

Precious memories preserved in book about Baltimore's Little Italy

By Nancy Menefee Jackson

Special to the Review

Editor's note: The following Q and A brought together an interviewer and a subject who were formerly fellow staff writers for the Catholic Review.

The Italian immigrant experience and the history of Baltimore's storied Italian neighborhood are captured in a new book, "Baltimore's Little Italy: History and Heritage of The Neighborhood" (The History Press). Suzanna Rosa Molino, the author, a St. Leo's parishioner, founded the nonprofit Promotion Center for Little Italy, Baltimore. She is married to former Orioles standout Ken Singleton; they have four children and three grandchildren.



St. Leo, Little Italy, parishioner and former Catholic Review staff writer Suzanna Rosa Molino is the author of a new 160-page book on the history of Baltimore's Little Italy neighborhood. (Courtesy Suzanna Molino)

CR: Why Little Italy? Tell me about your involvement with the neighborhood, and how that led to your book?

Molino: What spurred me was a combined passion for my Italian heritage and my adoration of Little Italy. As a little girl, my parents brought me here to visit my aunt and uncle on Eden Street, and as an adult I took Italian language classes at the Pandola Learning Center. In 2010, I established the Promotion Center for Little Italy, which pulled me 100 percent into the neighborhood, where I have made a plethora of dear friends and learned what the neighborhood is composed of, such as St. Leo Church, Sons of Italy lodge and the bocce leagues, where i play.

CR: Plenty of people get involved or volunteer. Why write a book?

Molino: Since establishing the Promotion Center I've been collecting the history of Little Italy and it fascinated me. I gathered every book, publication, anything I could get my hands on that was about Little Italy. To my knowledge nothing has been written solely on its history since 1974. My plan was to create a booklet on Little Italy's history for school tours and to hand out at festivals. An editor from The History Press emailed the Promotion Center in search of a writer or historian to produce a book on the history of Baltimore's Little Italy. I put the word out, but in

the back of my head I thought, 'I should write this.' When no one else took an interest, I completed an author proposal, and they offered me a contract.

CR: What's the most fascinating thing you've learned?

Molino: Probably how the neighborhood was once Jewish. It was fascinating to learn about the various Jewish-owned shops, vendors and synagogues that were once here. I enjoyed reading about how the Jewish and Italians meshed, living and working cohesively, befriending each other, and patronizing each other's stores.

CR: There is much history here. How did you decide what to include?

Molino: I knew what components I wanted to cover, but I also discovered stories that I just had to share. I created a binder stuffed with notes, stories, interviews, quotes and articles. It was very challenging to stay within the parameters allotted by the publisher. I was given 40,000 words, which is not a lot, yet a smaller book made the project doable. It was very hard to leave out information, I wanted to include everything! What (weighed) on my heart and mind was not being able to include many family names, stories and former business names that should be in the book. You can't fit that into 160 pages.

CR: What has St. Leo Parish has meant to this neighborhood?

Molino: The Italians brought more than just their trades and traditions, they brought their faith. Catholicism always has been important to the Italians and that's never changed. For 134 years, the common thread in this neighborhood has been the love for that parish. Of course it was established for the Italians, with Masses said in Italian. Occasionally, the liturgy today includes the readings read in Italian.

CR: Is the parish still as vibrant, still the anchor for the community?

Molino: Definitely. I have never seen such devotion as I see in this parish and community - the people adore and work so hard for their beloved St. Leo's! It's not only the Little Italy community itself. Many in Baltimore's Italian community repeatedly volunteer to work St. Leo's Italian festivals and ravioli dinners, and the Little Italy lodge events and dinners. Many who do grew up here and come back. And they all have stories. The parish absolutely continues to be the pulse of this neighborhood. In 1980, it was a huge, huge disappointment to the community when St. Leo's School closed. Many people back then thought, "There goes Little Italy," but that didn't happen.

CR: You wrote 800-word articles for the Review. What's it like to write a book?

Molino: Putting the pieces together was like a big jigsaw puzzle. It's not as if I started on page 1 and began writing - I jumped around as I came across various topics. The first story I wrote was on the "Little Italy Artist," Tony DeSales. He was fascinating - I wish I had known him. I remember seeing him on his corner before I was involved in the neighborhood. The most interesting part of his story for me was the postcards he created out of his sketches which he would hand out to tourists and

ask them to mail back when they returned home. He received postcards from around the world.

CR: Who was your favorite person you wrote about?

Molino: Besides DeSales, it would have to be Lucy Pompa and Mugs (Marion Mugavero, who died March 9), both in their 90s. I befriended and grew to adore both, as many others do. They are special and unique neighborhood icons.

CR: What was your favorite part of the book?

Molino: One of my favorite stories was about the Italian community visiting the Italian POWs at (what is now) Fort Meade, which housed Italian and German POWs during World War II. That said volumes for what kind of people Italians are, concerned about feeding and entertaining total strangers - not to mention prisoners of war - simply because they are fellow Italians! I love that story. Aside from the fact of the visits, the fascinating part was the U.S. bringing over nearly 500,000 POWs. My cousin Johnny Manna was the one who told me the story; he provided a few photos of his parents and others visiting the prisoners.

CR: Why is it important to document the history of an ethnic neighborhood such as Little Italy?

Molino: You can meet and talk to many people who have a direct tie to the immigrant. After our generation is gone, there won't be much of that. While researching, I could ask questions of folks who either were native Italians or their parents and grandparents were. With us second and third generation of Italians, the heritage and traditions will not be passed on in the same way. We personally witnessed our immigrant grandparents' ways, and grew up with them in the traditions and manners in which they lived in Italy. I can't pass that on to my kids - we're Americans now, as our ancestors wished to be. It's important to document their history for the next generation and to keep alive the history of Little Italy.

For a list of Suzanna Molino's upcoming book signing dates and venues in Little Italy and around Baltimore, visit promotioncenterforlittleitaly.org and click history. To reach the author, email suzannamolino@LittleItalyMD.com.

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