that you did for him and for all of the happiness that you brought him. He said he did not want to live alone and you were there to be with him. My family also wants to thank Dolores’ daughter, Susan Wasserman, for all the care and kindness she has shown our father over these past few years.

SUMMARY

Joe was an enigmatic man. You knew him through the things that he did – his service to his community - be it the Knights of Columbus or the Lions Club or any other community organization. He was a founding member of this parish from the days when it was a renovated Quonset hut on highway 100 and Wayzata Boulevard. He was from a generation that led by example. They understood sacrifice. They were the Builders of our society – this **Greatest Generation**. They never questioned when called to serve – their loyalty unwavering. Many of you here today have family members of this generation and know of what I speak. Joe lived the limitations of the depression and created a new life after the War. I think the War gave his generation a different sense of death. There was an all pervading sense of God in his life and a rock solid sense of duty and purpose.

I would like to leave you with a few thoughts from Tom Brokaw’s Book, The Greatest Generation:

“They answered the call to save the world from the two most powerful and ruthless military machines ever assembled, instruments of conquest in the hands of fascist maniacs. They faced great odds and a late start, but they did not protest. They succeeded on every front. They won the war; they saved the world. They came home to joyous and short-lived celebrations and immediately began the task of rebuilding their lives and the world they wanted. They married in record numbers and gave birth to another distinctive generation, the Baby Boomers. A grateful nation made it possible for more of them to attend college than any society had ever educated, any where. They gave the world new science, literature, art, industry, and economic strength unparalleled in the long curve of history. As they now reach the twilight of their adventurous and productive lives, they remain, for the most part, exceptionally modest.”

And so I am going to remember our father, Joseph, as a humble, kind and holy man who did his best to serve his country, his church, his community and his family - all with a smile and a plate of spaghetti! I hope you find a kitchen up there, Dad!

In this church this morning, in this liturgical season of hope and renewal, we will honor you Dad, pray for you, and pay tribute to all that you have given our family. We love you and we will miss you. From all of your family, Addio Papa, Addio Papa.

Lovingly,
Donna Piazza