

**Name of Interviewee: Barbara Grieco**

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**Additional Materials: TV34 interview.**

**Interviewer: Terry Edgewater**

**Date: 03/23/2018**

**Location: Montclair Fire Department on 1 Pine St, Montclair, NJ.**

### **Introduction:**

Barbara Grieco was born in Montclair. Her parents emigrated from Italy and met and married through an arrangement orchestrated by her father's brother Angelo, in New York City. The marriage produced 10 children of which Ms. Grieco is the sole survivor. She describes growing up in Montclair. She details ethnic prejudices, but emphasizes a happy family life and enjoying her younger years. She also describes the physical changes occurring in Montclair over the years.

A history teacher for 39 years, she has now been retired for 21 years. She graduated from Montclair High in 1948. While they valued education, her parents believed that it was more important for her two younger brothers to receive a college education. Initially, Ms. Grieco started working nights for Westinghouse, since the night shift paid more. Not happy with this job, she sought advice from Ms. Wheeler, head of the Montclair Recreation Department, who encouraged her to get into teaching. She was initially denied admission to Montclair State. Dr. Ferguson, her high school principal, intervened and she was accepted.

Ms. Grieco talks at length about her sister Rose and their involvement in theatre. Together with her brothers, John and Michael, and sisters, Grace and Rose, a group was formed. They incorporated singing, dancing, acting and musical instruments into their performances. They performed at Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C. In 1988, she and Rose danced for President Reagan when he visited the West Orange Arena.

Ms. Grieco also describes her travels to Russia, Greece, and Italy (describing, in detail, a five-week trip she took with her sister Rose to Italy that included a trip to her family's hometown).

### **Timestamps:**

[0:00]: Barbara Grieco was born in Montclair. She first lived on Maple [Avenue], and then moved to Columbus Avenue. She was able to walk to school. They had a park, Essex Field. It was half a block from their house, but they never played there. They played on their street. She is happy that she grew up before TV, she was always outside. She was athletic and remembers being chosen first for teams.

[2:20]: She used to play softball. She taught folk dancing for a long time. Barbara has been retired for twenty-one years. She taught a class for the recreation department for many years, but classes became too small.

[3:20]: She considers herself very lucky to have gone through the Montclair school system. She graduated from Montclair High in 1948. She was a history teacher for thirty-nine years. At first, she was not going to college, as it was more important to her family for her two younger brothers

to go. She tried to go commercial [?], but this did not work out. In the late 1950's, she went to see Ms. Wheeler who was the head of the Montclair Recreation Department. Ms. Wheeler encouraged her to pursue teaching.

[5:00]: She worked nights at Westinghouse because the night shift paid more. She thought she wanted to teach gym at the Panzer Athletics, which is part of Montclair State today. She dropped out because she felt that she was not receiving a good education. She asked Ms. Wheeler for advice and was told to transfer to Montclair State. When she was not accepted, she went to see the principal of the high school, Dr. Ferguson. He asked her how she can expect to do college level work. He looked at her Montclair High School transcripts and wrote a letter recommending her transfer to Montclair State, which then accepted her.

[7:50]: At first, she tried the business world, which did not work well. She trusted Ms. Wheeler, so she took her advice. Barbara worked at the Grove Street playground around the time she was a junior in high school and was known for being good with kids. She feels that to be a teacher, you must like kids. She taught at a junior high level.

[9:20]: She was involved in theatrics. Her sister Rose was talented. Rose had two plays on Broadway. She is Italian. They had special costumes made and performed Italian songs and wore Italian dresses. Rose came back with a new song or dance every time she came back from Italy. Of the ten people in her family, five are in the group. They were involved in performing with the theater group. Their instruments consisted of an accordion, guitar, and mandolin. They danced to recorded music. Barbara, together with her two brothers, John and Michael, and her sister Grace were all in the Rose's performing group.

[12:06]: They played at Rock Creek Park in Washington, DC. They were invited to represent Italy back in the early 1960's. Barbara and Rose danced for President Reagan at the West Orange Arena in 1988. An Italian newspaper editor called them and asked them to perform for the president. She remembers having to wear a man's costume because they did not have any men. This performance was featured on the 6 o'clock news.

[16:10]: She was a part of the Cosmopolitan Club, which shut down in 2009. It introduced her to hiking, which she loves. They had different language groups, chess and more. It used to meet once a month, every second Saturday. Together with her sister Rose, she wrote a few programs for Christmas and other events. They had a family friend, an architect, who made scenery for one night.

[17:46]: She is a first-generation Italian American, her parents were born in Italy. Her Montclair neighborhood was mostly Scottish, and her family were the first Italians to move into it. If they were playing ball, and the ball rolled onto their neighbor's yard, they could not get it back. She felt that they were discriminated against by that Scottish family, but not in the school system or otherwise. She looks back and loved the school system.

[19:00]: She never let the slight prejudice bother her - they just let it go.

[19:20]: Her mother never worked. She wanted to be a teacher, but coming to America as a woman and an immigrant made it difficult. Her parents married in the United States in an arranged marriage. Unless you were wealthy, Italian women had the main goal of finding a man to support them.

[20:23]: Her two younger brothers and Barbara attended Montclair State and became teachers. Barbara also travelled a lot, going to places like Russia, Italy and Greece. She went with her sister Rose to Italy and asked Rose to plan it, including a visit to her family's hometown. In five weeks, she went from Milan to Rome and to Sicily. There was a man in Sicily who wanted to marry Rose. By the end of the five weeks, Barbara started to pick up Italian language. She was sitting in a cafe in Rome when a man at the next table sneezed. She said two words perfectly in Italian, prompting him to reply to her in Italian, but she explained that she was American, and her knowledge of Italian was limited.

[23:45]: She wanted to learn Italian in high school, but the teacher was not very good so she studied Spanish instead.

[24:00]: Her grandfather died when her father was nine years old. Her father continued working on the farm. He always told his children that education was important. He regretted not being able to continue his education. He emigrated from a poor area in southern Italy. It took two weeks to get to Naples where he bought a ticket to the United States. This was a three-week journey. He was sixteen at the time and did not speak English. He arrived in New York City residing in "Little Italy" where he shined shoes for a living. Her uncle Angelo met him and introduced him to his sister. Her mother was being taken care of by her sister. Her father did not look traditionally Italian because of his reddish/blond hair, freckles, and hazel eyes. Her mother described him as an angel. They got married in New York after which he took her to the opera for their honeymoon.

[27:03]: Barbara's oldest sister was born in New York in 1911. She took a trolley up Bloomfield Avenue to get to Verona and, while traveling through it, fell in love with Montclair. The train helped her father in getting a job at a concession. A banking firm gave him space in their lobby to shine shoes and keep hats safe. They knew he had a big family and supported him. Years later, someone else bought the bank and kicked him out. For the rest of his life, he never took a vacation or put money into social security.

[29:00]: Immigrants were mistreated and packed into ships. It was difficult to travel to the United States. Because of the difficulties in their own childhoods, their family focused on education.

[29:30]: She supports her church through donations, but does not attend services often.

[29:50]: The nice thing about growing up in a big family is that it helps you get along with other people. She had to get along with her siblings. She feels happy and fortunate to grow up in such a big family. They may fight, but they will protect each other. She had two younger brothers and she would stick up for them.

[30:40]: She got into a fight when she was five with a boy outside her house. They were about the same age. Some high school kids came home and encouraged them to fight. So she hit him, and he got a bloody nose. That was her first and last fight.

[31:50]: She looked up to her older sisters a lot. The older children helped raise the younger children. One brother was very athletic and played tennis with her. A sister got her into dancing and took her and her two younger brothers to shows in New York City. Her mother wrote and spoke Italian well. She would read and write letters for her neighbors on Maple Avenue. She would sometimes get thanks with food or chickens.

[33:44]: Garbage trucks were open trucks staffed with three men. One driving, one took the can and threw it up to the other guy standing on a pile of garbage. He would dump it in and throw it back down. Eventually, they transitioned to the trucks they have now.

[34:30]: Columbus Street was not paved. During the summer, some people were paving it, which impressed Barbara as a little kid. They also did not have a sewer at the time.

[35:45]: She had a Victory Garden during World War II. These were to grow crops during the war to help provide more food overseas.

[36:20]: She is happy to have grown up in Montclair.

[36:30]: She vacationed overseas for eight weeks and visited Italy. While there, Barbara built a court in her backyard by herself. She went to the hardware store and her brother-in-law, who was a carpenter, helped. They have family picnics every summer, and during the winter holidays she has a party for her great nieces and great nephews. Her oldest brother still lives in Montclair and most of the others lived nearby.

[39:20]: Another sister married a carpenter. They got married in 1938 when Barbara was only eight years old. During the war, he worked for the US Navy. When living in Bermuda, her sister was allergic to the cedar trees. They moved back before the war was over. She lived the farthest away from Montclair. A brother lived in Brooklyn, one in Long Island, but they all moved back to either Montclair or Nutley following the war.

[41:00]: She was mostly involved in sports in high school. She is glad that she went to school before teams were a thing. They used to have teachers pick people and play other high schools. Usually only juniors or seniors were picked. She has a great-nephew who is good at ice hockey, and she sees how much practice they have to go through.

[43:20]: Montclair is special to her. The town offers a lot and, if interested, you can be involved in different activities.

[44:00]: Audio cuts out completely.