

Clelia Ilacqua

Full Transcript

Interview Conducted June 8, 2021

Interviewer

I'm going to start by asking you for a brief bio.

Clelia Ilacqua

I was born in 1952, August 3rd. I was born at St. Joseph's Hospital in Syracuse, New York, which is on the North Side, which is the Italian neighborhood. So I was born in the Italian neighborhood. I grew up here and went to school here and later went to Syracuse University. I studied biology and speech pathology there, then I went to dental school in Buffalo. I lived in Buffalo for seven years and practiced dentistry there for about three years. I moved to Connecticut, had my first child and worked as a dentist in Connecticut for a few years. When I had my second child, we moved to New Jersey where my husband was from, and I had my own practice there for twenty-two years. I sold the practice and came back home. So, I'm back in Syracuse. I live on the North Side. I came back here in 2011. So I've been back here ten years.

I practice dentistry, but I do it part time, because I am retired. I do volunteer work at the free clinic at the St. Joseph's residency program. I go to church at Our Lady Pompei. I sing in the choir there. I am in Syracuse chorale as well. I belong to the ADA, the 5th district dental society, the New York State Dental Association and the Onondaga County Dental Society.

Interviewer

How would you want to be introduced to a broad audience of people on the street or people who might come to the downtown circle and interact with this project?

Clelia Ilacqua

Dr. Ilacqua. That's what most people call me.

Interviewer

Thank you. To start very open-ended, what are your thoughts about the Columbus monument that's currently in the downtown circle?

Clelia Ilacqua

Well, I hadn't given it much thought until last summer, when I started seeing people taking statues down and damaging them, especially in Boston. And I'm not terribly attached to it, except that my grandfather was one of the businessmen on the North Side who put their pennies together and erected the statue. They commissioned it, and then they had all the parts sent from Italy, and they put it together. So there is a little bit of a tie there. And I thought, "this is ridiculous," that there's a chance that someone could knock it down. I understand that there are quite a few statues that have come down, and many of them have been vandalized. So I wrote to the mayor, because I knew he was toying with this idea of taking it down, and he had a commission that was studying the idea. And I wanted to express my opinion, because I'm a North Sider; I'm an Italian American. I have an historic interest in it, somewhat. And I thought he should know that there are some of us who are in favor of him taking the statue down for the sake of the statue. It's a beautiful statue; it shouldn't be destroyed. And there is a little bit of history and heritage there that belongs to us. And I don't want it defaced. So I wrote him that in an email, and he responded and told me that he appreciated my opinion and that I was not the only person who had reached out to him with that same sentiment. So that was good, because I wanted

to make sure we weren't all hotheads about this, and I wanted him to know that some people did favor this and it was okay. I realized he had his back to the wall. He's between a rock and a hard place trying to please everyone. And it would be okay if he decided to take the statue down.

So then he called me back personally and asked me if I would be on this committee to decide what to do with the statue once we take it down, and further if I had any ideas about what to put in its place. I've never had a real strong connection with Christopher Columbus, and I don't think my family does either. I think that injustice was done, and I think we need to right that injustice, and that's fine. My first question to the committee and to the mayor was, "if it wasn't Christopher Columbus at the top of that obelisk, would we even be having this discussion?" And the answer is NO. So if the Italian Americans back in 1934 had decided to put a globe, or Amerigo Vespucci, or Leonardo da Vinci, or Victor Emmanuel or some other Italian of note, on top of that obelisk, we would not even be having this discussion. So the thorn in the side of the people that are opposed to this statue is the fact that it is Columbus. I personally don't have a connection with Columbus. Take him down, put him in a museum, tell the story of the Italian Americans and erect another monument to the Italian Americans. As far as I'm concerned, we can leave just the plain obelisk with an engraving on the side that says, "In tribute, in memory of, in acknowledgement of the Italian Americans who came to this country and became American citizens." And if you want to do a virtual [thing], like you're doing, so that people can open their phones and hear more stories about the Italian American experiences, contributions, and all of that? Well, they can do that, and then put the statue someplace safe so that other people can't come along and destroy that little bit of heritage that sort of is connected to us.

Interviewer

Thank you. You've started talking about this already, but the next question on my list is: What histories do the monument and the monument site represent to you? Is there any more you'd like to say about that?

Clelia Ilacqua

I never met my grandfather. So I don't know him as a human being. I met my grandmother—his wife—and I know my aunts, my three aunts, who were his children, and my uncle and my father, and the other uncle was lost in the war. I never met him either.

My grandfather had a bar on the North Side, the Commodore restaurant. He was a local businessman, and he did well for himself. For a person who came from Italy with nothing, he did very well for himself. He owned some property, he owned his own house, he owned some apartment houses, he owned the building where the restaurant was, so I think coming from nothing, he did very well for himself. Now, how he did that, I have no idea. And I'm sure my father was very proud of the fact that his father did so well for himself. As far as my grandmother is concerned, my grandmother, I can tell you honestly, from what my aunts have told me, and from knowing her, never liked the fact that her husband had a bar. My grandmother was an educated woman. She read, she wrote, which was very unusual for an Italian girl. She came here as a young girl with her mother and father and her brother, and she was a devout Catholic. She read her Bible. The important things, to her, were her children and her church, and her religion. She didn't have much good to say about the restaurant. The restaurant, from what I'm told, was a speakeasy. And my father tells the story of how during Prohibition, they continued to sell alcohol. Now, I'm probably getting him in a lot of trouble by saying that, but I don't think he was the only one doing that, so I think we're pretty safe. And he tells the stories of how they got the alcohol in and out without letting the authorities know about it and they got away with it. So of course, my God-fearing grandmother wanted nothing to do with it. So if my grandfather was involved with a bunch of Italian men who wanted to erect a statue, I've got a funny feeling that my grandmother had nothing to do with it and probably wanted nothing to do with it. But she was a good wife and she stayed home and she took care of the house and the kids, and she did her little thing and she didn't complain too much. She was a very sweet woman, a very soft-spoken, quiet kind of person, very reserved. Anyway, I don't think she could care less about Columbus and the statue. To be quite honest, I don't think my aunts—Aunt Jenny, Aunt Mary or Aunt Carm—ever mentioned that statue

in anything I've ever had anything to do with. The person who talked about the statue was my father. He was the oldest son, and probably he was dragged down there by his father, and he was made to think that, you know, this is a great thing, we're putting up the statue. So it was important to my father. And in that regard, I guess it should be important to me because it was important to him. It seems very important to my little brother. He's very attached to that statue. For whatever reason, I don't know.

I've talked to my sister about it. She lives in Italy. And she has responded by saying that she's happy I'm doing this interview. If she was here, she would do it. And she would be happy to do it from Bologna, if you wanted her to. She'd be happy to talk with you.

Interviewer

Yes, please.

Clelia Ilacqua

Okay, I'll give her your contact information. She feels the same way I do. You know, that there was an injustice and the injustice needs to be resolved, that history has got to be made. Okay, we've made history, but she says she doesn't know a good reason for keeping it there. I haven't heard a good argument for keeping that statue there except for nostalgia. And that only takes you so far, you know? So let's right a wrong, and let's move on.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. My next question is about Columbus. You've mentioned not having very strong feelings about Columbus himself, but are there particular things you think people should learn about the history of Columbus and the effects of his voyages?

Clelia Ilacqua

Well, I think one of the reasons they attached themselves to Columbus was because he's considered to be brave. You know, he took off on his own without knowing where he was going, he was adventurous, and that took a lot of guts. I mean, that's a trait that is admired by the Italian Americans, especially these men that were the first immigrants coming here. They did the same kind of thing; they left their home, never to go back again. This was a trait that they admired. So in that regard, this is a good trait, I think. Is it the end-all and be-all of Columbus? No, there's more to the man than that. But you know, he was a symbol of bravery.

Interviewer

Thank you. Are there other histories and stories that you want people who come to the site to learn about?

Clelia Ilacqua

Other stories? Well, you know, there's so many Italian Americans on the North Side, and they all have a different story. You know, my family has its story. And in fact, we have two stories, because my father's family is from Sicily, and they have one kind of immigrant story. And my mother's family is from Naples, and they have a different kind of immigrant story. And I'm guessing that of all the hundreds of people, thousands of people on the North Side, everyone's got a different story. And I think that we should get a smattering of those stories, to kind of create a total picture of what the Italian Americans were up against and what they accomplished.

There are so many different stories. Like I said, my grandmother was from Sicily and was educated. The Sicilians that came here tended to be of an upper class. They lived in a different neighborhood than the other Italians. And then there are the Italians who went to Solvay. That's another whole different group of people. And they tended to stay with the people that they came with. And they had different experiences. The Sicilians kind of congregated together around Maltbe Street and Burnet Ave and that

area. And their church was St. Peter's Church. They do tend to surround their church. And then the people on the other side of my family are from Naples; my grandmother and my grandfather came from Naples, and they were of a much lower class, poorer people. My grandmother was from the countryside. They worked the land, they didn't have anything. A lot of children, that's what they had. And my grandfather was from the city of Naples. He was ousted from his family. His mother died, and his father remarried. His father was in civic life. So he worked with the city government somehow. And the new wife wanted nothing to do with my grandfather and his sister. So they sent his sister, Julia, off to the convent where she died at the age of 80-something. She lived the rest of her life there. That's what they did with people that they didn't want. They just got rid of them. So grandpa's sister was sent to a convent. And I remember my grandfather writing to Julia and getting letters from Julia when I was a kid. He would read these letters and, you know, poor thing! she was living in a convent; she wasn't a nun. She was probably scrubbing the floors. And my grandfather was essentially thrown out on the streets to fend for himself. And then this stepmother proceeded to have, I think, four more children. And they really had nothing to do with him. And so he joined the Italian Army at some point. He was supposed to fight in World War One. He chose to be captured by the Germans because it was better than getting shot at, and so he sat in a German prison camp for a number of years, which he thought was a good time because at least nobody was shooting at him. This is a typical Italian soldier (laughs). They're not fighters.

At any rate, the story is my grandmother and grandfather met up in Naples after the war. And then they got married and they came to this country. They came with nothing. They had the shirts on their back. They came through Ellis Island, and my grandmother was actually quarantined in Ellis Island. She was, I think, nineteen years old at the time. Nineteen or twenty. So she was a young girl. She left her family, left everything she knew. And when she got here, they put her in quarantine. Can you imagine? She must have been scared. She didn't know where she was. She didn't speak the language. And they put her in quarantine because she was sick. She caught something on the boat. I don't know what it was that she had. But they wouldn't let her go until she got better. And then she came to

Syracuse. She followed my grandfather up here. So they struggled. Grandpa delivered milk for the Netherland milk company. My grandmother worked in a factory like most of the poor women on the North Side. They worked in Mr. Pietrafesa's factory that made the clothes for Learbury's. Mr. Pietrafesa is one of the people who put up the statue. My grandmother didn't work for Learbury's for long, she didn't like them. And so she went and worked at the pocketbook factory. She worked on a sewing machine, and she sewed purses all day long. Until the whistle blew at five o'clock, she was sewing purses. And then she came home and she worked at home. I mean, they never stopped working; they worked and worked and worked. And the only day they took off was Sunday, but my grandmother was cooking on Sunday, so she was still working. They were the poor ones. Grandma was the best cook. They might have been poor, but we ate well.

My mother married up when she married my father. His family was educated and they had some wealth.

So you wanted to know about stories of people in the Italian families. There's so many of them. I don't know how you're going to get all of them. But what you can do is collate them and get threads, get trends that ran through them. I'd say the most common thread through both of my families was the stressing of education. My grandmother worked and saved her pennies. She didn't tell my grandfather about the money she saved. She kept her sewing money to herself and whatever extra few cents she had, she put it aside. Her focus was to send my mother to school, because she knew my mother wasn't stupid, and she was a good student. And so my mother graduated from high school, North High, and applied to Syracuse University and got accepted, which was very unusual -- for that generation in that community, to go to college. Most of her girlfriends were going to the factory to work. And my grandfather did not want my mother to go to college. He didn't think she should go to college; she should stay home and have a family, and blah, blah. And my grandmother said, "No, she's going to get an education. She's nobody's fool, she's going to get an education because that's good." Grandma always told us that what was in your head, no one could take away from you. And so my mother had to go back to school and take chemistry because she didn't have chemistry and she needed it for college.

Then she went to Syracuse University. She wanted to be a nurse because her best friend -- this is how she met my father -- her best friend, Carmela, was going to nursing school. This is my aunt, this is my father's sister. And she was going to nursing school, and my mother wanted to go to nursing school too. You know, they were girlfriends, they wanted to go to nursing school together. My grandmother said, "No, my daughter is not cleaning anybody's bedpans. You're not going to nursing school, find something else to study." There was very little that women could do in 1940. There wasn't much for women. Most of the men were going off to the war. You could be a teacher, or you could be a nurse. Well, she didn't want to do either of those, so she applied for home economics. So she went to Syracuse University, and she got a bachelor's degree in home economics. I'm looking at her notes, because I've got some of her notebooks. And she took a lot of chemistry and food science and electronics and budgeting and bookkeeping. And you know what? It was a pretty intensive course. It wasn't for any dummy. But anyway, she did it, and that's how she met my father, because her best friend was my aunt, and one went to nursing school and the other one went into home economics. And when she was up at SU, the Italian Americans kind of hung together. She was with a group of women that were all Italian Americans from different areas of the city. Her good friend, Rose Guerra, and the whole bunch of them used to hang out at the corner store and smoke. She never told my grandmother. That was a big deal in 1940.

She graduated in 1944, and then she went to work. She went to work at the county because there were no jobs. Her goal, her dream job, was to be a food writer for McCall's Magazine. That's what she wanted to do in the worst way. And she tells a story about how she and all of her girlfriends hightailed it down to New York City because they were all going to get these jobs. And they all came back with their tails between their legs because there were no jobs in New York City in 1944. There was nothing for them to do. So they came back. And that's why she went to the county, because she had to work, she had to find something to do, and the county was hiring caseworkers and social workers. Her girlfriend Jean got them in there, because Jean was a social worker. Jean was a fine arts major and did some studies in social work, and she ended up being a social worker in the children's division. My

mother always worked. She took a few years off when we were kids, but the big emphasis was on education and work.

On my father's side, it was the same thing. My grandfather had the money to send his kids to college. He had no problem with that. Aunt Jenny went to business school, because she was the oldest and that's what he thought she should do. So she went to business school. And she worked in immigration and naturalization. She used to train people who were coming here from Italy, and teach them whatever they needed to take their tests so that they could get their citizenship papers.

My father was next in line and he was sent to Syracuse University. He got a degree in business administration. It was called Business Administration and Accounting. His favorite subject was French Literature. He then went and worked in several businesses. He ended up going into the army during WWII and ended up in England, France and Belgium where he got to use his French.

Aunt Carm, like I said, went to nursing school. She got a masters in nursing. She was a very smart woman. She really excelled. She used to teach surgical nursing. She was a smart person.

Aunt Mary went to business school, and Uncle Pat was sent to college, but he didn't like it, so I think he quit. He went into business. So they all had the opportunity to go to school, and it was encouraged. So of course, we grew up with the same emphasis. We were encouraged to go to school. So I went to college, my sister went to college, my brother went to college. College meant assimilation and a better life. We were encouraged to be "American" and were not taught to speak Italian.

Interviewer

Thank you, that helps a lot. As you're telling your story, a lot of it feels like it resonates with my own family, because my grandparents were immigrants from Poland. There's a lot of the same, you know, coming with not very much, emphasizing education.

I've got about three questions left here, but the next one you've addressed a lot. The next one would have been: How does your personal history or your family history shape your feelings about the monument and its meanings? I don't know if there's anything else you'd like to say about that, or if you feel like you've covered it.

Clelia Ilacqua

As you can see, it doesn't. My family's life had very little to do with that monument there. And you know, I love to tell my brother, after 1945 when they gave my grandmother that gold star, I don't think anyone gave a damn about Christopher Columbus. They lost their son. He was only nineteen years old.

Interviewer

I'm so sorry.

How do you think we should think about the monument and the downtown circle in ways that decrease polarization and address its complexities?

Clelia Ilacqua

I think they're already doing that by making that triangle the Heritage Park. I think they've accomplished their goal. I got some flak from the women's group there because -- not me personally, but the whole concept of keeping the circle Italian and the other triangle everybody else, was like, "Why do we have to do that?" Well, you know what, the Italian Americans started this whole thing, this was their monument, you know, let them keep something. We don't have another Heritage Park. We don't have another place that celebrates the Italian experience. So let us keep that little bit of it. And then you can have the other little piece, and...You know, I mean, we have to cooperate. It's called cooperation, you know, something we don't do anymore. The Heritage Park is a very nice idea, the idea

of incorporating all of the ethnic groups that came here, the Polish, the Italians, the Germans, the Irish, the Vietnamese—the North Side is loaded with Vietnamese people, Bhutanese, Senegalese, there's a lot of different groups, not to mention Black people that came here from the south. And then the Indigenous people, of course. And I think there should be a smattering of the Indigenous, but the Indigenous people have already got much to celebrate over up by the lake, and, you know, they can be incorporated into this also, I don't have a problem with that. But I think they've already done what they need to do as far as designing this thing, you know, for everybody.

Interviewer

Just to follow up on that, what's the vision of the relationship between the circle and the triangle, the Heritage Park triangle?

Clelia Ilacqua

The whole thing is going to be called Heritage Park. The triangle on the side there, the Powelson building, is going to celebrate all of the immigrants that came here and their experiences. And the circle is going to be kept primarily for the Italian American experience, however they design it. I'm okay with them just leaving the obelisk, take Columbus out of it; I don't have a problem with that. But I think there's some concepts that are -- they're thinking of putting a different kind of a statue or some kind of other monument there. And I haven't been down there in years. I mean, I walk by all the time, but I never look at it. That's the other thing: I walk by it all the time; I never look at the stupid thing. So it really doesn't mean much to me. If it did I'd stop and read the plaques. I don't know what the plaques say on it, but apparently those bronze plaques are offensive to people. So I'm going to have to go down there and look and see why they're so offensive, but they're going to have to take those off. I had presented to Gregg Tripoli [Director of the Onondaga Historical Association] the monument that was put in the Vatican, which is a boat with all the refugees in it. And it's really interesting, because it's got people from Nazi Germany, it's got American Indians, it's got Syrians from the most current refugee crisis, it's got North Africans, it's got all kinds of people in it. The boat looks like it's going to sink. It

probably has some boat people from Southeast Asia too. It's very symbolic. If you look at it, you know what it's talking about. And so something similar to that could be done. I envisioned a statue of an Italian woman and man and a couple of children and their valises, poor, some kind of statue of the poor people who are all of our grandparents who came here. You know, they all looked like that. So we could do something like that, or they could just leave it the way it is, you know, just Columbus. He's the source of the problem. No one else is.

That's the park. They're calling the whole thing Heritage Park.

Interviewer

Thank you, that makes a lot of sense. That really covers the questions on my list. Are there any other aspects that you want to talk about that we haven't covered or that I haven't asked about?

Clelia Ilacqua

I'm really tired of this subject. I just wanted him [Mayor Walsh] to know he could take it down and it was okay with me. I didn't want to get this deeply into it. But as these things always happen, you know, you start in this and...I just want everybody to get along. You know, I'm so tired of all these people fighting with each other. Anyway, that's all.

Interviewer

Well, here's hoping that the work that you're doing and the work everyone's doing on the committees now will contribute to more dialogue and understanding and diminish the conflict.

Biography

I was born at St. Joseph's Hospital in Syracuse, New York, which is on the north side, which is the Italian neighborhood. I grew up here and went to school here. I went to Syracuse University. I studied biology and speech pathology. Then I went to dental school in Buffalo. I lived in Connecticut and New Jersey. I had my own practice there for 22 years. I sold the practice and came back home. So I'm back in Syracuse, I live on the north side. I came back here in 2011. So I've been here 10 years. I practice dentistry, but I do it part time, because I'm retired. I do volunteer work at the free clinic at the St. Joseph's residency program. I go to church at Our Lady of Pompei, and I sing in the choir there.