Federal Hill Project: Interview with Catherine Bruzzese by Alba D. Iadeluca - July 17, 1978 - TAPE 20

Catherine Bruzzese

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Oral History Interview
with
CATHERINE BRUZZESE
July 17, 1978
204 Magnolia Street
Providence, RI
By Alba D. Iadeluca

INTERVIEWER: How are you Cathy?
INTERVIEWEE: Fine, thank you.
INTERVIEWER: I would like to ask you about the place where you were born and your life there before coming to the United States. Where were you born?
INTERVIEWEE: I was born in Grotteria, a town in the province of Reggio Calabria. My Region is Calabria. I was born and raised there. I went to grammar and junior high school there.
INTERVIEWER: How many years did you live in Calabria?
INTERVIEWEE: I lived there 14 years. I then came to the United States with my family and settled here.
INTERVIEWER: Where did you arrive when you came to the United States?
INTERVIEWEE: I arrived in Logan Airport in Boston. We arrived in January, but it was not cold then. We didn't have snow until 2 months after we came. I remember the
people saying that we brought them good weather from Italy. In Calabria it is very warm; it does not snow like here; I remember seeing the snow once during my 14 years there.

INTERVIEWER: When you arrived in Boston what was your first impression?

INTERVIEWEE: I like Boston; I thought it was a big city. The cars looked very big and the highways very wide. But I was very confused. I felt like a stranger, everything was so different from home.

We then arrived to Providence. All this time I kept picturing what my house was going to be like. But when I arrived in Providence to the house where we were going to live in, I was disappointed.

INTERVIEWER: In what way? Was it much different from what you had imagined it to be?

INTERVIEWEE: When I opened the door, there was a big stairway facing me; it almost scared me. I pictured it to be much prettier, a different style.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that you arrived with your family, who had made the arrangements for this house?

INTERVIEWEE: Our relatives who already lived here.

INTERVIEWER: Where was this house? In Providence?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it was in Providence, on Federal Hill.

INTERVIEWER: An Italian section?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it was an Italian section, but it had very
little in common with Italy. The older people who came to Federal Hill many years ago were different. They had the old way of thinking. They remained the Italians of so many years ago. They did not speak the national Italian language; they all spoke different dialects from their towns. I didn’t associate with too many Italians except for a few Italian friends in school.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to school here?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I went to Bridgham to complete the junior high school.

INTERVIEWER: Did you speak English when you went to Bridgham?
INTERVIEWEE: Not a word. I managed to successfully attend classes such as math, science, history, geography where I was able to follow the class regardless of my not speaking English. At first it was like using sign language with the teachers, but we managed to understand each other.

The strange thing about junior high school was when they decided to have me in their Italian classes. There I would actually help the teachers with words and the reading especially.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think about that? I mean helping the Italian teacher?
INTERVIEWEE: I thought it was strange helping him. If he was there to teach the Italian language he should have
known it better than he did. Also, I noticed that more than the actual national language he was teaching some dialect.

INTERVIEWER: Did you attend High School after that?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I went to Central High School. That's where I started learning the English language. At Central they had an ESL class for all foreign students. The class was conducted in English only and the English language was the only mean of communication.

INTERVIEWER: How big was the ESL class?

INTERVIEWEE: About 30 students.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any other Italian students besides you?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes several. But we could not talk Italian to each other.

In fact, to prevent the possibility of speaking our own language, the teacher would sit us far apart from one another.

INTERVIEWER: Did you like the idea of not being able to talk in Italian to your Italian friends?

INTERVIEWEE: No, because sometimes I could not express myself in English and I would have liked to say it in Italian.

INTERVIEWER: In cases of extreme difficulties with the English language, were you able to talk to the Italian students so that they would relay the message in English to the teacher?
INTERVIEWER: No, the teacher was very strict. I liked her as a teacher, but I did not like her attitude. I stayed in the ESL class 2 years. I thought this was very unfair because a new girl came in, she spoke much less English than I did but the teacher put her a year ahead and kept me behind.

INTERVIEWER: Are you talking about grades?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, after 2 years of ESL, I was put in the 9th grade and the other girl who had only had 1 year of ESL was put in the 11th grade. I told the teacher that this was very unfair, but she did not seem to like people who spoke-up and especially Italians she did not like them. This did not happen only to me, but also to my Italian friends. And we finally got to the point when we strongly believed that she did not like us because of our nationality.

INTERVIEWER: The girl who was put in the 11th grade, was she Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: No, she was Spanish.

Another thing happened, two new students came in. They were Portuguese. It seemed that they never went to school in their country or if they did they had very few years of education (may be 3rd or 4th grade). They needed much help in everything; it was very hard to teach them a new language when they did
not know their own. The teacher used to help them a lot.

This ESL class was made up of different groups. A low group; a more advanced one and so on. The two Portuguese students were in the lowest group; in fact, they two only made up the lowest group. The teacher would spend about 1 hour each day with them. Then she asked me to help them out. As I said, I was in the ESL class for 2 years and what these two students were learning, I had already learned the year before. This fact of helping them out was beginning to interfere with my regular lessons.

Every morning we were given an hour to review our homework, but I was not getting this hour because I was helping the two students. In the afternoons, after school, I had a job to go to, so my time to study was limited and I liked to have that hour in the morning at school.

INTERVIEWER: Were you asked to help these two students every day?
INTERVIEWEE: At first she would ask me occasionally, then it got to be an habit.

INTERVIEWER: Where the two students benefiting much from your help?
INTERVIEWEE: Yes, they learned the alphabet, and words such as table, chair, etc.
INTERVIEWER: Did you complete High School?

INTERVIEWEE: No, because after spending my free time to help the two students, I would get behind in my work, so I would not be prepared for my lessons. The teacher would ask me why I was not prepared, and I told her it was because I was giving my free hour to them (the two students). She told me the next morning to study my lessons first and then help the other two students. So, the next morning, I started reviewing my lesson, but the teacher approached me, handing me the book to go and help the Portuguese students. I reminded her of what she told me the day before about my studying my lesson first. She said: "I told you to go there and help them". I then replied: "You are the teacher, you're supposed to teach them, not me."

Ever since that day we had a bad relationship. She would pick on me for anything I did. The situation became uncomfortable, I talked to another teacher about this and he suggested that I talk to my counsel. I then came to find out that she was my counsel and there was nothing I could do. I got to the point where I could not take her anymore and I told her that it was my last day. Of course, she did not believe me, but I had made up my mind and that was my last day.
INTERVIEWER: Do you regret not having finished school?

INTERVIEWEE: The job I have now does not require high school, but I would like to better myself.

INTERVIEWER: What type of job do you do?

INTERVIEWEE: I work in an industry. It pays good money. But I plan to go into something else. I am presently attending school and will get my high school equivalency. I shall be getting it very soon.

INTERVIEWER: What do you do in your free time?

INTERVIEWEE: I go out, I visit my friends. With them we take week-end trips. The week-end of the 4th of July we went to Hampton Beach and we had a very nice time. We enjoyed ourselves very much. We are very close and this is really nice.

INTERVIEWER: Are your friends italian?

INTERVIEWEE: Not all of them. I have some italian friends and some american friends. I don't believe in associating with just my people. I like to have all kinds of people for friends. Nationality does not matter. In fact, I also go out with my american friends and we have a very nice time together.

INTERVIEWER: Do you practice any sport in your free time?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, in the winter time I play bowling and in the summer I play tennis, I also go to the beach a lot.
INTERVIEWER: During the years you lived in the United States did you ever return to Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I went back to visit two times. I enjoyed it very much. The first time I went to visit my relatives and my town. The second time I did not see my relatives, I went on a tour.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you stay when you were last there?

INTERVIEWEE: I stayed 3 weeks. During the 3 weeks we visited almost all Italy and it was just beautiful. I took so many pictures and met so many people who I still write to.

INTERVIEWER: When you went back to visit did you find Italy different from how it was when you first left to come to the United States?

INTERVIEWEE: I cannot really say it. Because when I lived in Italy I was very young and I did not do much traveling. When I went back the first time and went to my village I thought things were a little different. The village had expanded. There were new buildings, new stores, also the people were different.

INTERVIEWER: In what way were the people different?

INTERVIEWEE: When one goes back to Italy after living here, people look at you as an american, that puts me on a spot. Here they consider you as an italian, there they consider you as an american.
INTERVIEWER: Do you see yourself as an american or as an Italian?

INTERVIEWEE: At this point I think I see myself as an American. Because I grew up here. Here I spent those years that mature a person.

INTERVIEWER: Although you are now living in the United States and feel as an American, do you still maintain some Italian traditions?

INTERVIEWEE: As far as cooking traditions, yes. We eat Italian food, we bake and we have big meals especially on the holidays. I myself do not like to carry on traditions, I consider myself more modern.

INTERVIEWER: Do you believe in festivities and community parties, like the St. Joseph's Day on Federal Hill or other such festivities?

INTERVIEWEE: I believe in it; I like to go may be for one night; but I do not like to be a part of it.

INTERVIEWER: I imagine you speak Italian. Is the Italian language spoken at home?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, with my parents I always speak Italian, but sometimes with my sisters and my friends we speak in English.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find it easier to express yourself in English?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I do.
INTERVIEWER: Do you still live in Federal Hill? Where do you live now?

INTERVIEWER: I live on Magnolia Street, in the Silver Lake section. That is also an Italian section.

INTERVIEWER: If you had to come back to Federal Hill would you like to?

INTERVIEWEE: No, because there are older Italians there and also because the houses are not too comfortable. For example, the yard space is very small and one cannot have a cook-out or outside party or simply entertain people out in the yard. Also, for the children there is not too much room for them to play.

INTERVIEWER: There are some community organizations on Federal Hill as you already know. They are seriously trying to re-build Federal Hill. What do you think about this possible re-birth of Federal Hill?

INTERVIEWEE: I think it is possible and it is very nice for the people who are living there and who intend to stay there. I like to go on Federal Hill. I always go to "It's a small world". This is an Italian coffee shop. They sell delicious pastries, and it is almost the only place where one can buy a "cappuccino". I also like Caserta Pizzeria on Federal Hill. They make very good pizza there; my
friends and I always go and treat ourselves with a pizza.

INTERVIEWER: Do you do any shopping on Federal Hill?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, my mother buys cold cuts in an Italian store there on Federal Hill and she likes that. I think now that they are fixing the roads, if they make it appealing enough, there would be more people on Federal Hill and it would be very nice to see more people there.

INTERVIEWER: As a woman, do you consider yourself an old-fashioned lady or a more liberated one?

INTERVIEWEE: There are certain things I like to be old-fashioned about and there are others about which I am more modern. By old-fashion I mean that I believe in respect and morale; respect for my parents and I try not to disappoint them too much. By modern I mean that I like to follow the new style with the clothes. I believe in taking trips and spending some time for myself.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of the woman in general. What should her role be?

INTERVIEWEE: I believe that a woman should have a job; I don't believe in her spending all her time in the house. It is good for her to go out and spend time for herself, too. I believe a man should respect her
as an individual. He should respect her job, too, or her career whatever the case may be.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think she should also be a good mother and a good wife?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, if she chooses to get married and have a family she should be responsible, but she should also take care of herself and her out-of-the-family interests whatever they may be, such as, jobs, sports, etc.

INTERVIEWER: What religion are you?

INTERVIEWEE: Catholic.

INTERVIEWER: Are you an active catholic?

INTERVIEWEE: Not really. I do not go to church every Sunday, but I believe in God, I enjoy going to church at Christmas and Easter mostly.

INTERVIEWER: Are your Christmases and Easthers in America different from those you had in Italy?

INTERVIEWEE: Not really. The religion is the same and the tradition of going to church especially on those days is also the same.

INTERVIEWER: Do you participate in church activities and volunteer work for church bazaars?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I think the Church is the House of God and it should not be used as a demonstration place or a place where sales of different merchandise is taking place.
INTERVIEWER: What do you think about the priests?

INTERVIEWEE: I used to believe them more when I was younger. Certain ones I still believe in, but others seem to be out just to make money.

INTERVIEWER: Are you interested in politics?

INTERVIEWEE: No, also because I have never voted. I became an United States citizen just last year.

INTERVIEWER: So, you are a real american!

INTERVIEWEE: A citizen yes, but I was born in Italy.

INTERVIEWER: It has been pleasant talking to you. I thank you very much for this interview.

INTERVIEWEE: You are very welcome. It was my pleasure!