

**EI-1383**

**RENZIE VIGGIANO**

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**AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW: 80**

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**ITALY: ACQUAVIVA D'ISERINA**

**THE US: WALL, PENNSYLVANIA**

LEVINE: Today is the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, the year 2005, and I'm here at Ellis Island in the Oral History Studio, with someone who came through Ellis Island when she was only five years old, leaving from Naples in 1930. so if we could start, if you would say your name when you came to this country?

VIGGIANO: My name is Renzie Petrocelli, and my married name currently is Viggiano, and that is V as in Victor-I-double G-I-A-N-O, Viggiano.

LEVINE: Okay, and could you spell your maiden name?

VIGGIANO: My maiden name? Last name, first name?

LEVINE: Well, both, I guess.

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VIGGIANO: My first name is Renzie, R-E-N-Z-I-E, and they took a portion of my grandfather's name—his name was Lorenzo. So they just took a portion of the end of it, Renzie, and so that's how my first name came about. My last name then is, maiden name, is Petrocelli, P-E-T-R-O-C-E-L-L-I.

LEVINE: Great, okay. And your birth date?

VIGGIANO: My birth date was November the 5<sup>th</sup>, 1924.

LEVINE: Okay, now where in Italy were you born?

VIGGIANO: I was born in Acquaviva, A-C-Q-U-A-V-I-V-A, Acquaviva, D-Capital D-apostrophe, Iserina, I-S-E-R-I-N-A, Provincia de Campobasso, Province of Campobasso. Campobasso is perhaps forty-five minutes away from Naples.

LEVINE: Okay, great. And did you live in the same town up until the time you left Italy?

VIGGIANO: Exactly, yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, okay. Can you talk about that town? How do you remember it? I mean, you were a little girl, but—

VIGGIANO: Even though I was five, I remember my mother. My father had already gone to America. And I remember my mother and the local priest, and the teacher, saying about Americans speaking differently. And I heard them saying a few words in English. And I then I thought, well, I wonder how the word kitchen, cucina, would be pronounced in English? I remember just skipping back to piazza, the plaza, and saying kootchen, kootchen. So thinking that cucina would translate into English as not kitchen, but kootchen!

LEVINE: Ah, isn't that interesting? Yeah, that's great. So did you know people? Like, when you were in Italy, did people come back from America? Did you have any sense of what America might be like?

VIGGIANO: They came back and told me wonderful tales of America. And they also said, but how very difficult it was to find work in America, because some of them had trained for different jobs. My father, for example, was a shoe designer. He had gone to Naples to train as a shoe designer. But of course, when he came to America, into this small town outside of Pittsburgh, there were no shoe designing jobs, much to his disappointment! And so he opened a shoe repair shop.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

VIGGIANO: And but, yes, people came back to the small town, telling us about, you know, America and the wonderful opportunities that were there, even though they had to work very hard. And so I'm thinking, "Gee, that'd be a wonderful place to go to!" And my mother—we had already tried three times to come to America. That is, my mother, my brother, younger brother—younger by one year—and myself had gotten all the papers ready, and gone to Naples. That was the city from which we would board the boat, the ship, to come to America. And my mother then, we each had to go through a physical, and she was turned back because of an ingrown toenail.

And so then she was back, we're back in the small town for six months while she was going to the doctor's, having this problem taken care of. Again, the doctor said she was ready; we could try again. Again we went to Naples, and they gave her this very, very thorough physical again. And she again was sent back to have more treatments on that ingrown toenail! The third time we went back to Naples, all the papers were in place, and accepted at the Consul. And my brother had developed this very bad cough. So we went to Naples, and again we were turned back because of my brother's cough. At the same time, my father wrote my mother a letter, saying, "You've tried. This is now the third time. If you don't come now, I'm not sending you any more money to come to America." So that was a very difficult period of time for my mother.

LEVINE: Yeah! Well now, what was your mother's name?

VIGGIANO: My mother's name was Rose Berardi, B-E-R-A-R-D-I.

LEVINE: And was she and her family from that same area in Italy?

VIGGIANO: Yes, yes, from that same small town.

LEVINE: And how about your father? His name?

VIGGIANO: My father, his name was Paul Petrocelli, or as they pronounced it in Italian, Petrochelli.

LEVINE: Petrocelli. And was his family from that area as well?

VIGGIANO: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: So as far as you know, going back generations, from both sides, they were from—

VIGGIANO: Acquaviva D'Iserina, Provincia di Camposbasso.

LEVINE: Okay.

VIGGIANO: Close to Naples

LEVINE: All right.

VIGGIANO: And we have been back, and it's still the same.

LEVINE: Really?

VIGGIANO: We were back two years ago, and it's still the same.

LEVINE: It's still that small little town that--?

VIGGIANO: A small little town with a piazza in the center of the town, and the village church sitting on, twenty steps above the piazza.

LEVINE: Wow! What was the name of the church, do you remember?

VIGGIANO: Santa Maria.

LEVINE: Santa Maria.

VIGGIANO: That's what we called it.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And you remember the priest from when you were a little girl?

VIGGIANO: I remember the priest, because we lived across the street from the church. And so I remember the priest always coming over to our house. And did, of course, the school was also across, one very tiny room was the school. And it was also across the street from our piazza, the piazza on our house. And I remember always going over, and listening to the teacher.

LEVINE: You were too little to go? You were too young?

VIGGIANO: To go to school. I was too young.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VIGGIANO: I was four and going on five.

LEVINE: Yeah.

VIGGIANO: So I was too young, but I was always there, you know, because it was so close to our house.

LEVINE: Oh, that's so cute. So in other words, you were outside the little school, listening?

VIGGIANO: I would be sitting on the steps, listening.

LEVINE: Wow! Uh-huh, so how about grandparents? Did you have any?

VIGGIANO: Yes. My grandmother's name was Edmina Rossi, R-O-S-S-I. And she, her mother had come, my great-grandmother had come from another small village right next to Acquaviva. And my grandmother was a tailor, a tailoress. And so she did all the sewing for the, the vestments for the church, and for other people in town.

LEVINE: Roughly how many people were there? Are we talking a few hundred?

VIGGIANO: In that small town?

LEVINE: Yeah.

VIGGIANO: Very likely six hundred people.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh. Now, was there anything about the priest in Italy that maybe was different from a priest here? You know, anything you recall about that person?

VIGGIANO: I particularly remember the weddings that were very joyous occasions, and they were celebrated mostly outdoors in the piazza, and that it was a very memorable occasion, with everybody getting dressed up, and the priest always being there at the center of everything, and always, you know, making sure that the young people, with their parents, would participate in the church, whatever was happening. And of course, the funerals were really quite memorable, because if possible, they would get a tiny little local band together when someone died, and there would always be a procession to the cemetery, which was very close to the town itself.

LEVINE: Now, the procession, would that be people walking?

VIGGIANO: People walking, and the band, maybe an accordion, and maybe some other instruments, a few other instruments. The priest first, and the band, and so forth.

LEVINE: Well, I guess the priest might have been the most esteemed member of the community?

VIGGIANO: Yes, very respected, and of course people took all their problems to him, so he really knew every family's circumstances. And he was really a central part of the town, and the family.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember if there was—was there law enforcement? Were there policemen? Do you remember anything like that in the town?

VIGGIANO: They really didn't need it, because everybody in the village looked after everyone else. So if any of the teenage children got out of hand, and one of the neighbors saw him, they would not only scold him, but they would tell the parents. And so that would be taken care of within the family and the neighbors. And the children knew that this would happen. And this carried over to this country as well, you know—in our family, anyways. So it was—

LEVINE: Now, when did your father leave?

VIGGIANO: My father left in 1929—1929.

LEVINE: But do you remember him? Do you have any memories of your father?

VIGGIANO: Yes.

LEVINE: In Italy?

VIGGIANO: Yes, because we had pictures of my father everywhere when he was in the Italian Army.

LEVINE: Oh.

VIGGIANO: And of course, I mean, his friends and relations in the town, and my mother's family, always talked about him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Now why did your father go to outside of Pittsburgh, do you know?

VIGGIANO: He went there because there was a family that he knew there.

LEVINE: A family from your little town?

VIGGIANO: From our little town, that had already gone to Pittsburgh, and another family that had settled in New York. And so he went, you know, to Pittsburgh in hopes of getting a job there as a shoe designer.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

VIGGIANO: And of course, it didn't—there were no shoe designing jobs in Pittsburgh. But we were met, he was met in New York, by this friend of the family's that had come before him.

LEVINE: I see. So, he went, and he established a shoe--?

VIGGIANO: A home.

LEVINE: A home, and a shop?

VIGGIANO: And a shoe repair shop, and then, of course, a cleaning shop with it. And eventually, when we came here, he had the one shop, but he also then bought out several other people, and owned three shoe repair shops and cleaners.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

VIGGIANO: In spite of difficulties. Even when we came to Ellis Island, I remember the weather was atrocious, and the boat, the trip coming over on the Saturnia. And the water was just tremendously choppy, and waves. And in November it was very—the end of October, November, it was very, just cold weather, and a very crowded ship. So I remember that trip. But what I'm—in the final analysis, as I was telling my daughter today, I said, "If your grandmother, my mother, and my father had not persevered in this country—and my mother particularly, in being turned back three times—none of us would be here."

And today, of course, all my daughters are college graduates and my brothers were college—you know, I am a college graduate. So it's—the work ethic is totally different, and that was instilled very deeply in our family, because we all worked in the family business. And that was not only shoe repair shops, but of course, every store that we owned at the same time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Okay, well just to finish off with your life in Italy, when your brother's cough subsided, and you found that, do you remember getting ready to go? Did you personally bring anything with you, as a little girl? Or did your mother pack something that you remember?

VIGGIANO: Yes, all of our relatives and my grandmother made, handmade these beautiful—crocheted, embroidered. And so of course, we had to bring all those things with us. And just, everyone had to give us a gift, like a going away, bon voyage gift. So it was, we brought those things over, which really, it was a very binding feeling, just to see these embroidered things around our house, and you know, on the tables, and so forth.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, so you used them every day?

VIGGIANO: Oh, of course, yes, yes.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. Now, so when you left, were people, did people come? I mean, was there, like, either a party, or people just simply came to either say goodbye, or to see you off?

VIGGIANO: Well, they had been doing it. The first time, many came. And the second time [laughs] fewer people came!

LEVINE: [Laughs]

VIGGIANO: And the third time, they, you know, fewer, less people came. But my uncle, my mother's brother, was always there for us, and with us, making sure that, you know, what was needed and what we had to do was done, papers, you know, and so forth, to come to this country.

LEVINE: Yeah. So, you, your father was the first, and he knew people?

VIGGIANO: Several families, two families.

LEVINE: Yeah, and then you, your mother and your brother traveled together?

VIGGIANO: Yes.

LEVINE: And you got to the port. I guess you didn't have to stay over or anything? Or did you?

VIGGIANO: We were met here by—well, what really, I think, was tremendously frustrating is we were going in the many lines here at Ellis Island. The people that were, you know, asking my mother her name, and we heard people in line before us being questioned, you know, "Your name is Petrucelli? Petrocelli?" And finally, the person that was taking down this information said, "Your name is Smith," and he'd just stamp that name on the papers?

LEVINE: So you left Ellis Island with that on your papers?

VIGGIANO: No, not us, but people in the line directly in front of us! And by that, time, because my mother heard all of this, and so she was really very stressed.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, when the boat came into, the ship came into the New York Harbor, do you remember seeing the statue?

VIGGIANO: And it was pointed out to us. And my mother, we all came to the, you know, to the—

LEVINE: The railing?

VIGGIANO: --the railing, and it was pointed out to us, even though the weather was foggy, and so forth.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

VIGGIANO: But America was the great land of opportunity, as it is today.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. So then you got to Ellis Island. It was very crowded. And was it—did you have to stay at all? Or did you leave the very day you came?

VIGGIANO: Well, we had our friends, my mother's friends, were there at the dock, waiting for us. So of course, they waited on the dock until we went through all of the procedures. And they met us there at the dock, and took us to their home in Brooklyn.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Now, do you remember any first impressions of this country?

VIGGIANO: I thought it was very chaotic. But I had heard so much about America that in spite of it being all new and chaotic, and the weather not being very cooperative, or very nice, it was still very exciting, and challenging—just new and exciting!

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. And your brother was a year younger?

VIGGIANO: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, okay. So your mother had her hands full, I mean, traveling with two young children?

VIGGIANO: Very much.

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh.

VIGGIANO: Very much.

LEVINE: And I guess your mother really wanted to come, or she would have [laughs] been dissuaded by all the complications!

VIGGIANO: Exactly. She really did, and she, from the tales that she had heard from people that had been here, friends that had been here, she knew that there was far more opportunity here than, you know, in the small town where we were from.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. What was your mother's personality like, when you were growing up?

VIGGIANO: Well, I remember my mother, because we had these businesses, the stores, and the grocery store, and all the people in this small village of Wall, just outside of Pittsburgh, coming to our store. And there were only two Italian families in this small town. The rest of the other families were all Slovaks, Serbians, a few Jewish families, Croatians. And so my mother, not knowing how to speak a word of English, she had to learn all these, some of these other languages. So I would hear her saying to me, tell me to go get some vondorfka, okay, corn or potatoes, you know, for customers. So she picked up their languages! So she would be speaking a mixture of Italian and all these other languages! So it was--

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, do you remember, by any chance, the music that people who had immigrated to this country were listening to?

VIGGIANO: Yes.

LEVINE: As you grew up?

VIGGIANO: Yes, it was Caruso, the great tenor Caruso. And my father himself was a musician, played mandolin, and several other instruments. And of course, they played the traditional Italian folk songs, like "O Sole Mio," and "Return to Sorrento," you know. And so we had instruments in our home. And my one brother did go to college, and studied music, and that was an influence from my father. So the music was there from our hometown, from Italy, and the Italian heritage.

LEVINE: Yeah.

VIGGIANO: It was always there. And my mother was very persevering, [unclear], and a person that was very respected. And we learned respect very early, you know. That was our parents. And so it was—but I remember her as being the most persevering person. You were not a quitter. Once you started taking music lessons, you continued. You did not quit, regardless of how you hated it! And so today, I carried that over. One of my daughters is a music teacher. She hated it. My brother gave her one of his instruments, and she hated it. But I said, "We don't have quitters," just as my mother had said to us.

LEVINE: Oh, wow! Do you remember the reunion with your father, between you and your mother and your brother?

- VIGGIANO: Yes, my father was really excited, delighted to see all of us, but particularly my brother and myself. And of course, I mean, the children were first. And my mother, you know, he said a few words to her, but it was the children! [Laughs]
- LEVINE: Uh-huh.
- VIGGIANO: So.
- LEVINE: Yeah. So, when you arrived in Wall, your father at that point, he had the shoe repair shop?
- VIGGIANO: Repair shop.
- LEVINE: And was that it, when you first arrived?
- VIGGIANO: When we first arrived, yes, and then he added, you know, the cleaning portion to it.
- LEVINE: Now when you say cleaning, you mean, like--?
- VIGGIANO: A cleaning shop, cleaning store, where we cleaned clothes, and so forth, with all the machinery.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh. And then it extended into a grocery store later?
- VIGGIANO: We then opened a grocery store next door in this building that my father had acquired, had bought. And so we were always in business, with the responsibilities and the opportunities, and always interacted with the public, with people in that hometown. And it was—we again were very close with our neighbors, who were not Italian. But we were a very tightly knit community, as we had been in Italy.
- LEVINE: I see. Now, can you say anything about the exchanges that went on between the Slovaks or the Croatians and Serbs, and your family, and any kind of mixing of the different groups?
- VIGGIANO: Yes, because my mother always made a garden in the rear of our home, a small plot of ground. And my mother would grow zucchinis, and of course she gave Mrs. Ondish across the street, who was Slovak. And so of course, she would take zucchinis over to her house, and the exchanged recipes. And so it was this kind of interaction with, you know, either the Slovaks, or the Serbian people, or the few Jewish people that were in the community. And because they all came into the store, they could say to us, “You know, we don’t have enough money ‘til payday. Can we pay you

for this next week?" And so, we had a very large record book, where we kept all these accounts.

And one day I remember my father saying to all of us—by that time there were four children, a few years later, and he took the book, you know, with all of these receipts that—not receipts, but payments that people owed us, and he said let us go down the cellar. And so we went. He said, "Come around by the furnace." So he said, "You see this book? This is the end of it." And he threw it in the furnace.

LEVINE: Oh!

VIGGIANO: He said, "It's forgotten. They don't owe us anything." So you cannot do that with Giant Eagle today, or any other business.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

VIGGIANO: But yes, it was very, you know, tightly knit. Our friends were the friends of Serbians or Jewish people or Polish people across the street. You know, we went to school with those friends, and so it was. And of course, we were called a few names, like, you know, meatball, on the school ground, playground, because we were Italian, and meatballs.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. And did the others have names, too?

VIGGIANO: Oh, sure, yeah! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Now what kind of a town was it? What did most people do for work in that town?

VIGGIANO: They worked on the local railroad.

LEVINE: Oh.

VIGGIANO: And many of our customers were people that worked on the railroad, and the people in the community.

LEVINE: You don't mean building it, you mean, like, working on it?

VIGGIANO: As engineers, or as brakemen, or just repairing the railroad. It was a very huge railroad hub area.

LEVINE: Oh, what railroad was it?

VIGGIANO: Pennsylvania.

LEVINE: Pennsylvania Railway, yeah.

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VIGGIANO: And it was all—and I remember vividly the trains coming through, and the women would always hang their white sheets and white clothes out in the backyard, and the trains would come through and spew all this dirty black smoke, sooty smoke, and it went all over the sheets. And the women would take their brooms and run down to the railroad, and yell and scream [laughs] at the engineer, or the, you know, brakeman!

LEVINE: Uh-huh, yeah, wow. So—

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: Now, do you live near there now?

VIGGIANO: Yes.

LEVINE: Ah, uh-huh.

VIGGIANO: In the same town of Wall.

LEVINE: Oh, you do? Uh-huh.

VIGGIANO: And in the same house that my father lived in, and my mother, all these years. I have a beauty salon where we had the store.

LEVINE: Oh!

VIGGIANO: Even though I teach high school every day, we still have people working in that beauty salon. And my mother has since passed away, but we don't have anyone living upstairs. The apartment is still the same, and so we just keep it that way for when we have company or guests, like my cousins coming over from Italy, and so forth.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VIGGIANO: And so we live—my daughter lives next door to where we had the grocery store.

LEVINE: Hm. Did anybody in the family, that you can recall, want to go back?

VIGGIANO: We've gone back to Italy. We've gone back to Italy, to Acquaviva D'Iserina. We've gone back a number of times.

LEVINE: And it was always for a visit rather than thinking you might stay?

VIGGIANO: My daughter wants to build a home in that small village.

LEVINE: How do you feel about that?

VIGGIANO: Well, they put in a very large road, as they do here as well, and it bypassed this very, you know, small villages, and other small villages. So of course, then the population changed completely, because they no longer farm the land. The young people would go to Germany, or to Austria to work, and they would not—they're not now, today, farming the land. But, we're very close with my cousins. Their educational level has risen, to that they all have Ph.D.'s, and my one cousin teaches art at the University of Rome. And his wife teaches Latin, and their have, you know, college. The level—

LEVINE: Yeah, it's not the little town you left?

VIGGIANO: It's not the little town. It is—we were back two years ago, and it's, my cousins still live in that same small town, where they had five or six stores, and other businesses. They're no longer—there's one store.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

VIGGIANO: But nevertheless, the people are, you know, very much the same. There are not as many; there's probably three hundred people in that small town now. And they've also moved out to other larger communities, to Iserina, or to Naples.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. How about the American dream? Do you think that your mother and father felt that they had found that?

VIGGIANO: Oh, definitely, as they watched their children grow in every respect: education, professionally, and so forth. They knew that it could not have happened in Italy, even though education is more common. There's people that, you know, do get these professional jobs, educationally more oriented. Yes, my mother always felt that she had worked very hard, and my father. They were, my father was involved in the politics of the community and so forth.

LEVINE: Oh, really, mm-hm.

VIGGIANO: And they felt the challenges were many, and the rewards were also multiple, you know, multiplied.

LEVINE: Yeah. When you came was actually the Depression here. Did that affect your family?

VIGGIANO: We had the store—we still had the business. And they had, of course, the welfare, that those people are on now, they're getting stipends from the government, and so forth. And my father would never do that. He said, "We [unclear] little we have. We're not going to go for these government stipends." And we still had the business, so instead of doing as much shoe repairing, he had a contract through the government to buy, supply, new shoes to the people in the town. And we didn't have as much. I know that. But we never felt poor. I mean, that was so remarkable, that, you know, we did not have very much, but because we had businesses, we always—and we never felt poor. And I don't think I ever felt poor all my life, even though we didn't have that much. But yeah, the Depression, it was deep depression.

LEVINE: Do you remember the build-up to World War Two? And did World War Two affect your family personally?

VIGGIANO: Yes. My brother was, went to Germany. And he was not—it was shortly after the war was over he was sent to Germany. And he then went from Germany to Acquaviva, and he went there because my mother went over to Italy at that time. So he had borrowed a car, and he drove from Germany to Acquaviva, and he took my mother all over, my uncle, and other, you know, family members, all over Italy in that car. So, yes. And whenever my brother was leaving for the Army, we met him at East Pittsburgh, where the train was just doing a stopover with the troops on it, troop train. Yeah, it did, but thank God, he came back. You know, he was safe.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. Do you remember when the war was over? Do you remember that day?

VIGGIANO: Yes. Big celebrations, in this small town. You know, there was a band, and dancing, and just huge celebration.

LEVINE: Yeah, right. Is there anything else of historic proportion that happened during your growing up years, or that you, that affected you in particular? Is there anything, either political or--?

VIGGIANO: Oh, John F. Kennedy dying. I remember working in our grocery store, being behind the counter, the soda fountain, is where I was standing. And someone came in the store and said, you know, "Did you hear? President

Kennedy was shot!" And so it was just a shock, a shock to everyone, as it was for the nation. But, so that was quite—and it was for the entire nation, not just for our family.

LEVINE: Yeah. How about 9/11, and particularly the Flight Ninety-Three? Do you remember where you were, or how that affected you, or your response?

VIGGIANO: I was teaching. I was in school, and one of the other teachers came by and said, "Did you see it?" He had a TV set in his room, using that to teach. And he said, "You have to come to my room. You have to see this." And here it was the planes going over, and bombing. It was just incredible, of course! I mean, it was—well, you know! I don't need to tell you how it is. It can't happen in America, it just can't!

LEVINE: Right.

VIGGIANO: But we still have faith, you know, that it happened, and we deal with it. You know, and of course, Italians are deeply religious, with deep faith, and I think that's what carries them through, right, many situations, as with 9/11 and so forth.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

VIGGIANO: It's been a great challenge and a great experience, and just having gone through all of this growing up, you know. And the opportunities.

LEVINE: Mm-hm.

VIGGIANO: Every time I traveled to a foreign country, whether it was doing some school research in China, or in Israel, or in other countries, I'd come back, and literally kiss the ground!

LEVINE: Do you think--the immigrant experience of you and your family—do you think that's made a difference in your personality, or in your approach to things?

VIGGIANO: Yes.

LEVINE: The ramifications of that? How could you say that affects the way you are?

VIGGIANO: Because it shows the spirit of individuals, and the perseverance—particularly perseverance of not giving up. We may have all these things happen, all these trials and tribulations, but ahead of us is still a bright sky, and a better road, and bigger things, and better things. So, the best is yet to come.

LEVINE: Well said. What would you say you're most proud of, or satisfied, that you've done?

VIGGIANO: Myself, personally?

LEVINE: Yeah.

VIGGIANO: To have had the opportunity to go to college, because in an Italian family, the boys went to college. When I was growing up, my brothers did; the girls didn't, and I was the only girl in the family. My friends would go to New York, or they'd go to Washington D.C., to wait on tables, to earn money to pay tuition. And I would ask my father, and he would say, "No. You're here until you get married." You know? "You don't leave the house until you're married." And when I was able, even though I was married, I went back to college. And I went to college! I went to cosmetology school when I was still in high school. I owned a shop, got married. My children were grown up; my husband died. I went—he died in June. In September I was at the University of Pittsburgh, starting my degree.

LEVINE: Huh.

VIGGIANO: And my own children have gone to universities. So yeah, I am very proud, because I'm very educationally oriented.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VIGGIANO: And proud, and happy, and humble to have received a letter from a student of mine, that I had in my class seven years ago. I had not heard from this student in seven years, and a month ago I received this announcement. Alex is graduating from the University of Pittsburgh with a degree in computer science and a minor in mathematics. This student had cerebral palsy, severe cerebral palsy. He shook all over. He could not—you could not understand him, really speech impediment, severe. I taught him to do some computer programming. I had not heard from him in seven years.

LEVINE: Hm.

VIGGIANO: So whatever contribution we can make to others, educationally, or otherwise, I mean, I think those are such great rewards.

LEVINE: Yes, yeah. What are you looking forward to now?

VIGGIANO: Working on a Ph.D.

LEVINE: Oh, good for you! Good for you.

VIGGIANO: And of course, I mean, making a contribution to other people's lives.

LEVINE: Wow.

VIGGIANO: And the challenges and opportunities are still there.

LEVINE: Yeah, okay. Well, oh, maybe we should just say your husband's first name?

VIGGIANO: My husband—

LEVINE: And how you met?

VIGGIANO: Oh, well, we had, I was going out with three of my friends, girlfriends, and we were just going to a movie. And this boyfriend of one of my girlfriends said that, you know, he was going to introduce us to some other boys, friends of his. And so we went to an adjoining town nearby. And there's a tunnel in this, you have to go through a small tunnel. And he was going through the tunnel; he stopped the car. On the side of the tunnel, inside the tunnel, were five or six young men. They were shooting dice. And so he introduced us, and one of the boys came around. And the window on my side was open, and he said to his friend, "Well, who's that pretty little girl sitting there?" That's how I met my husband!

LEVINE: [Laughs] And his first name?

VIGGIANO: His name is Ralph.

LEVINE: Ralph. And how many children did you have?

VIGGIANO: I had three girls.

LEVINE: Three girls, right.

VIGGIANO: Three daughters.

LEVINE: Wonderful.

VIGGIANO: And they're, two of them are here with me, going through Ellis Island, still, you know, researching our roots, and so forth.

LEVINE: Do you feel any special connection with Ellis Island, or not?

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VIGGIANO: Well, I think yes, because it's part of our roots. I mean, this is our path, that we traveled. And Ellis Island was part of that path, and the Statue of Liberty. Yes, it's part of the road that we traveled, that contributed to who we are, and what we've become.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. Well, that's a wonderful place to close, unless there's something else you'd like to add before we do close?

VIGGIANO: I want to thank you for this opportunity--.

LEVINE: You're most welcome.

VIGGIANO: --to contribute. And the best is yet to come for America.

LEVINE: Ah, okay—

VIGGIANO: And of course, you have to say, God bless America! [Laughs]

LEVINE: You do! [Laughs] And I've been speaking with Renzie Viggiano. Is that right?

VIGGIANO: Yes, and I'm remarried, so my name is Randie, and my professional name is Randie, R-A-N-D-I-E.

LEVINE: Oh, okay, Randie.

VIGGIANO: Viggiano Beri, B-E-R-I.

LEVINE: B-E-R-I. Okay, so it's Randie Viggiano Beri.

VIGGIANO: It is.

LEVINE: Say it again.

VIGGIANO: Randie Renzie.

LEVINE: Randie Renzie, okay.

VIGGIANO: Viggiano, and my maiden name was Petrocelli.

LEVINE: Right, okay.

VIGGIANO: So all these names, you know, Randie, Renzie, Viggiano, Petrocelli, Beri. I mean, you know, it's America, isn't it? It's the diversification in our culture, America? Each time I've gone to places like Japan, I come back to America, and I say, "Thank God for the diversity of our people."

Because after I'd been, was in Japan for a couple weeks, I got very tired of seeing all the people that looked the same. And here we're so different, and we're so fortunate!

LEVINE: Yeah. Right. Okay, well I want to thank your for a wonderful interview. I'm so delighted. I was going to ask you: you're here today for a meeting? Is that part of your visit?

VIGGIANO: That's part of why we came here. We came here because we had been thinking about coming here for quite a long time.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

VIGGIANO: And three of my daughters are teachers, and so I'm here with two of my daughters that are teachers. And so we thought, you know, we want to go there, because we can share this with our students as well, this experience, and perhaps encourage them to become interested in the history of America.

LEVINE: Well, your interview is one of those things that students have exposure to, and do become interested, because I have worked with this material with a number of students, and it's a first-hand account. It's history from people who lived it, and so it's very valuable!

VIGGIANO: And perhaps we should change our education system to that students would go to high school, elementary school, high school, for three years, and the final year they would go to a foreign country, and see how blessed we are in America. To some poor country. And they need that. They need that, because we have so much in America. And I think the young people need to see why they need to appreciate the goodness and the benefits and advantages of being an American.

LEVINE: Okay, well that is a beautiful place to end. Thank you so much for a lovely interview.

VIGGIANO: Thank you.

LEVINE: Okay, this is Janet Levine signing off for the National Park Service.

END OF INTERVIEW