

Background

Well, maybe I should just give you a short synopsis of that period of time so that you know what occurred. My father is the Italian side of me. He was born in Albany here in the Bay Area. His parents came here in 1889 or something like that. His father and four brothers and two sisters settled on the peninsula. They all started businesses. They all became wealthy, as did my grandmother on the Italian side. My grandfather's name was Fortunato. My grandmother's name was Onarina. Their last name was Diridoni. Just an I on the end of my name, but it was pronounced Diridoni. And, as you know, in Latin, Diridoni means direction giver. Diri is direction giver is doni. And I didn't realize that, but it's kind of fortuitous. My dad was born in 1912 or '13. I can't remember which. He was the first son of the generation. Our very Catholic family had the policy that the first son of a generation became the priest. They gave the first son to God. So the family celebrated when he was born.

My dad was born in 1912, 13, something like that. And then they moved back to Italy, around about 1925, to take him to preschool. And by that time, they had become wealthy people. He began by cleaning buildings, and then pretty soon he was renting buildings and pretty soon he was owning buildings. In the 20-year period of time he was here, he became wealthy, by our standards, and by Italian standards, he became very wealthy. So, he took his money back to Tuscany, which is where my grandmother was from. She was an Onarina Giacomelli, and Giacomelli is a leap family from Florence that worked with the Medici. In fact, we have a seal that the Medici gave one of our relatives declaring them to be nobility.

Indeed, they became field marshals in the Medici military and are buried in the Medici tomb in Florence. On one hand, my grandmother was a powerful Tuscan leader. My grandfather's side was from Sicily, but they were brought into Pisa, which is the town near where they settled, and became nobility because of the money and because of grandma. They settled in a town called Torre del Lago, which is the hometown of Puccini. They bought a beautiful home on seven acres and a vineyard near Lake Massaciuccoli, which was about three blocks from Puccini's home. They had a villa in Pisa and a villa on the coast of Viareggio, the Italian Riviera.

So, they went from being ragtag immigrants to America to coming back and being among the elite in Tuscany in a period of less than 40 years. Dad went to preschool, and when the hormones began to kick in during puberty, he wasn't going to become a priest. He was a big, good-looking kid. He didn't run from the ladies who started chasing him. I got a note from the priest one day that Grandma showed me that said, "Your son is not priest material." So the family went into crisis. They all cried because he couldn't become a priest. He was sent to mechanic school then, even though he was a really bright guy. Chrysler was running mechanic school all over the world for their cars.

He went to mechanic school. A couple of years later, in the late thirties, he was sent back to America because Mussolini was coming to power, and they didn't want him to lose his American citizenship by being drafted by Mussolini. He was sent back and began to work with the four brothers that stayed here. Because he flirted too much with the girls, I think, he was sent to a

cattle ranch near Eureka on the northern border of California. He learned to speak English and learned some manners on the cattle ranch. He worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps, which is kind of like a home Peace Corps during the end of the downturn period of the Roosevelt administration.

He was working in the area of Dunsmuir. He was the head of the carpool because he knew the mechanic stuff. He ran into my mother who was visiting the area. She was being schooled to become an operatic singer and a piano player. She fell in love with this big, good-looking Italian, and they decided to make babies. They settled in Dunsmuir, and that's where I grew up. Dunsmuir was a division center of the railroad, a very low-income town. Everybody worked for the railroad and didn't make a whole lot of money, but you had enough to feed your family. That's what I grew up in. As soon as I could work, I was working.

I worked first cleaning bricks, chipping the cement off bricks. Then I worked in a gas station during my high school time. When I went away to college, I'm dyslexic. They had to teach me how to learn in a peculiar kind of way. But when I started learning, I really did start learning, and I found that I was pretty bright. I got 99 plus percent on the SAT. Instead of me being a railroader, I had to go to college. I wanted to become a railroad worker. That wasn't very fair. So I went off to college. I worked summers and vacations back on the railroad. I was a brakeman and a fireman.

Every time I had a break, I made sure that I didn't have classes on Fridays. I could take off on Friday morning and be up there and take a train out on Friday evening and try to get back on Monday to go to school again. I did that for seven years, through a bachelor's in accounting and a master's in management, and then you've seen my history, so you know the rest.

Can you share some stories from childhood, and how your Italian-American heritage played a role in your upbringing?

I can tell you that my dad was a traditional male Italian; he was macho. He was big and good-looking, too good-looking for his own good in some cases, and he worked very hard. I can never remember a time that he didn't have three jobs. He'd work on the railroad, come home, sweep out the local grocery store, and then he would cut wood for the neighborhood. He didn't talk much. He'd say in an accent, reacting strangely, speaking in the community. He would shut up and sit there for three days with a vaccine cup. All of a sudden, he kind of disappeared, and he wouldn't be allowed to play football ever. That was nice because we didn't feel alive, that would be the great thing about that. But the reason why I think about it though is the family. At the same time, they began to realize in growing up that being a macho Italian male wasn't appropriate. The thing that made me realize that most was when the Catholic priest in the area, who was a little Irish Catholic guy, looked down on Italians. The Italians were the intruders into the society in Dunsmuir.

They were taking the jobs away from the other guys, like you see the immigrants nowadays. So dad would go to church and give as much money as he could, which wasn't very much. Then the little priest would come over to our house and scream bloody murder at dad. "You got to give more money to the church. You're going to go to hell." I was about four years old, and the little priest came over on one of these mornings. Dad had a terrible temper, by the way. On one of these mornings, dad had just gotten back from working all night on the railroad. He was sitting there at the table with his head down on the table. The priest was screaming at him. He lost his temper. He stood up, grabbed the priest, threw him through the screen door without opening the screen door first, and came off the hinges. The door and the priest landed in the patio. The little priest screamed at him, "You're excommunicated. You're no longer a Catholic. Don't ever come back to the church." Dad said, "So be it." Then my mother explained that, "You see, this is why I would rather not be a Catholic." She was an Episcopalian, by the way. She said, "This is why I would rather not be a Catholic. Women and anything subservient were there to serve the church and the priest. Most churches. And in my way of thinking," my mother told me, "she was a real civil rights advocate. It should be to serve society."

She said, "Now we're going to become Episcopalians. If your dad wants to say the Catholic creed, it's exactly the same. The Episcopal and Catholic Church are exactly the same, except that women are equal. They can become priests, and they can become deacons, and so on, and so on." So that's where I grew up very comfortably and under the control of a radical civil rights advocate. I became a civil rights advocate.

Were there other instances growing up where you felt isolated as an Italian-American? Did you speak Italian in the house, or did your father kind of want to suppress that part of his heritage?

My father radically wanted to suppress it. My mother encouraged him to teach us to speak Italian because Italian is the root language for all of the Romance languages, Latin and Italian. It's the root for Spanish and French and Portuguese and all around. But dad would not see or hear of it. When mom would talk, she could speak a little Italian, but mom would try to teach me a little bit. He would interrupt and tell her not to do that. The reason was because he was so sensitive to being prejudiced against when he was first back in America because of his inability to speak clear English. By the way, when he did start speaking English, it was precise. It was real precise English. He was taught by an English teacher who worked on the cattle ranch where he was working.

Did you keep any other traditions or customs from Italy within your household?

I think the tradition that my mother kept alive was loving each other. She was very demonstrative; you get within 10 feet of her, and you were getting hugged. She would hug us and tell us that she loved us. When dad didn't show much demonstration like that, she would

remind us he loves you, don't worry, he loves you. He acted like he did. When there was something to be done, he was very thoughtful and would work very hard to make sure that we had whatever advantage he could bring and whatever demonstration of affection he could afford to share.

How has your heritage influenced your philanthropic efforts, particularly in supporting education and community organizations?

I grew up knowing that I was primarily Italian. There was a strong Italian community in Dunsmuir, although it was considered the lower end of the economic spectrum, along with the Mexican Americans who were maintaining the tracks. And the Irish who were new arrivals also. I realized I was Italian. A lot of the other kids in school with me had names that ended in "i" and were Italian. So we had a category, and we got together, and we supported each other for this, that, and the other thing. We had a football team, the number one football team in the state for two years. The biggest streets in our local economy were people who had to run the railroads. Little people couldn't run those big old steam engines and so on. So the great big people came there, and they had great big kids. We had a really good football team, even though we were a small school.

We had the number one team and won the state championship for small schools year after year. There were a lot of Italian names on that football team. I began to be proud of being Italian. When I went off to college, being Italian became unique and kind of cool because other people who were Italian stuck together; we had a kind of cadre. So when we ran for office, I ran for junior and senior class president and student body officer and graduate representative. Student council at San Jose State. That began my political activities. I think it helped to be able to say, "My name is Dyradon, but I'm Italian." I did it in every speech.

What really crystallized it was when I came back from the military and got into politics. I ran for office on the county board of supervisors. In California, in the big counties, the supervisors are the most powerful political people. They have the biggest districts. They have the most money to be in charge of. They have the most direct services because they're spending all of the state and federal money that comes to the area. They have the largest staff, personal staff. So they can get out and really do a lot for their constituents. Here we were, five members of the board of supervisors in a great big county that is now Silicon Valley.

We had this ability to do great good. I was assigned transportation and parks as my responsibility for my 20 years on the county board and was spending money buying parks and building a transportation system, and being very proud of it. So in 1976, when we had the bicentennial for the nation, I became chair of the county bicentennial commission. As the chair of the bicentennial commission, I helped found the Italian American Heritage Foundation, which continues to this day as the primary Italian American organization in the region. I was there at all of the activities, spoke at their Italian American Days, in fact, chaired the annual celebration of

Italian Independence Day on June 6th, and chaired it for 12 years. I was very proud of being the Italian liaison on the county board of supervisors.

I think I'm still known as the Italian supervisor.

What accomplishment are you most proud of in your career?

There are two ways to answer that. The most publicly proud I am, of course, is of the transportation system. I chaired the Transportation Committee of the Board of Supervisors for 20 years, was able to start from nothing, develop the master plan, and chair the tax measures, and develop the master plan to the point now where we have a downtown station, which, by the way, is named after me. It's the Diridon station. That's what you see behind me in the picture. Ultimately, we'll have high-speed rail, BART, commuter rail from the Capitol Corridor Trains and the Altamont Express, and Caltrain, a light-rail line going directly under it with a station under it, and dozens of bus lines that interconnect there, and bikes, and so on.

That's been master-planned carefully by committees that I've chaired for the last 20 years. So I'm very, very proud of the transportation system. At the same time, I'm very, very proud of having chaired the Parks Department for those 20 years and expending the funding that I helped create in the park charter measure, which created a dedicated portion of the county tax base that would only go to parks, couldn't be used for anything but parks. We went from 500 acres to over 45,000 acres of parks in the 20 years that I was in office. That's something for my grandbabies to enjoy for a long time in the future.