

DEBRA PERNA DIDONATO

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 20, 2022



HISTORICAL SOCIETY *of*
HAMMONTON

EST. 1960

**Historical Society of Hammonton Oral History
Debra Perna DiDonato**

Date of Interview	Wednesday, July 20, 2022
Interviewer(s)	Janet Hasulak
Interviewee(s)	Debra Perna DiDonato
Others Present	Deborah White, Historical Society of Hammonton

This is Janet Hasulak. It is July 20th, 2022. I'm here with Debra Perna DiDonato and we're doing an oral history interview for the Hammonton Historical Society.

Question: To start out, I'm going to fire some questions at you, Debbie. Your full name is?

Debra Ann Perna DiDonato.

Question: What is your age?

Sixty-one.

Question: Your date of birth?

April 26th, 1961.

Question: Where were you born?

Newcomb Hospital, Vineland, New Jersey.

Question: Pretty close, pretty local. You were born in the hospital?

Correct.

Question: Did you grow up in that town where were you born?

No, I grew up in Hammonton.

Question: Your parents were from Hammonton?

Correct.

Question: Did your parents at any point in time, move to other areas?

No, they always lived in Hammonton.

Question: Can you describe the house you were raised in? Where did you live when you were growing up?

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We lived at 447 North Chew Road. My grandparents on my mom's side, the Berenato side who came from Italy, built that house when their old child, Angelo, was born. Let me see, I think I wrote it down just in case. Oh, yes, 1917. After my parents were married in 1952, they lived in that same house with my grandparents. That's the house I grew up in and it was wonderful. Across the street at 442 North Chew Road, believe it or not, my father's grandparents came from Italy and moved there.

Question: So, there were great grandparents on the scene for you.

They passed away before I was born.

Question: Really close, across the street.

Right, I know.

Question: Can you describe the house? Your room?

My room was my favorite color of lavender, and it was the '60s and '70s. I didn't have a door on my bedroom, and instead I had purple beads hanging in the doorway.

Question: It was the '60s.

Yes, purple beads, so that was fun. Honestly, it was wonderful, it was a loving home. My Perna grandparents ended up moving from Winslow to across the street to where my great grandparents had lived, and then my sister moved there when she got married, so we were always very close.

Question: Yes, right there on the same street.

Yes.

Question: How nice. Where did you then go to school?

Hammonton Public School system.

Question: Public school.

I went to kindergarten in this building. Mrs. Rice was my teacher.

Question: Oh, Debra lives in Mrs. Rice's home, she lives in the Rice House.

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The most lovely person that you'd ever want to meet. I mean, I still remember, right, how wonderful she was, and I was five years old. Yes, very nice.

Question: Your life was intertwined with the history of this building then.

Yes.

Question: As were a lot of people who went to kindergarten.

I still remember my kindergarten class, then we graduated high school together. I love bumping into them around town. I remember one of the little boys tried to kiss me. I was little.

Question: This is while you were in kindergarten?

Yes. I remember going this way and there were cubbies where we used to hang our coats, and I remember climbing up there.

Question: You had to make your escape somewhere. It's funny what comes back to you, the details.

Yes, I just thought of that.

Question: So, you went through the whole school system, started at kindergarten, and graduated high school from the Hammonton Public Schools.

Correct. I was in every single building. I was in Mrs. Rice's class here and then I was in all three buildings that used to be part of the Public School. I went through 8th through 12th on Liberty Street.

Question: Over at what was the High School.

Right.

Question: How did you get to school? Did you ride a bus?

We rode a bus, yes.

Question: Do you remember the names of any of your other teachers?

Oh, I do. Let's see, Kindergarten was Mrs. Rice, Mrs. Mottola [Phonetic], Mrs. Palma [Phonetic]. We had Mr. Taylor in 3rd Grade but he was – how do I describe

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him? I guess, in that hippie kind of way. We painted the walls, we painted the windows, we used to pick up trash, we sang folk songs all day.

Question: He conducted his class in a very loose hippy way?

Yes, he did. So, needless to say, I learned a lot from him just because I remember a lot and I remember the songs and things like that. Of course, they let him go and for the second half of the year, we had Mrs. Rita Benedetto [Phonetic] who is one of my favorite people in the whole wide world. She came in and taught us penmanship, our math, everything that we didn't learn yet.

Question: The rudimentary things that you needed to have.

4th Grade was Mr. Lewis, 5th Grade was Mr. Fortis [Phonetic], 6th Grade was Mr. Vaughn [Phonetic], who was amazing too. 7th Grade, we started with different teachers.

Question: Changing classes per subject.

Correct, yes.

Question: Who were some of your best friends during Grade School and High School?

From Kindergarten on, Lisa Ruggero [Phonetic]. There's quite a few because I liked to be friendly with everybody.

Question: And they're still here.

And they're still here. Some of the Kindergarten kids were Terri Bertino, Lisa Ruggero and my good friend, David Mitchell. We were all in the same class, Lisa, David, and I and we were all born on April 26. That was something special. Unfortunately, David passed away.

Question: Yes, we're talking about a lot of years and different age groups.

Yes, a lot of years.

Question: Your friends change as you age a little bit.

They do.

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Question: They switch around.

I felt like I was always friendly with everybody. Then, of course, when you get in High School, there's the Chorus and the Band, so you move that way, too.

Question: You do. You go off following your interests.

I think my sister was always my best friend, my mom, and my sister, yes.

Question: How many siblings do you have?

I have one, her name is Donna Patton [Phonetic] and she's two years older than me.

Question: When did you marry and how old were you when you got married?

I had just turned 26, it was 1987.

Question: How long have you been married?

1987, so what's that 30-35 years?

Question: Since 1987, if they want to do the math, they can do the math. Going back a little bit to when you were a teenager, how did the teenagers dress back then in the '60s and '50s?

We had funny pictures, our bellbottoms, and the granny dresses. Then the shirts came in where they were loose on the bottom, I don't remember the name. They were like granny dresses and we had chokers and vests.

Question: Nehru jackets I remember that were popular that had that little Nehru collar on them for the boys, in that time period. What would've been considered "wild" clothes and hair in those days?

You know what the thing was, when we went to school, of course, we weren't allowed to dress however we wanted, we had our dress code, and it was strict. Girls had to wear dresses. It was up until 5th or 6th Grade that we still had to wear dresses, we weren't allowed to wear pant. We always wore shorts under our dresses. Then, maybe 6th Grade, I think we were allowed to wear pant suits, where the tops had to match the bottom.

Question: But no jeans, it would've been too casual?

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Never jeans, not even in High School. Mr. DeRosa [Phonetic] God bless him, in High School, he would stand there every morning and if you had jeans or sneakers...

Question: He was maintaining a standard in his classroom.

He certainly was. He was the Vice Principal and Mr. Lucas was the Principal at that time, I think. Yes, it was and so we weren't allowed to wear jeans. If we did have our hipsters on, it had to be covered with a vest. Mainly, if you looked, that's mostly what the girls did.

Question: You had to dress appropriate.

Correct. We always had to dress appropriate, which I thought was really nice.

Question: What did the teenagers do for entertainment at that time? Were there popular places in town to go?

The Bowling Center was always popular and the Skating Rink. They were the two places that you went.

Question: The Skating Rink that just recently closed?

Correct.

Question: I was sad to see that.

I know, me too.

Question: Any other things you can think of that the kids would do for entertainment? Did they have dances scheduled?

Oh, my gosh, yes. In High School we had dances and in Middle School. In fact, 7th Grade, Stephen, my husband, was the first boy I ever danced with. We went to a dance together.

Question: Not too many people can say that.

A Valentine's Dance.

Question: You've been sweethearts a long time.

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Oh God, I love Stephen. I remember in 6th Grade; he was in my class in Mr. Vaughn [Phonetic], and I sat behind him, and I was supposed to get my braces on. I went home and I said, "Mommy, I can't get my braces on, Steve DiDonato's in my class." Everything changes and High School comes, and he was always wonderful to me. I still remember when coming around the corner, we were in the building that the St. Joe Academy is now, it was the corner building. I was coming out of a classroom, this is 7th Grade, and it was like the beginning of school. He had on this silky flowered shirt with the big collar, and he had his books under his arm, he must have grown two feet. He looked down and went, "Hi, Deb." I was done.

Question: He stole your heart right away at a young age.

Yes.

Question: As most people know, Steve DiDonato is your spouse. Is he from Hammonton?

He is from Hammonton, too. He was born in Newcomb Hospital also. He was born August 16th, 1961.

Question: Were you married right here in town? Did you get married in a church here?

We got married in Almonesson and then we had a marriage in church in town at St. Antony's

Question: How many children do you have?

We have two children.

Question: And their names and birth dates?

Christina Marie, well now she's Dillon and she was born on March 24th, 1989. She married her husband Drew in 2014. And Matthew Stephen DiDonato and he was born on April 27th, 1990.

Question: Do you have grandchildren?

I do. I do, I love it.

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Question: I can tell there's a lot of love there just from how you said that. How many grandkids do you have?

Two, Christina has two children, Luke Arthur Dillon and his birthday was just the other day, July 18th. He was born in 2017. And Filomena [Phonetic] Marie's birthday is coming up and we call her "Mena." She's named Filomena after my mother-in-law and Marie after my mom. Her birthday is August 4th, 2018.

Question: Yes, just around the corner. You already talked a little bit about the house that you lived in when you were a child. The house you were describing, is that the house you lived in your whole childhood?

My whole childhood and I moved out when I got married.

Question: That's your whole childhood.

My whole life.

Question: Yes. You went from there to being a married woman.

Correct.

Question: Do you have any other particular memories about Hammonton from when you were a youngster in school and a teenager during that time period?

Oh, where do you start? There's so many, so many. We just had our Feast, of course, and all those memories come up. When we were little, you couldn't even walk the streets there were so many people. My relatives used to come from Philly.

Question: It really attracted even more crowds.

Oh, my, yes. It was big, it was big, where they walked in the procession with their bare feet on the asphalt. It was just so cool. We cooked. My father was involved in The Assumption at that time, so he was down the stands and we all helped as we got older. The Feast is one of my main memories

Question: You always went every year.

Yes. I can't even describe how many beautiful memories from that. Family, friends, just people you knew. We would go over the Landolfi's and listen to the

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Gibbstown Band. We would go over there, and then go watch the fireworks up at top of the building.

Question: Did you work as a teenager? Did you do any part-time jobs or anything like that?

I did. Of course, I babysat. I started working at Atlantic Blueberry at Galletta's family farm when I was 11, believe it or not. I wasn't allowed out on the line because I was too young, so I did tickets. Do you know what that means?

Question: No, not really.

After the girls would pack their blueberries. They would send their crate down the line, and each crate had a ticket with their number.

Question: Every girl had to track what they had packed?

Correct. Every girl would have a number. They would put their ticket in, and I would go collect them, and put them in little cubbies. At 11 that is what I would do.

Question: You were given some responsibility and it would give a little money in your pocket.

Exactly. We laugh about it now. My mother poked sticks for the Galletta family, so they knew us kids, too. At 11 years old now you think they're just babies, right? I was getting on a bus at 5:00 o'clock, 5:30 in the morning, with all these older kids like 18 years old. Mostly, everybody worked there until they got done with high school. Talk about great memories.

Question: It was good seasonal work for the kids in town.

Yes. Then, when I was older, I got to be on the line. I started out at, I think, at \$.10 a crate. That's wonderful memories.

Question: You had fun doing that.

I had fun.

Question: There were a lot of other young people working, right?

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So much fun. We worked really, really hard, I'm not going to lie. We worked very hard; it was a lot of hours. If blueberries needed to be packed, you didn't get a break.

Question: This was all through the blueberry season, you knocked yourselves out.

Correct. Then the carnival, of course, was the big thing because then you'd see everybody there. Like I said, there's so many things that I'll probably think of when I'm done.

Question: If you think of anything after the fact, you can always write a little addendum if there's any stories you want to tell or anything like that, we can always add to our question and answer session, as well.

Christmas time when they had music downtown. Now, they do have music again in Hammonton.

Question: Downtown.

Which is lovely. There was shopping along Bellevue Avenue and, like I said, Arlene's, and there would be lights across and the music would be playing. It was beautiful.

Question: When you would Christmas shop, you would go downtown to the stores that were there.

Yes.

Question: What were some of the favorite stores that your mother frequented when you went there?

We would go to Arlene's, Brita's, there was Presses, there was Malinsky's. It was just really cool.

Question: A lot of businesses have come and gone.

Yes.

Question: Any major news events that you remember from when you were younger that had an impact on you?

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I know I was really young, but I do remember – I don't know, you hear things and maybe that's why you remember, when Kennedy passed away.

Question: Oh yes, big event.

I remember standing in front of the TV. I got to shake Bobby Kennedy's hand years later. He came to NAFEC [Phonetic] and our class had a school trip. I remember him standing at the plane and there's these steps like this, and he shook all of our hands.

Question: What is NAFEC?

The government airport near Pomona.

Question: You were there to see him?

Yes, that was really cool.

Question: That was a memorable moment.

You had asked before about school dances, yes, we did. When we were in High School, there used to be dances all the time. We used to have dances, I think, we used to try once a month. They would collect money for certain clubs, maybe the cheerleaders would hold a dance, or the Band would hold a dance.

Question: You were raising money to fund Clubs and activities?

Correct. I was in choirs, band, and musicals. But the band was the big thing then. There were over 200 people.

Question: They were well-supported by the community.

That's an understatement, we really were. Everybody travelled and we were award-winning, and everybody loved it.

Question: That was their heyday it sounds like.

It was.

Question: How has Hammonton changed since you were younger? You were talking about businesses and none of them are there any longer. What are some

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of the significant changes that you remember? Is there anything you miss particularly?

It was very disheartening how the town had gotten, growing up in Hammonton all those years.

Question: What would you describe? What happened to the town?

I don't know it just kind of – the stores were empty.

Question: Businesses left?

Businesses left.

Question: Did things get seedy?

I don't know about seedy; Steve says I look through everything with rose-colored glasses and I say, "Well, that's okay." To me, everything always is okay. It just changed in such a way that it was – like when you look at a picture and you see everything in color. I always described town as going back to black and white and not really wanting to go into town.

Question: It was looking a little depressed?

It was. Even though we still had the Halloween parades and things like that, they're all good memories, everything is a good memory.

Question: The parades and the fun things happening.

Yes, they really were. I'm glad that the town came back, it really did and now things are better than ever. There is Bagliani's and Inferrera's and family business that are still here. The Bowling Center's been here for 70 years.

Question: Some businesses have endured amazingly. I know that's a pleasure to see the families that have remained successful with that.

Yes, exactly. You have the good memories of going to religion classes with your friends and then you got to be with your St. Joe friends, because we all got communion together.

Question: That was another circle of friends.

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It really was. We would have religion classes on Mondays or Sundays after Mass and they were good times. Of course, we had dinner with my family every Sunday.

Question: Was that a traditional thing with families to have Sunday dinner?

Yes, with our family. Honestly, I don't know how my mom did everything. We would settle down and relax. Then, at night, my Aunts and Uncles from Philly would come down and we'd have sandwiches if we went to Bagliani's, Inferrera's, or Olivo's.

Question: It was a full day.

It was a full day; it was a lovely day. On Saturdays, we always tried to go to Philly to see them. I was a kid that grew up with family. I will be honest with you, I wasn't the teenager that dated a lot or went out a lot, I guess I was more family-oriented.

Question: You were busy with family. It sounds like the extended family made an effort to stay close.

Correct.

Question: That's really a pleasure to hear about because life isn't quite that way so much anymore, it's a wonderful thing. Speaking of family, let's talk a little bit about your mom's side of the family and your mother. What was your mother's name including her maiden name.

My mother was Marie Rose Berenato Perna.

Question: Berenato was her maiden name.

I don't know if you want to know all this, but my grandfather, her father, was Francesco, who they called Frank Berenato. He was born in 1887 in Messina, Italy. He passed away in 1961, five months after I was born. He arrived in New York on a ship named "Madonna" in 1905. I thought this really interesting, I found out that his brother-in-law gave him the money to come to America when he was 17, 18. You know how they log in on the ship with the Manifest Sheet, they had a list of what they had with them, he had \$5.00 in his wallet.

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Question: He was really functioning on faith.

Right, \$5.00 in his wallet. Then, my grandmom, Natale, but they called her Nellie Giacobbe, she was born in Sicily, Italy and then she passed away in 1959, the year my sister was born. She arrived in 1898 and then they built that house on Chew Road in 1917.

Question: They were the ones that built the house.

Right, when my Uncle Angelo [Phonetic] was born. Then my mom was the youngest of five children.

Question: Was she born in the house?

I think she was born on 1st Road, I think, Doctor Esposito?

Question: Was it at the Swenson Birthing Center?

I'm so sorry, I don't remember. Actually, my mom passed away in 1984, she was 55.

Question: She was young.

Yes.

Question: What brothers and sisters did your mother have?

Angelo was the oldest. Then Anna was two years younger than him. Then Lena was three years younger than Anna and Pete, who was four years than Lena. And then, my mom, who was the youngest, was two years younger than Pete. She was the first one to pass away that's why it was hard.

Question: Yes, the baby of the family. Absolutely, it would be tough on everybody.

Yes.

Question: And her maiden name was Berenato.

Berenato, correct.

Question: Are you related to Joe Berenato, who reports for the Gazette?

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There's so many Berenato's, I don't know.

Question: I'm just curious because he has recently been doing a lot of work with the Historical Society.

My brother-in-law Charlie Patton and my daughter, Christina, have been working on family history. It's extremely interesting.

Question: Did your mother tell you any stories about her childhood or schooling? Is there anything that you remember?

She was in the Girl Scouts. In fact, I have pictures of that. She was born on December 7th. I remember she said her brothers were away at War and she remembers standing in front of the radio hearing all about everything that was going on.

Question: World War II.

Yes.

Question: Probably following it.

Right.

Question: I remember my father saying that as a boy, during that time period, they followed the movement of the troops, so the kids learned about geography that way. It used to amaze him that people didn't understand where certain countries were because when he was a kid, that's what they did. He realized it came from following the news, following all the US troops movements.

Yes, because of their brothers, like I said. I remember her telling me that all the time. She was the only one that finished school. She was the only one that went through high school.

Question: It wasn't so common back then to graduate.

Because they had to work.

Question: Yes, the kids were sent out, you went to work and helped support the family, especially if it was a big family.

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It was because of the War. That comes to mind, too. When we were in 5th Grade, it was the Vietnam War. Mr. Fortis, we made a book with the yarn and manila paper. We used to get the paper "Bulletin" that was out of Philadelphia. We used to have to every night write down all the service people who had passed away, because it was Vietnam.

Question: Oh, my goodness. He was trying to make you understand the impact of War, that lives were lost.

Yes.

Question: It sounds like it was an impressionable lesson learned.

Yes. So, I remember that.

Question: Back to your mom, she did finish school.

She finished school.

Question: Did she work when having a family after becoming a married woman?

Yes, mom worked hard. She worked at a clothing shop –

Question: A women's dress shop?

No, they actually made pants. I think she worked at a couple of them.

Question: Is this before she got married, as a young woman?

I have a cute picture of my mom and dad. There was a shop, I think it was Pino's shop, where the gym is now, across from Peter Lumber. Do you know that gym that's right there?

Question: Yes.

There's a picture of her and my father leaning against the car, and they were goofing around, like they were hugging each other. I think that's how they met. She went to Hammonton High School, she graduated in 1946. She worked in the shop. Then, like I said, I remember when she did work for Galletta's, too. And she worked non-stop at home, too. When I tell you spotless, when they say you could eat off the floor. Normally, you go, yeah, sure, but you could have.

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Question: Wow. She was meticulous about how she kept her house.

Oh, my gosh, that's an understatement.

Question: Was she a very high-energy person?

Yes, God bless her. She would come home from the shop for lunch, and when we were younger, my grandparents, who were across the street, used to babysit us.

Question: That was convenient for childcare.

The whistle would blow – well, they used to live in Winslow and then they moved here across the street. The whistle would blow because Hammonton would have a whistle blow at lunchtime, you probably knew that.

Question: I honestly didn't.

Yes.

Question: For lunch, the shops would shut down when it was lunchtime.

Yes, the whistle would blow. She would come home, and she used to wear these shifts, like a comfortable dress. She would come home, she would have a half a sandwich and something to drink, but she would even clean during then.

Question: She made good use of her time.

She really did, yes. She taught us well.

Question: Did she have dinner on the table, as well?

To be honest with you, daddy, my father usually cooked dinner. He used to work at Whitehall. He also had a couple of jobs, he worked at Whitehall and then he worked for a cleaning company.

Question: That's a photograph of the Whitehall Pharmacy up there.

Okay. He worked for a cleaners and he also picked up bodies for the Landolfi's Funeral Home. He used to get home first, so he would start dinner. Daddy did most of the cooking, mommy used to do the Sundays, the meatballs and the soups and the gravies and all that.

Question: For the weekend crowd coming in, the family get-together.

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Yes.

Question: Did you rotate whose homes you got together in or was it always at your mom's house?

A lot of it was at my mom's house. On Sundays, yes. I mean, we always went over to everybody's. On Christmas, maybe it would be over my Uncle Pete's house, Thanksgiving was over at Aunt Lena's house in Philly. Sunday night, sometimes, we would go over Aunt Anna's house, we would always be rotating.

Question: For celebrations or holidays.

Yes. Say, for Christmas Eve, that would be a big one, that was bigger than Christmas. My parents would cook all day – I always told Stephen, I said, "I think that's what Heaven's going to smell like."

Question: Just like Christmas Eve cooking. That's a lot of memories attached, of course, and it's your mom.

[Crying]

Question: That's all right Deb, it's an emotional thing, nice memories though.

They would cook all day. Again, I swear I don't know how they did it. It was so cool.

Question: As you get older, you realize how much work it entailed to do stuff like that.

Right. It was so cool because we'd have people coming in and out all day, tasting things or whatever. We wouldn't eat dinner until 8:00 o'clock at night. It would be dad's brother, it wouldn't be the Berenato side, because the Berenato side would have Christmas together, and then you always split up the family as far as when you could go.

Question: It would be this side or that side.

On Christmas Eve it would be the Perna side. Like I said, the best part was everything was wonderful. We could've been up really, really late. Honestly, by

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the next morning, my mother would always say, "The angels cleaned up." [Crying] I'm so sorry, I must be tired.

Question: That's all right, I know you miss her, that's all right.

I'm sorry, I must be tired. Anyway, by the next morning when we were kids –

Question: It would be like a miracle happened, all of a sudden Christmas would happen.

Yes, and everything would be cleaned up. I tell you there wouldn't be a fork out of place, they worked together.

Question: She made all of these holidays happen.

Both of them, my dad and my mom, they really worked well together.

Question: You had good examples set for you. You know what a good marriage was, and a good family life was.

Truly.

Question: It was very special. You were very blessed as a child.

Oh, extremely.

Question: Very, very blessed.

Sorry about that.

Question: No, that's all right.

I'm sorry.

Question: It's special memories and I'm happy that they are happy memories for you that you're able to go back to. I remember one time I asked somebody what was your father's favorite hobby, "Oh, drinking. He would come home late, and mother would say, 'Get upstairs.'" I don't always hear the happy stories, it's a pleasure to hear one. What do you know about your mother's background? Where did her side of the family come from?

Messina, Italy, and Sicily. Then, her parents, they came over. Yes, that's about all I know about them right now. I don't know any of the great grandparents on her

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side. What happened and I think mainly because grandmom Berenato died before I was born and grandpop Berenato died when I was an infant. By the time you want to learn that stuff, you're older and they're not there to answer your questions.

Question: You start paying attention to the family history.

Yes. All that I know is it was just happy, everybody used to say.

Question: Your great grandparents were still around when you were little, they lived across the street?

They were my grandparents, not my great grandparents. They were my grandparents on my dad's side, they were his parents.

Question: On the other side of the family. I'm sorry, I was confused about that.

Yes, that's okay.

Question: Your mom passed away at such a young age, was she in bad health?

She had cancer. She got cancer when she was 50 and it lasted four years. It started with breast cancer, then it went to her lungs, then to her spine, and then to her brain.

Question: So sad, she's a very special person, I can tell. Is she buried in one of the local cemeteries here?

She is, she's buried in Holy Sepulcher. Aunt Lena and Uncle Sam Tribuiani, my father, mommy, are all buried in the same plot.

Question: All together.

Yes. And then Uncle Angelo and Elsie Berenato and grandmom and grandpop Berenato are behind them. Then Uncle Pete and Aunt Nellie Berenato are behind them.

Question: It's a family section.

Yes. My Aunt Anna and Uncle Tom Turco from Philly, they're buried in Philly, because her daughter and son passed away before her. I know that's awful, so she's with them.

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Debra Perna DiDonato

Question: Do you keep in touch with cousins from your mom's side of the family?

We do. It gets harder and harder. In fact, my sister and I had a get-together with everybody a couple of years ago. We were thinking about having another one, but quite a few have passed away. Aunt Lena and Uncle Sam's son Bobby passed away, who was a favorite cousin.

Question: Okay.

I think we were a little bit ornery together.

Question: You had mischievous fun.

Yes. He passed away when he was 60. My cousin Tommy passed away, he was in his 40s, Mary Ann passed away when she was 55.

Question: Those were some young ages.

Yes, everybody, my cousin Bruce passed away when he was 61. He died because he was in Vietnam, and they said that Agent Orange.

Question: Did it give him a neurological problem?

I don't know. The kind of cancer that he had, he went to the doctors, but they couldn't find it. They sent it away and they found out that that's what it was from. A lot of my cousins have passed.

Question: Yes. That's a scary position to be in. Nobody wants to be next in the que, for one thing.

I know, right.

Question: It makes you feel your own mortality.

It does.

Question: We want to enjoy the time we're here.

Absolutely.

Question: Let's switch over to your dad's side of the family. What was your father's full name, and did he have nickname or anything?

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He did, which makes us all laugh. His name was Donald J. Perna. He was born February 25th, 1929, in Rosedale. That's where he grew up in Winslow. His parents were here in America, and they were William Perna, he was born in Winslow in 1903. His mom, Antionette Ciano [Phonetic] was born in Manhattan in 1909. The Ciano's were in Manhattan and then they came to Hammonton. My dad's grandparents, Domenico Perna was born in Campania, Italy. Filomena Masi was born in Campania, Italy. His mom's parents, Giuseppe Ciano was born in Basilicata, Italy and Rose Urgo [Phonetic] was born in Basilicata, Italy.

Question: Those were your father's parents?

Parents were William and Antoinette. His grandparents were Domenico and Filomena. They're the ones that were from Italy and they came to settle here in Winslow and Hammonton. His mom's family, the Ciano's were Manhattan and then came to Hammonton.

Question: Did he have brothers and sisters?

He did. He has one brother, Joseph Perna. He lives in Cologne now. He's three years younger than daddy. God bless him, he's still going, he's 89.

Question: Your dad grew up in Hammonton.

Yes. Rosedale and Winslow.

Question: Within the borders.

Yes. He went to St. Joe High School. They used to call him "Wheel."

Question: That was his nickname.

They called him "Wheel."

Question: How did he get that nickname?

He was just all around. The funny thing is we always laughed because he was on the basketball team and daddy was 5'4". He always used to joke and said he was one of the tall ones, because it was all the little Italians, they always used to joke.

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That's funny. My father in high school, he loved to take pictures. I keep saying I'm going to bring all the pictures here because I don't know what to do with them. Truly, they are really all of St. Joe's School of the gym and kids in chemistry class.

Question: Pictures he took when he was a kid?

In High School. He was the photographer, so he has all these black and white photos that they're not family, they're his classmates. I really should bring them here because maybe somebody knows somebody would want them.

Question: Debra's been really big on giving everything an accession number and filing things away. Since Greg became the President, he's got a file system for businesses, for schools, for the civic organizations. Whatever you have, we'd want the pictures, and we'd try and see to it that it gets catalogued appropriately, so it can be looked at. Back to your dad, what did he look like? How would you describe his appearance?

You see me, that was pretty much what my father looked like. The older I'm getting, and the more chins I'm getting, the more I look like him. I always thought that was so cool, when everybody would say, "You look just like your dad." The funny thing is, I used to work in – oh, that's a really cool thing, can I go back? Do you mind?

Question: No, that's okay.

When I was older, I was a telephone operator when I was 19 for the Tomasello's on Broadway, they had a switchboard and I used to do that.

Question: With the plugs and cords?

Yes. I would have the funeral companies, the gas companies, the Banks.

Question: That was how the telephone system worked, that's how you had to plug people through.

Yes, correct. I would take messages for them, so yes, that was a really cool highlight. From there, I went to Mainline Card and Gift Shop.

Question: It gives you appreciation of all the new technology.

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Debra Perna DiDonato

Oh, it sure does. I went to Mainline Card and Gift Shop, which was in the Peachtree Plaza, it wasn't called that then.

Question: How old would you say you were when you worked there?

Nineteen. I worked right out of High School. I worked at Mainline, as an operator, and then I worked at Mainline until I got married, basically, because then I started teaching at St. Vincent de Paul in Mays Landing. I'm sorry, getting back to daddy. When I was at Mainline Card and Gift Shop, I was checking this person out. The woman kept looking at me and looking at me, but I was younger, and I was thinner. She goes, "I know this is going to sound really funny, but do you know a Donald Perna?" I said, "Oh my gosh, he's my dad." She says, "Well, I went to High School with him, and you look just like him." Somebody at Bagliani's maybe three months ago, said, "Are you Donald Perna's daughter?" I said, "Yeah." She goes, "I would know you anywhere."

Question: People can still see the resemblance, obviously.

Isn't that funny? Yes. So that's dad, that's what he looked like. So, there you go.

Question: Did your dad finish High School?

He did.

Question: He graduated?

He graduated St. Joe in 1948.

Question: Were both your mother and father Catholic?

Yes. They got married in 1952 at St. Joe's Church.

Question: What kind of work did your dad do?

He worked at Whitehall forever. Like I said, he had little odd jobs. He loved to cook, so he would cook for deer hunting clubs, he liked doing that later on.

Question: They would give him venison or whatever.

Yes. He would go to their camps and cook for them. He worked for a cleaners that used to be – do you know where Central Café is?

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Question: Yes.

It was Central. Across from the railroad tracks and on that street there used to be a cleaners, I don't remember the name. Anyway, he used to work there.

Question: At the Mexican restaurant?

No, it was on the side street. Then, he used to go pick up bodies for Bob Landolfi. I remember when I was about four, him, my mom, my Uncle Pete, and Aunt Nellie bought a place in Margate called "Park and Swim." They ran it through the summer, it was right on the beach, it was a hamburger joint. I was four but I have such cool memories of that, like the smell.

Question: You must have spent a lot of time there.

Yes. "See You in September" the song must have just come out and the kids used to play that on the radio all the time.

Question: It was your summer world at the time.

Yes, it was. They only had it one summer, but it was very cool.

Question: How old was he when he married your mom?

They were 23 when they got married.

Question: Relatively young, early 20s.

They got married when they were 23 in 1952. They had Donna in 1959, but my mom had trouble when she had a lot of miscarriages. We always said, "Mom, back then, everybody had babies when they were young." She said that they tried but there would always be complications.

Question: It didn't work out right away for them.

Right. That's why it was seven years.

Question: That's heartbreaking. Did you dad end up in the Military at any time?

He was in the National Guard. I have lots of pictures of that, too.

Question: Did he go away for a couple of weeks in the summer and do training with them?

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Yes.

Question: Your father's ancestors, did you already read through who they were?

His parents and his grandparents, yes.

Question: We went over that. Is your dad still alive?

No, he passed away in 2012.

Question: He's in the cemetery by your mother?

Yes, at Holy Sepulcher. It was just the Feast week, so there was already the American flag on the gravestone and of course we had to put the Italian flag, we always do that. He always did that.

Question: So, you're carrying on the tradition of that.

Yes.

Question: Did your parents ever tell you how they met and fell in love? Did they have any stories about that sort of thing?

This is terrible, I guess, because mommy was young, I don't know, and I was young. There were tons of pictures that we always looked through and it looked like they would always be with their groups of friends, but they met at the clothing shop, I know that. They dated and the rest is history. They had fun. Looking at their pictures, they'd go into Atlantic City, and they had fun.

Question: Did they belong to any Clubs or organizations?

I know my father belonged to the Assumption. I'm trying to think, let me see, not really, I don't recall anything. Oh, the Centennial, my father was very big on part of that like starting everything. He was like the Grand Marshall, that was such a cool time. When the Centennial happened, my mom and dad were very, very, very involved in that. Talk about a great time, I was five, but I remember everything like getting our dresses made and getting things done, fun times.

Question: That became a big deal.

Yes.

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Question: You already mentioned you resembled your dad a lot.

I do.

Question: Do you feel you have more physical traits from him than your mom?

Yes. Now that I've gotten older and I look in the mirror and I'll say, 'Yes, I look like mommy.' People have said, when they see a picture, "Oh, you look just like your mom." But if you put my dad and me together, yes.

Question: There's definitely more of a resemblance there.

Yes.

Question: It sounds like the resemblance is what people see a lot, too.

Yes.

Question: Did your mom have hobbies? It sounds like she was a busy lady working and keeping her house.

She sewed a little bit, whenever anybody needed it. She crocheted, so we all had a blanket from her.

Question: That's a special keepsake.

Oh, very, very. She had started to make me a purple one because I love purple and lavenders, but she got too sick. A very nice woman named Jean finished it for her.

Question: That's sweet that she had the help with that. You mentioned your sister. Do you have any stories about when you and your sister were younger? What can you tell me about your sister, growing up with her?

Donna is my best girlfriend. Well, Christina is too, my daughter, but on a different level. I would say like you said, the type of family we were, we were always together, so we did everything together. We used to go to Philadelphia, and we used to go to all the parks just to go to have a barbeque. We used to go to Wildwood and stop along the road, because my goodness gracious, you couldn't go to Wildwood without stopping on the road and eating. It was just to Wildwood, now you go what? There are such happy, cool memories of my

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parents packing lunches and give us another experience. Down at Hammonton Lake, we were always down there, my mom used to take us.

Question: Back when there was still swimming.

Yes, we had so much fun, going on the equipment. Coach DeLaurentis had a little stand with the necklaces you got to bite off, the candy necklaces and little ice cream. We didn't have a lot; we didn't have a lot of money.

Question: They still knew how to have fun. They still got out and did family things, that's what made things memorable for you, too. What other memories do you have regarding your maternal grandmother and grandfather? Did they pass away when you were little?

Yes. Unfortunately, none, because my grandmom Nellie Berenato passed away two years before I was born in 1959. Then grandpop Berenato died when I was five months old.

Question: You didn't know them.

No.

Question: Are they buried locally?

They're buried right behind my parents. Now, grandmom and grandpop Perna were in Winslow. I remember going there and making gravy and I remember literally falling back into a pot of tomato sauce. Nobody got mad at me, I still say that now, nobody got mad or whatever. When they moved across the street, it was great. Grandpop worked at the brickyard in Winslow, and he would always bring us something for a snack and grandmom would babysit, and we had the best time. Grandpop died when I got Communion, so I was eight years old, so that was 1969.

Question: This is your father's father.

Yes, he was so lovely.

Question: Do you remember his appearance?

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He ended up sort of bald, he had a little bit of hair and he had blue eyes, just so sweet, so sweet. He had emphysema.

Question: Was he sick for a while?

My grandmother died in 1975, so she's the one I got to know the best. We used to love it. She used to be so much fun because we used to go through her jewelry and then go sit in the rocking chairs and listen to her stories.

Question: You had girly things to do, going through grandma's jewelry.

Yes. I remember at night, when she used to babysit, we used to watch Mitch Miller together and all that good stuff.

Question: I remember him. Good wholesome all American things to do.

Yes.

Question: What kind of education did your grandfather have? Did he finish school?

I'm sorry, I really don't know. I could find out for you.

Question: I'm just curious.

No, I don't know, I'm sorry. Now, as I'm older, I would love to ask them all that stuff.

Question: You know what's sad is you don't get interested or start caring about these things sometimes until you're older.

Right.

Question: You realize how significant the family history might be. Then sometimes by then, it's too late, we've already lost our relatives.

Exactly.

Question: So that's really sad. Is there anything else you would like to add about any of your relatives? Do you have any stories you would like to share?

Anything in particular, I don't know.

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Question: Anything that you think might be significant about the family history. You mentioned you celebrated the holidays so much together, what would Christmas Eve be like? What would happen then?

Like I said, on Christmas Eve, it would be The Seven Fishes, of course. I remember the would be in the back in the garage soaking and the calamari. I'll be honest with you, I ate nothing. I have tasted everything, so I used to have oil and macaroni or oil and capellini.

Question: That's what they made for you?

Yes, because they used to do the anchovies in capellini, so I just used to have the capellini. Then, of course, the big antipasti. All that delicious food that we would wait all year for. My mom was a really good cookie baker, so, of course, we had all that. Then, like I said, everybody would stop in all day throughout the day. On Easter we would have artichokes and daddy and mommy would make stuffed artichokes and then we would give them out. We used to start on Easter over at our grandparents and we used to go to Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Domenico Ciano's and have all their pies, like spinach pie, sausage pie, all that good stuff. I mean, that's probably what it was, going from family to family.

Question: A nice way to share that holiday with everybody and a nice thing to do.

Yes.

Question: With your work history and stuff, you mentioned a little bit of it from when you were younger. Tell me a little bit about your married life with Steve and when your kids came along.

I worked at St. Vincent de Paul in May's Landing. I was a 5th Grade teacher altogether, but then I also taught 4th, 5th, 6th and 8th Grade English and 4th, 5th, 6th Science. Being a Catholic school, I also taught Phys Ed and I had morning duty, lunch duty, and afternoon duty.

Question: They put you to good use.

Yes, they did, and I loved it, they were so wonderful. Steve and I got married in 1987, like I said. I was going to continue to work but something about my measles

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shot didn't take or whatever when they tested me. I had gotten pregnant, and they didn't want me in a school setting, with all the kids.

Question: Because you weren't vaccinated and then you couldn't be vaccinated.

Right, until the baby was born. I did stop working, but we always had the Bowling Center, so I always worked there. I worked behind the counter.

Question: That's what I wondered, when did your involvement with the Bowling Center start.

When we started going out and then towards the end and then getting married. I would teach all day and then I would go to the Bowling Center, of course, and either do some of my work there or lesson plans.

Question: I've talked to quite a few people who said they met at the Bowling Center.

Yes, a lot of people have.

Question: They talk about how they met their spouse or what they did as a kid, the Bowling Center always comes to mind, they start talking about it.

I don't really drink, but when you were eighteen you can have your first – Steve, I remember, gave me my first drink, because I didn't like anything. I had a couple sips of Blackberry Sour or something, I don't know.

Question: It didn't appeal to you.

It doesn't sound good, but I did like beer. The funny thing is, going to Philly, we had beer. My Aunt Lena had these little orange juice glasses and at that time it was Black Label, and my dad would give me a little sip. I do like beer. I can't finish a whole bottle, but I have it once in a while. That's funny. Then what happened is, we had the Bowling Center and Steve's hours were like a hundred hours a week. It was crazy, it was morning to night. Then the kids were born, and we would try to eat together, but he was still working quite a bit, he's always working. As they got older, we tried to eat at 3:30, so we could always eat together.

Question: You went to his schedule, so he could be there.

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Right, as a family. Even from school, I would pick the kids up from school so we could eat at 3:30, so we could all eat together.

Question: Before his evening work started.

Right. But God bless him, he used to come home. When Matthew was a baby he had really bad ear infections, so I would always have to be holding him. Steve sometimes would come home at 2:00 or 3:00 o'clock in the morning. He would take off his clothes, because at that time, you could still smoke in the Bowling Center. He would take everything off and he would come and take the baby from me, he was so lovely. Then in 1995, he started KMD Construction, the construction company. We worked out of the office and maybe if he got home at 2:00 o'clock in the morning, we would work in the office until maybe 5:00 or 6:00. The kids would wake up, he would be with them for a little bit, he might take an hour to go to sleep, then he'd be to work, but we'd see him at 3:30. My neighbors always used to laugh because I used to be vacuuming, and they could hear the vacuum because I'd central vac at 1:00 o'clock in the morning. I would say, "That's why I look the way I do." We didn't sleep. We really didn't, if we got two or three hours, we were good. That is the honest to goodness truth.

Question: That was your usual.

Yes, that was usual. It was funny because I still remember my niece Stacy saying one time when I sat down, "Aunt Deb, I've never seen you sit down." It was funny.

Question: You had energy like your mother, you got a lot accomplished.

We did the construction company and then we moved the office. The rest is history. Steve and I started off just remodeling houses, then he got into new construction. Now, Christina, she's in it now, she's part of the business and the construction company. It's lovely, we're always together. Matthew, even though he's a teacher at Haddonfield, he works at the Pin Deck. He always worked as a bartender but then the way his schedule was, he couldn't do it. He's always available, in fact, he just worked the other night. Kiki went to Rowan, and got her master's there, and then got her doctorate in educational leadership there.

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Matthew went to Princeton, he graduated as an astrophysicist, and he always wanted to be a teacher. He has a couple of masters, two or three.

Question: He's brilliant.

Yes.

Question: But he wanted to teach.

He always wanted to teach. The silly thing is, when he was a senior he graduated and all these people came and courted him like they wanted him. They were offering him ridiculous amounts of money.

Question: He didn't want to take those?

He wanted to be a teacher. So, his sister, who was a teacher at the time, would go, "Are you crazy?"

Question: Being a teacher is not going to be as lucrative as that.

She says, "Take it. I'll be your maid, we'll go together. We'll live together, we'll save your money, and then we can have any classroom we want, Matthew." He just always wanted to be a teacher.

Question: He followed his heart.

He really did. He really kept to his goals, I was really proud of him because people gave him a lot of flack about it, so I was very proud of him.

Question: Yes, as you should be, absolutely.

He would always say, "Mom, everybody's always saying they want teachers that know what they're talking about, so I don't know why everybody's giving me a hard time."

Question: He was academic-minded, he could help his students out that way to follow their passions, what they wanted to follow academically. When did you and Steve get involved in the political arena?

Steve started out with the School Board in 2005 after being one of the founders of the Hammonton Education Foundation. He wanted to run for Mayor, he just thought he could make a difference. He was sworn in 2010 and has been the

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Mayor ever since. He really, really, really loves Hammonton. We thought about it, and I would be behind him no matter what he did, because, of course, it could have hurt our business.

Question: It takes time plus you have political allies, and you could make political enemies, as well.

Right. Stephen always says, "If everybody liked me, I wouldn't be a good Mayor." That's the truth.

Question: That's a fair statement.

Yes, he really did. He always said, "I can put my head on the pillow at night because I feel like I'm doing right by 15,000 people."

Question: A big accomplishment.

My family, always, from when the kids were little, did you ever hear the Mother Theresa poem "Do it Anyway"?

Question: I don't remember.

You have to look it up, "Do it Anyway." That's how I've always taught my children and that's how we try to live. You do it anyway.

Question: Don't listen to the naysayers.

Yes. People have said if you try to do something that you have an agenda. Well, no, the agenda is well, you do it anyway. You know what I'm saying?

Question: Yes.

That's the way we try –

Question: That's your mission, "Do it Anyway."

Yes, and help -

Question: Just keep moving forward.

And that's why Steve really wanted to go this last term. I didn't know if he was going to run again, but he did. He says, "I just have a little bit more to finish. If I finish this, then I'll feel..."

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Question: He must have had an agenda of things he wanted to get accomplished and see through or projects that he wanted to see through.

He does, correct.

Question: My husband called him about traffic issues ages ago and we were relatively new to the area. We were so impressed that he called back himself and was willing to discuss it and give us the time of day. The fact that he just called back, was willing to discuss things, and be a sounding board. Ultimately, I don't think there was anything Steve could've done about the traffic on our street, but he was willing to hear my husband out and listen to the complaint so graciously.

Thank you.

Question: That went a long way for us to be supporters for him, just that he cared about what we thought and what my husband was saying.

He does listen to everybody, and he does answer calls, even if they call whatever time of night, he answers the phone.

Question: That matters to people, personally, no matter what the issue is.

I know I'm biased, but I know what he does. There's always going to be people that knock you down and that's fine, if that's how they want to be, that's their life.

Question: Especially in the public eye, they're going to say that.

Yes. At the beginning when people used to do stuff that affected my children, but I've gotten over it. My father always used to say that – he worked at Glossy Fruit Farms for many, many years in retirement and would see a lot of people.

Question: Steve did?

No, my father. I would go and he would go, "Debbie, what they print in the paper, it's not true." I said, "Pop, don't worry about it. We know what's true. We know what we're doing." This sounds kind of silly, but I always said, "Just say a Hail Mary for them, because maybe something's not happy in their heart."

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Question: They have to twist things around.

Yes.

Question: Usually people who put out miserable things are miserable people.

Yes. We all are extremely proud of Stephen. I'm proud of him that he can be such a dad and a businessperson and help a lot of people out, that people don't know, just people behind the scenes. I'm very thankful.

Question: That's awesome.

Me and the kids always said, "Daddy will take anybody who comes off the pike." And we have, we have, you'd be surprised how many people's clothes I have washed, how many people have had to stay, and that's the type of person he is. I'm really proud because then that just followed through on my children, too.

Question: You feel like you're teaching them good, solid ethics that you want to last and be passed on.

Yes.

Question: Debbie, I really appreciate you participating and sharing your family's bio.

Thank you. I'm not very exciting though.

Question: I disagree. You know a lot about Hammonton and it's a pleasure to hear more details that you've had to share about your whole family.

Thank you, you are so sweet.

Question: I'll see that we get this printed up and get you a copy to edit and have for your family.

If there is anything else, I'll take your email.

[End of Interview]

Frank and Nellie Berenato on their wedding day (maternal grandparents)



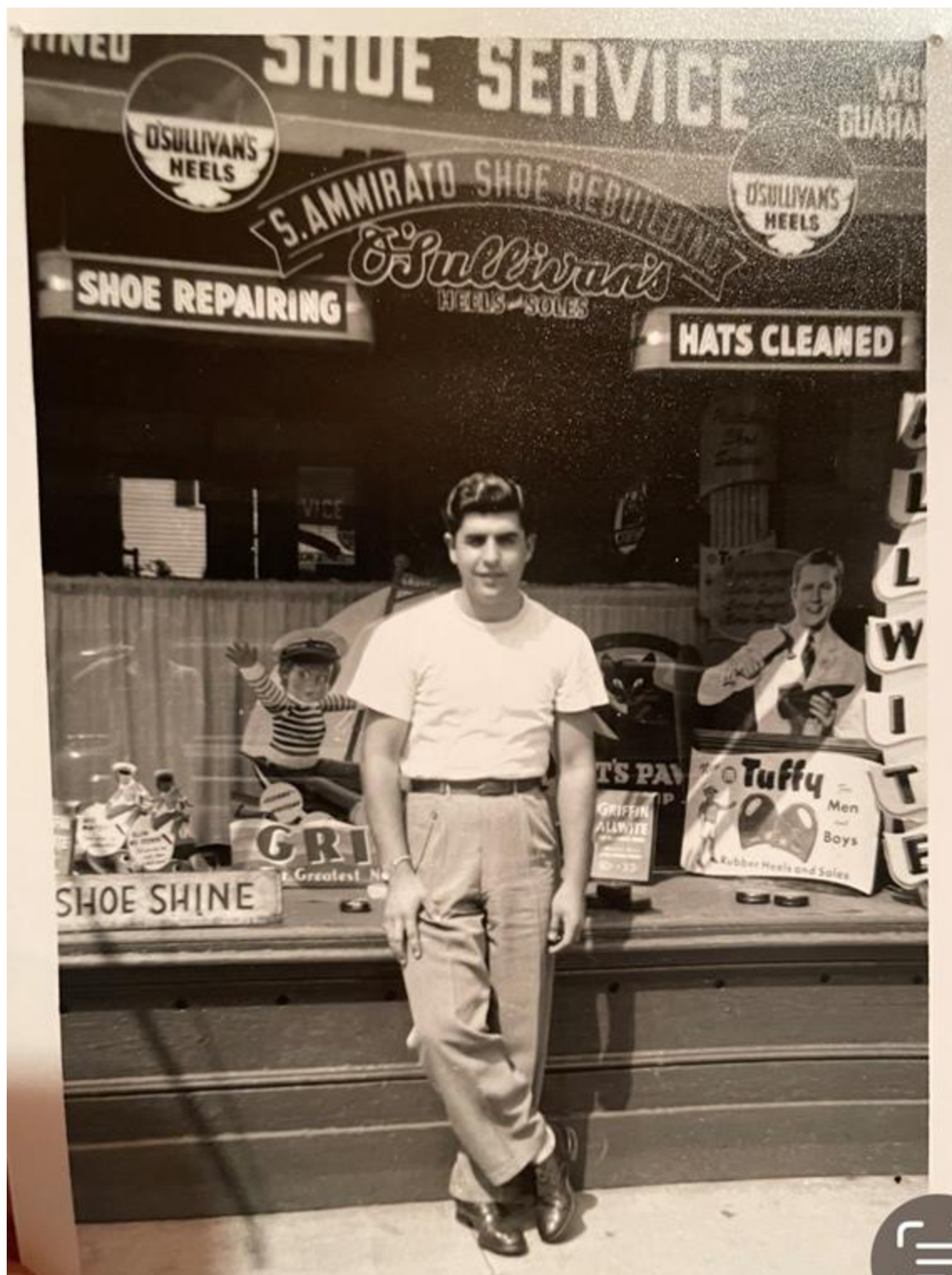
Mom and Dad at the shop they worked at before they were married



Mom on Bellevue Avenue



Dad in Town



Donald and Marie Perna on their wedding day (parents)



Mom and Dad - Saint Joseph R.C. Church, Hammonton



Frank and Nellie Berenato on my parents wedding day



Bill and Antoinette Perna on my parent's wedding day



Mom, me, Donna, Dad 1961



Me at the Hammonton Lake 1964



JUNE 1964

Assumption Society @1965- Dad in middle with Donna and me



Dad, Grandmom Perna, Uncle Joey (Dad's Brother)



Kindergarten teacher Mrs. Rice on a field trip.



Dad leading Centennial Parade 1966



Grandmom Perna with Donna and me during Centennial



When I was an "Angel" for the 2nd Grade Communion (5th grade)



My sister Donna and me @1972



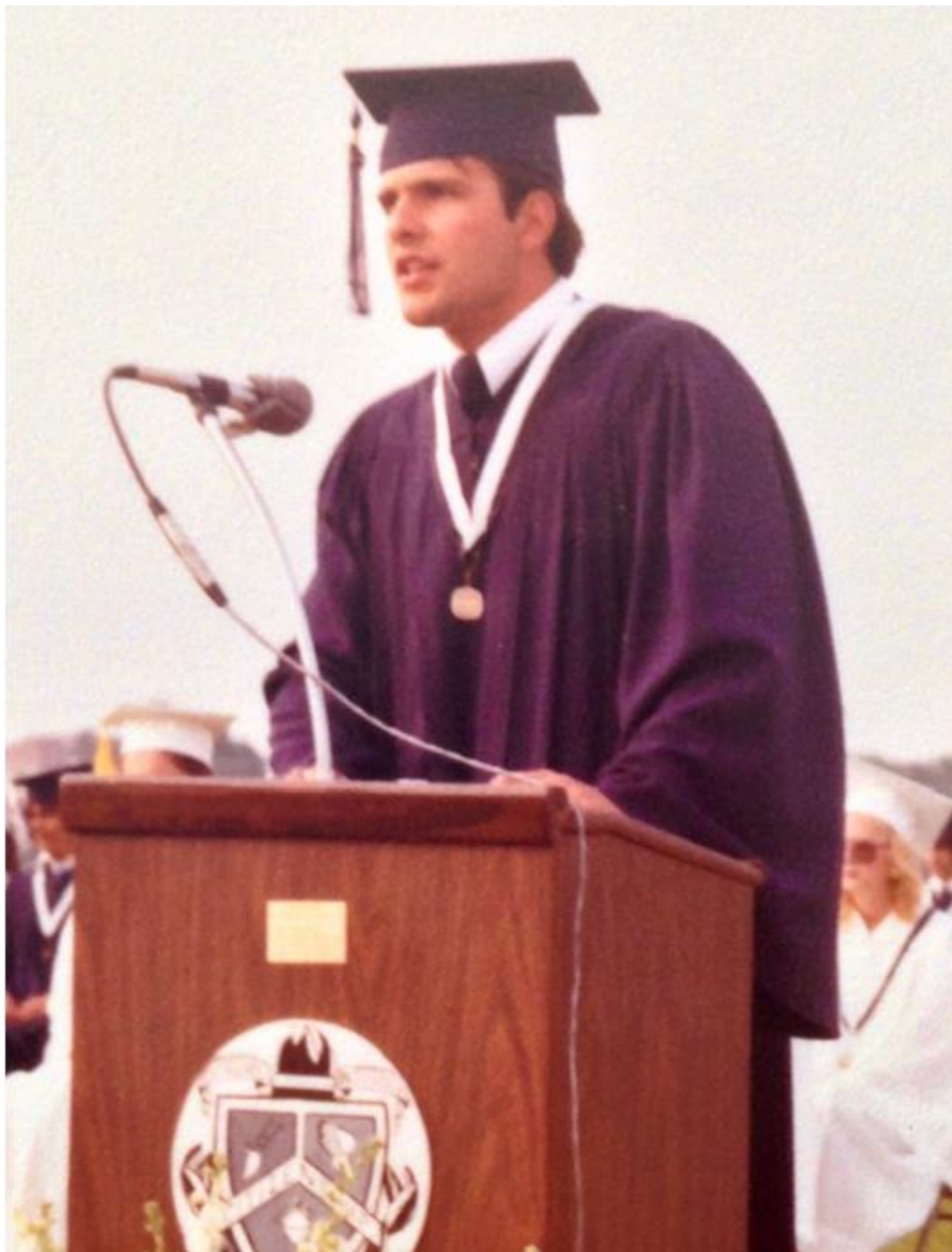
Hammonton High School Blue Devil Band - Lisa Ruggero and me with our cymbals



Dominic (Tip) and Phyllis DiDonato with Steve (playing for all stars)



Steve giving President of Class speech at our graduation HHS 1979



Glassboro State College Grad- 1984



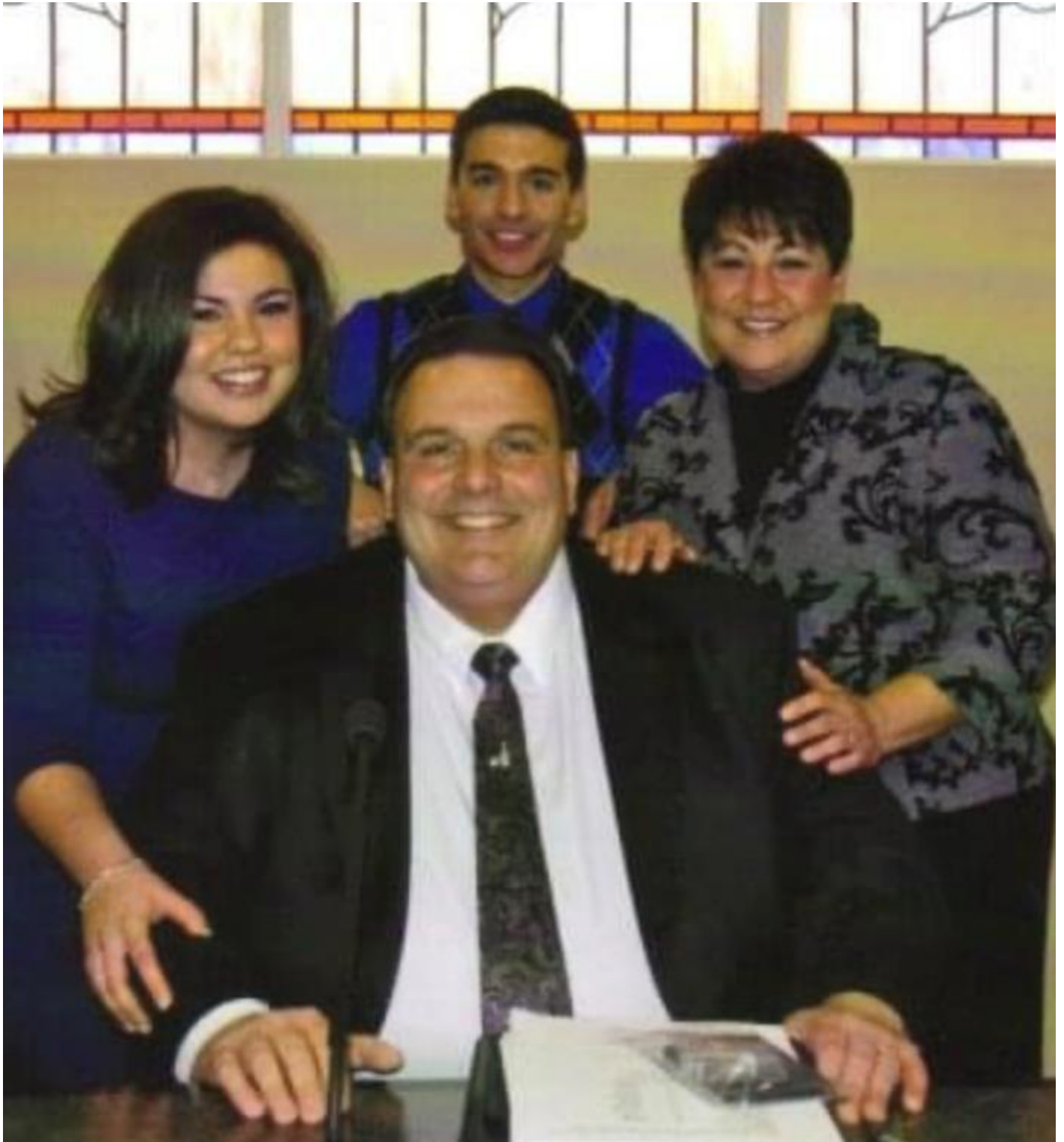
Steve and me coming into our reception on our wedding day



Christina's (Communion) May, at St. Anthony of Padua, Hammonton
1997



When Steve was sworn into Mayor First Term January 2010



Matt's Princeton University Graduation Festivities with Chrissy 2012



Donna, Dad and me 2012 (3 months before he passed away)



July 16th Flag Raising a Town Hall



3 Generations at DiDonato Family Fun Center - Steve , Tip, and Christina



Steve and Me



Drew and Christina Dillon on their wedding day (daughter & son-in-law)



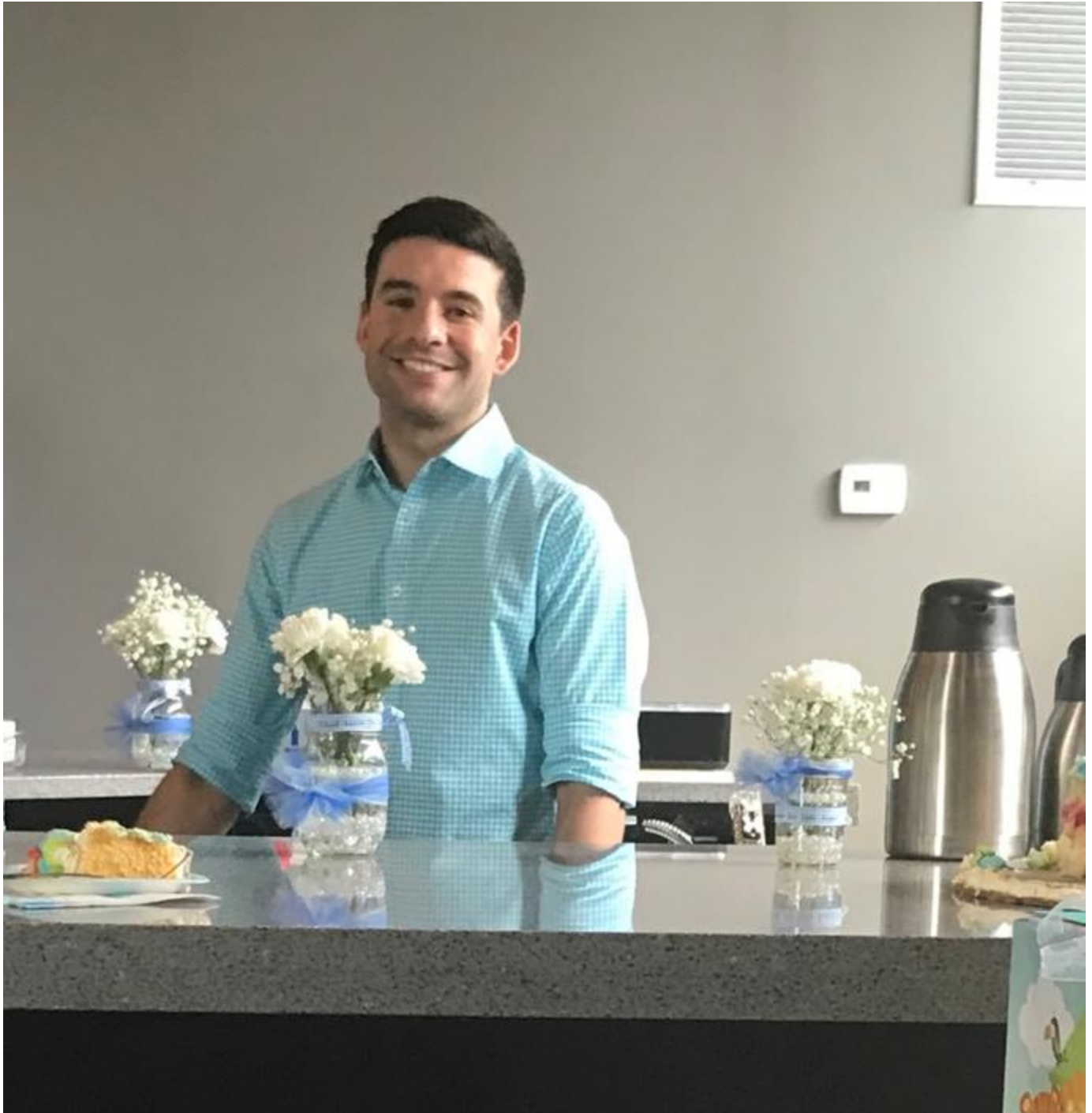
Dillon Family



Drew, Christina, Luke and Mena Dillon



Matt tending bar for a party at The Alley in our 1952 Room



Matt and Bryan with Luke and Mena



Luke, Matt, Chrissy and Mena - Lake George, NY - our favorite place to visit



Our son Matt with our grandchildren, Luke and Filomena



Steve, Debbie, and grandchildren



Tip and Phyllis with their Grandchildren



DiDonato's Magical Holiday Express (Santa with Chrissy and Matt)



Council

