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Three Generations of Italians: Interview with Alfred DeStafano by Susan McGuire

Alfred DeStafano

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE       Alfred De Stefano
INTERVIEWER             Susan McGuire
DATE OF INTERVIEW         February 23, 1979

SUBJECTS COVERED

Childhood, Growing up in an Italian household
Italian Influence
Education and Work
Traditions
Social Issues
Al, could you please tell me a little about your childhood?

Well, the parts that I remember, I don't remember very much about my earlier childhood, I remember there was a lot of confusion in the household when my sister was born obviously. But in the later years that I do remember it was a good childhood and a happy childhood, a childhood that a lot of involvement with family. Specially on my mother's side, her brother who lived in Providence at the time, who had three children at the time, we would get together very often, every Sunday as a rule. I used to look forward to seeing them because I didn't have any friends in the area so it was most family involvement then.

Can you tell me how much education you had?

Well, I made to my third year in college and
I managed to get sick in my third year, not necessarily sick of school but physically ill. I was out of school for two weeks during exams and I never got the initiative to go back so I just entered the work force.

INTERVIEWER: Did your parents want you to have a good education?

INTERVIEWEE: Well of course they did, I think most parents want the best for their children, I think all parents want the best for their children. My father never had much of an education, he never made out of grade school and my mother did graduate from high school but my father especially wanted me to have a much better education than he did because he use to tell me that he didn't want me to have to go to work everyday like he did.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that you entered the work force, what kind of work do you do?

INTERVIEWEE: Now I'm a disc jockey, then I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do, all I knew was that I didn't want to go back to school. I pretty much, seeing the way I left school, and feeling the way I did about having enough school for a while, entered into the work force as a typewriter repairperson. I did that for a while and then I finally got involved in radio and did a lot
of work in, if you want to call independent study, just basically a lot of work on my own to get to be on the radio.

INTERVIEWER: Do you enjoy what you are doing?
INTERVIEWEE: Definitely.

INTERVIEWER: Your not sorry that you left school then?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes and no, both positive and negative feelings about that. It would have been nice to have made it to a degree granting stage but just for the sake of having it after putting that much time. As far as the regrets other than that, no, I'm happy with what I am doing now and I do enjoy it. It's nice when you can go to work and have fun at the same time.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think you hurt your parents by leaving school?
INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. I think they did feel that a little bit because naturally they made sacrifices so I could have gone to school. All parents sacrifice a lot and I know they did very much. They tried to support me through school and I worked when I was going to school too, help to support myself. A lot of expenses occur and a lot of hopes and dreams that may have come crashing to a halt when I left school. My father never really made it to see me on WPRO at all but my mother, even though she may not be totally happy about
it at times, at other times you can tell she is pretty proud about it.

INTERVIEWER: Through your childhood did you ever learn about Italy? Maybe through your grandparents?

INTERVIEWEE: Well there was a lot of influence in that respect in the area. My grandmother lived with us for quite a while until one day she fell and broke her hip and was in hospitals and nursing homes after that but in my very early years my grandmother on my father's side was with us. A lot of Italian was spoken in the household and I picked up the dialect and it wasn't very hard for me to speak in either language then. Since then, the influence has gone from the household, I all but forgotten all of my Italian; but then my grandmother was here (she spoiled me rotten, it was nice to have her around) and years later on my mothers' side, my grandmother died and my grandfather was here. There was a time when they were both here with us together.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me what it is to be an American?

INTERVIEWEE: Superman, apple pie, mom. What it is to be an American? America offers a lot of opportunities, a lot of freedoms that I'm sure you can't get in other places and we have our rights here that no one can take away from us, the right to life, liberty, and the all important pursuit for hap-
INTERVIEWER: Now can you tell me what it is to be an Italian?
INTERVIEWEE: In all honesty I really can't tell you what it is to be an Italian. I'm aware of my heritage but I never visited Italy. There was a lot of influence there, but then again it was an Americanized influence from my grandparents who came to this country looking for a better way and my parents were both in this country so we're more American than Italian.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of the traditions you adhere to?
INTERVIEWEE: That's kind of a tough question. Every once in a while we'll break a loaf of Italian bread at the table rather than slicing it; but quite often we use a knife and do it in a nice and neat American way. Unfortunately we had to a lot of dealings with death in the family in the past few months and there is an Italian custom about collecting money at wakes and that helps to fer the cost of the wake and funeral and that was adhered to by my mother when both my father and grandfather died. Eat a lot of macroni, of course we enjoy that, and lasagne. I really don't know if that's a tradition to adhere to or just a preference I guess.

INTERVIEWER: Did you find it difficult to go to school, make friends, learn America's values on life and then
INTERVIEWEE: have to go home and switch to Italian values on life?

INTERVIEWER: I never, I don't remember as a child ever feeling any frustrations or any conflict at all or confusion about that. Everything seemed to fit together very well, what was home was home. Like I said there was a lot of Italian influence but that was all it really was. It was never pushed, it was never pushed upon me and there was never any conflict about going to school and learning things about America and the American way. I don't remember my parents ever complaining about the school system not teaching anything about Italian History or anything like that. We were here and we are here.

INTERVIEWER: What is expected of you as a son?

INTERVIEWEE: I guess what is still expected is my loyalty to the family, to remain true. I don't necessarily know if that is just the Italian way of thinking because there is always feelings back to the family, I mean that is where your roots are and just be aware of it basically and don't forget about it which would be pretty difficult to do.

INTERVIEWER: Do you try to do your best in what is expected of you?

INTERVIEWEE: I try! I don't know how well I do. First you have to be true to yourself and do what you feel
is right and then you can fill other people's expectations of you.

INTERVIEWER: What is your attitude toward religion?

INTERVIEWEE: A lot of people would say my that my attitude toward religion isn't very good. It's not important to me really. I was brought up going to church every Sunday in the Catholic Church, received my first Communion, received my Confirmation. I never really questioned much about the faith. I did do one semester at P.C. as far as religion was that they taught us to question about the faith and if you can't question it and come up believing that it's really no good and I did question about the faith and there seems there are more questions than answers. I quite often looked toward the world of science for answers to mysteries rather than religion so I have to say religion doesn't influence my life one way or the other right now.

INTERVIEWER: What is your attitude about dating? Do you feel that it's good to show a lot of affection in public or should it be kept within the house, within four walls type thing?

INTERVIEWEE: I'm sure there are certain limitation for everything but the amount of affection you show in public, I don't necessarily think it's a bad thing to show affection in public. I realize
that in some older cultures that your not suppose to kiss on the streets. It was actually a crime I believe in some older civilizations and cultures to do such things but I don't, I think that is foolish. I don't see anything wrong in showing amounts of affection in public. Of course, there are more intimate moments which have to be shared in private.

INTERVIEWER: Were you able to date while you were a teenager say at 16 years old?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I was. I didn't very much then but not because my parents didn't want me to. I guess I just wasn't very popular in high school then. There was never any pressure there from them one way or another. They didn't pressure me to start dating early, to get serious with anyone, or anything along those lines. What I did was basically up to me. There were always the questions that were asked about where are you going, what time are you going to be home, don't be out to late, and drive carefully. Other than that there was never any pressures in which direction to go as far as dating or not dating or who I saw and when I saw them.

INTERVIEWER: Do you want to get married? What are your feelings toward marriage?

INTERVIEWEE: My feelings toward marriage used to be much more
negative than they are now only because I've seen quite a few unhappy marriages where it's been a marriage just in sake of the name alone and there's been nothing left after a certain number of years whatever it happens to. My parents on the other hand, this may sound strange, was one of the few good marriages that I've seen, and for me to talk this way after coming out of a household that has been happy, may throw some people off; but like I said I have seen the other side of the fence, the other side of the bridge. There are unhappinesses, unhappinesses in a lot of marriages. I don't know if it is necessarily marriage that I object to or just the fact that a lot of people a lot of the time people get married who really don't know one another. So I think I would opt for marriage maybe after a trial marriage, for two people to get to know each other and see if they really are compatible as they think. Then if they are and they want to get married fine. I'm not one for hassling people or worrying about what other people do or what other people think because other people are always going to have thoughts. There's no taking that away from them and I believe in freedoms. If two people want to live together then I think that is there right, if they want to
INTERVIEWER: live together temporarily to see if marriage will suit them then I think that is their right. Marriage I think I will go probably for after living together for a while in a trial situation. What is your attitude toward divorce?

INTERVIEWEE: Well in my world there isn't much need for divorce because it would never get that far. I don't feel it is wrong, you do take vows but baseball players sign contracts and they don't necessarily play them out or play out their options. You take your vows and I'm sure at the time every good intention is there and you tend to carry out your vows but people change, times change, influences on our lives change. It's just that it's such a dynamic society involving so much change that it's conceivable in my mind that two people got along very well together, after ten years of marriage, not get along so well together. It is conceivable and I know it happens a lot that people get married for the wrong reasons, people get married because they have to get married. Kids get married before they realize that they are still kids and they have a lot of growing and changing to do. I think that is maybe the biggest cause of it because a lot of young marriages, especially when your young maybe between the time you're 18 and 25 or 26. Just to
pick two figures out of the air, that's one of
the most dynamic time in your life. You're
picking a career, you're going in that direction,
you're working hard at that, and then you get
into it you may like it or you may not like it.
You may want to try something else and a burden
of a marriage at the time may not have been
right. So I don't frown upon it, as far as saying
I wouldn't criticize anyone who was divorced,
because they were divorced. I think it is maybe
the most intelligent thing to do in most situa-
tions. To realize, hay, this isn't working any-
more, we've taken the vows, but what's the sense
of leading 20 or 30 more unhappy years of life
just because of something we said when we were
kids. It is much more honest to be honest with
yourself and do what you have to do.

Do you feel there should be abortion?

That especially in this day, is a very sensitive
area and separation of church and state, the
church didn't have a whole lot to say about abor-
tion. I personally could not condone an abortion
first of all. However I do believe the right is
there for a woman to make up her own mind about
or a woman and a man to make up their own minds
about rather than something being shoved down
their throats by a legislature or a legislature
influenced by the church. All the pro-lifers or anti-abortionists, whichever way you choose to look at it, fine everyone is entitled to their own opinions but as far as making others believe and do what they feel and believe, I don't think they have that right. I think it's our society and the all American ways are based on freedoms. It is a very sticky situation, it all depends, some would call it murder. It all depends upon when you think life begins. Is it at the moment of conception and I don't really say I believe it is because a woman has a burden to bear for so many months and she can not bear that burden for whatever her reason may be, she does not want to then I don't feel we should be telling her she has to. People make mistakes and there are many methods of prevention now and if you're going to take the sternnest viewpoint then you'd be thinking along the lines of the church and even that is a crime because you are stopping life from happening. If someone makes a mistake and they don't want to or their life is such that they can't pay for that the rest of their lives, I don't think they should have to.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think a man 's and a woman's role in society is?
INTERVIEWEE: In today's world I think that is a very difficult situation and the line between them is growing finer and finer everyday. It's almost at the point now where you really can get in trouble talking about role playing and different roles, what is typically a man's role and what is typically a woman's role. The ERA is very strong right now. Women don't want to be second class citizens and they shouldn't have to be. There is no reason why a woman can't do what a man does. I feel this will soon be an out-dated question.

INTERVIEWER: You don't feel a woman should be in the home, taking care of the house, cooking the food and making sure it is ready for when the husband comes home?

INTERVIEWEE: I don't want to say that we've seen the last of that because that is definitely not the case. There are strong role models there and many people will be adhering to those for a long time; but as far as I'm concerned if I'm either living or married to a person, no, she will not be home cooking food and taking care of 3 toddlers in diapers or whatever. Whatever burdens or responsibilities that have to be beared they should be beared equally. I'm sure I want a career women for my women cause I think that can form the
strongest of relationships, is where each member has their own thing to do and takes up a lot of their time, where they can concentrate on what they are doing so you don't get totally involved with each other in such a way that it wears on you after a while which probably makes a lot of women very fed up with being at home. Taking care of three children, seven days a week, with no break, while the amn gets out does his own thing and comes home, eats dinner, reads the paper and then falls asleep, I'm not sure that I would want that at all.

INTERVIEWER: Who do you feel should be the main bread winner of the family?

INTERVIEWEE: I don't think there should be a main bread winner of the family. I think that is foolish and it should be shared equally. A man and a woman sharing a life they can share the expenses especially when a career man is married to a career woman, all the better for them. They would be that much more affluent in the society.

INTERVIEWER: Are you an American or an Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: I'd have to say that I'm an American.