

Name of Interviewee: Peter Giuffra

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Additional Materials: TV34 interview

Interviewer: Peter Di Angelo

Date: 03/23/2018

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

Introduction:

Peter Giuffra was born at Mountainside Hospital in 1942 and grew up with four siblings at 161 Park Street. His mother had come to Montclair from Maine, his father came from Brooklyn. His parents met taking summer courses at Middlebury College, and in 1929 his mother then moved to Montclair to teach Latin and French at Montclair High School while his father finished medical school. His parents were married in 1934.

He remembers his Park Street neighborhood as primarily white, but that he often played with other kids from North Fullerton Avenue, behind his house, where his father had purchased an additional vacant lot. The lot attracted a more diverse group and Giuffra recalls a fun childhood filled with outdoor play in all seasons. He is not sure why his parents didn't enroll him in the public schools; he attended Lacordaire and Immaculate Conception schools. He recalls the strict nuns and also remembers the nuclear bomb drills of the 1950s. He recalls favorite stores and also how different aspects of the town (such as food shopping and access to restaurants) has changed. He recounts some of the benefits of being an altar boy while in grammar school, including excused absences from school during the week if there was mass! He also recalls the traveling circus that he enjoyed very much when it visited town each year.

Today, Mr. Giuffra is known around town for his role as Elvis in the Fourth of July Parade. He explains how that tradition came to be and how special it is to him. His love for Montclair has also translated into dedicated involvement in beautification of the town – annually planting tulips at the high school – and more than 25 years as a chaperone in Montclair High School's Project Graduation event. He does it all as a way to thank the town. He notes that many things have changed in town and the progressive changes are for the better, including more diversity.

He speaks somberly of the horrific shooting that took place in the Montclair post office in Watchung Plaza in 1995.

The interview closes on a more positive and grateful note, with Giuffra stating that his favorite thing about Montclair is the people and that he could not imagine leaving the town.

Timestamps:

[:20] Peter Giuffra was born in Montclair at Mountainside Hospital in 1942. He grew up with four siblings at 161 Park Street, near the Lutheran Church, between Chestnut Street and

Watchung Avenue. His mother, born 1903, was from Maine and met Peter's father, who was from Brooklyn, when they were both taking summer courses at Middlebury College in Vermont. Peter's mother was preparing to continue her studies at the Sorbonne in Paris; his father was taking a pre-med chemistry course there. Peter says it was "like at first sight" for them and they started dating. Instead of going to Paris as she'd originally planned, his mother instead took a job in 1929 at Montclair High School as a French and Latin teacher and rented an apartment on Union Street. His father would come to visit while attending medical school. They were married September 8, 1934. She stopped teaching thereafter, when she was pregnant with their first child – Peter's older sister. Peter's mother may have been influenced to settle in Montclair because Peter's dad's older sister was living here, on North Fullerton Avenue (his aunt and her husband had a fruit and vegetable place on Bloomfield Avenue).

[4:05]: When asked about his neighborhood as a child growing up, as far as diversity within his neighborhood, Giuffra stated that it was "uniform racially," in his own terms meaning it was mainly white. As a youngster in the 1950s and 1960s he became aware of segregation but did not see any overt examples of it himself or disrespect towards others. He mentioned that he is quite happy with the increased diversity of Montclair.

[7:25]: Later into the interview he did mention that there were non-white kids from neighboring streets that would all congregate and play together in the lot behind his house. While Giuffra's neighborhood was primarily white, that didn't stop the children from forming broader relationships with kids from other neighborhoods nearby.

[7:37]: When asked what his house was like growing up, Giuffra mentioned a few things. There was an office for his father to work in, and his father had put up a basketball hoop on an oak tree near the driveway. In 1948 his father bought the 1-acre lot behind the house, between the Park Street house and North Fullerton Avenue. Here was the main place that Giuffra and his friends played all sorts of games such as hide and seek, crab apple fights, baseball (they had a backstop in the empty lot), football, and snowball fights in the winter.

[9:05]: Giuffra went into great detail on his schooling. From Kindergarten through Grade 2 he attended Lacordaire, as his three sisters had. Then he attended Immaculate Conception Grammar School, from 3rd grade to 8th grade; that was the school affiliated with the church his family attended. This is the school where Giuffra met his closest friends, friends that he is still in touch with to this day. Surprisingly, his 8th grade class consisted of almost 50 kids in homeroom. He fondly recalls all the school yard games they played: flipping baseball cards, handball, and other games like "Joe Joe Come Over the Hill." He had a lot of fun.

He was taught by nuns, who were fairly strict in their teaching habits. He graduated from Immaculate Conception in 1956, noting that it was the year Elvis became popular.... He remembers that in the 1950s there were threats of a nuclear war, and Giuffra mentioned how his class would often have drills where they would go underneath their desks or down to the basement. He doesn't remember being scared by the drills, though.

[14:31]: When asked if he remembered any important restaurants or stores in his neighborhood growing up, Giuffra mentions a candy store at Watchung [Avenue] and another candy store on

Park Street near Bloomfield Avenue [11 Park Street, where Villa Victoria Pizzeria was at time of interview]. Here is where he would often go to after school, with Giuffra saying, “I’d go after school and get a Chunky bar, eat it and be so happy.”

He comments that the stores have “changed so much.” He also stated that his mother would get food delivered to the house from a store at Watchung called Frank and Eddies (before that it was Naspo’s – sp?). She did not have to go to the stores, which was convenient as she was raising five children. This is where Giuffra stressed how different life was back then, stating that when he was growing up, “milk was delivered, bread was delivered, vegetables were delivered...” These were regular stores, but they were small; there were no supermarkets like A&P at the time. Grocers would deliver their foods in small, old school busses and would have a scale to weigh the purchased items right there by the vehicle. “People came around town who would sharpen knives.” Judging by this statement alone you can see the difference of living in that time, not only in Montclair but in general, compared to today. When he bought his own home in 1969 on North Fullerton Avenue, his kids still enjoyed going to the local candy stores. When asked about restaurants he said there were no restaurants in Montclair when he was growing up. The first pizzeria he recalls was in Verona, Miele’s, which still exists today [on Bloomfield Avenue].

[17:37] He recalls that the empty lot that his family had purchased between their Park Street home and North Fullerton Avenue, drew a diverse group of kids, some of whom lived on North Fullerton Avenue. He said it was a great time, and this diverse group played games in all seasons.

[18:10]: He also mentioned a wooded area near his Park Street house, near the Lutheran Church, where he would often play, which brought up the conversation of the town of Montclair being much less built-up than it is today. Giuffra mentions a “no man’s land” -- empty land that ran near Watchung Avenue, between Midland Avenue and Valley Road to near Vera Place and all the way down to Walnut Street. He and his friends or his brother would walk in that area that was just vacant, wild, and not tended. Now that area between Valley Road and Central Avenue has all been built on. [note: Some of that land had been a railroad right of way, for another train line that was never ultimately built in Montclair. It would have branched off near Walnut Street and headed west towards Central Avenue, Valley Road near Tierney’s Bar, and ultimately continuing through Verona. At some point, the railroad sold the property, and it was developed into homes.] Those were some major physical changes he has seen in town.

[19:45] He notes that two of his three children live in Montclair, and several of an older sister’s children live in Montclair. Many of his family members were raised here, attended public school here, and continue to love the town.

[20:06]: When the topic of religion was discussed, Giuffra had much to say. He was raised Catholic and mentioned that when growing up he was an altar boy at Immaculate [Conception Church], as were many of his friends. Although not particularly religious, the benefits of being an altar boy included getting out of school during the week for certain events such as a wedding or mass; sometimes getting paid \$1 or so for serving; and an annual day trip to Olympic Park in Irvington. As he got older, organized religion became less and less important to him, although he still believes in the tenets of the faith.

[22:00]: Giuffra recalls a shocking and true crime that took place in the neighborhood when he was an altar boy in grammar school at Immaculate Conception School. He remembers that Father Munlee (sp?) was the pastor, and other priests there at that time included Father McCarthy, Father Sheehan, and Father Davis. Someone living in the second-floor apartment of the house at 159 Park Street, right next door to Giuffra's family home, called Father McCarthy. In this call, the man told the priest, as if he was going to confession, "Bless me father, for I have [sinned]. Father, I have just choked my wife to death." This shocking story was all over the newspapers—Newark Star Ledger, and the now defunct Newark News. Giuffra's mother, who had known the woman well through her involvement in a group of French speaking teachers and others called Alliance Francaise, was quoted in the newspaper reports as "an anonymous neighbor," relaying that the woman had been "a lovely neighbor."

[24:00]: When asked about any festivities and events, Giuffra gave a lot of information here. First, he talks about the ice-skating rink on Chestnut Street [Clary Anderson Arena] and he notes that the property had housed "Army barracks after World War II." He mentions Fortunato Field directly across Chestnut Street where Montclair High School boys and girls play soccer and lacrosse, which had originally been a parking lot. He remembers, as a little child, when the traveling circus would come to town and set up tents in that parking lot; he lived very nearby, and he loved when the circus came to town.

Then he discusses the Montclair Township 4th of July Parade, which he recalls started in the 1950s. He always loved attending the parade, and he remembers marching in it with groups he was in or, in later years, that his children were in such as the Indian Guides, Indian Princesses, and the YMCA.

[25:42] He is a very well-known man in the community of Montclair, mainly for his role as Elvis Presley in Montclair's 4th of July parade. One year, when his daughter Jillian was home from junior year in college, he decided in June that he "wanted to be in the parade and have fun." [1994] She suggested that he get an outfit, dress up like Elvis Presley, and ride through the parade playing music. He knew Lonnie [Brandon, Montclair Township Director of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs], who was in charge of the parade, so he got permission from him to be in the parade.

For a costume, Giuffra chose the later Elvis years with his iconic white outfit. He went to Fabricville, a former fabric store on Watchung Avenue, got the card of a seamstress who lived on James Street, bought material and "baubles" in New York, and he "got three fittings as if I were a bride."

He asked some of his son's friends to use poster paint to decorate his van. His daughter went to Crazy Rhythms [a record store] on Bloomfield Avenue to make a tape from an album, that they could play through speakers. He got some candy to distribute along the parade route. Although he thought it would be a one-time thing, he was well on his way to becoming an iconic figure in Montclair's 4th of July Parade.

He remembers lining up on South Fullerton Avenue with other parade participants. When he turned left onto Bloomfield Avenue, and the huge crowds that attended the parade went wild, he was surprised by the reaction, as he didn't think so many people remembered Elvis.

He greatly enjoys what he does, and describes it as “such beauty for me,” and that it is “totally fun.” This example shows the diversity of the Montclair residents, as everyone is different and has their own talents. He finished this section by saying that portraying Elvis in the 4th of July Parade was his way of “thanking Montclair for being Montclair.” He continues to get his old truck painted each year for the parade and is really glad that high school kids, including those involved in Serendipity Café, are also now involved with his role in the parade. One other interesting thing to note, and yet another example of Giuffra's commitment to the community is in regards to his tulip bulb plantings. It started in approximately 1988-89, and he became involved in a PTSO parent-teacher-student organization intending to “doll up” the high school campus. As a gardener, he was pleased to participate. This was his way of wanting to “beautify Montclair.” When his daughter Jillian was a junior at Montclair High School (1989-90), he had recently closed his business and had more time; he became a chaperone at the very first Project Graduation event for Montclair High School's graduating seniors. He came home and told his wife Alica what a fantastic event it was! His daughter Jillian attended the 2nd year of this annual event as a graduating senior. Elvis, Project Graduation, the planting, all started around the same time. He enjoys giving of himself, especially to Montclair High School which he considers “a very special place.” He wonders if his fondness for the school stems from the fact that his own mother taught Latin and French there, on the 3rd floor! He recalls that his mother had loved teaching at Montclair High School.

[36:39] Giuffra says he wouldn't change a thing about his life because it might have precluded him meeting his wife of 51 years, Alica. He fondly notes “She's a good person, a great lady.”

[37:07]: Giuffra talked a bit about jobs he had as a teenager. He mentioned how his father hired a gardener for the front yard of their house, and this gardener became a friend of the family. Giuffra eventually worked part-time for the gardener after school. Perhaps this is what started his love for gardening in Montclair. He stated that this man was like “a second father to me,” taught him many things, and was a “great guy.” The man's last name was Lombardi; there are still relatives of this man working in Montclair. He laughs recalling how he and his brother once worked for over 3 hours shoveling snow out of the long driveway of their next-door neighbor at 163 Park Street and each made 50 cents from it. While it may seem surprising today, back then that would have been a lot to a child, as Giuffra stated that for just 25 cents you could “go to a movie and get popcorn.” He thinks his love for Montclair and desire to “give” to Montclair may have come from his mother, who also loved Montclair and was a very active volunteer here.

[40:18]: Further into this section, Giuffra brought up the topic of Elvis in the 4th of July parade again, saying that on his truck he comes up with a theme. Last year he simply put on his truck, “Elvis Embraces Montclair.” He followed this up by saying “that is what I do,” and that it's yet another way of him thanking Montclair for simply being Montclair. He finished this section by stating that he “couldn't ever imagine not being in this town.” This shows us just how much Montclair means to not only Giuffra, but everyone in the community, and how the town has grown on each and every one of them, and they all contribute to it. He noted that his son, who

had been a lacrosse player and recently moved back to Montclair and was to start teaching youth lacrosse in Montclair, told his father than he wanted to start helping plant tulips in Montclair, too. Seems to be an inclination that has passed down through the family's generations.

[42:00] He notes that so many things have changed in town...the many restaurants, the schools, and it's become more progressive. He remembers a time when there were stupid "kid" fights between different groups of kids, one time at the Bellclair Lanes bowling alley on Bloomfield Avenue. He thinks the changes are for the better. And while "there are many progressive towns, but there's only one Montclair." He states his desire to never move out of Montclair.

[43:00] At the time of the interview [2018], he would be involved in Project Graduation #29 and it would be the 25th appearance of Elvis in the 4th of July Parade. He briefly recalls playing on Edgemont Pond all the time when it froze over and going up to Mills Reservation not only as a youngster but to this day. "So many wonderful things here that make it worthwhile," he adds.

[43:50]: When asked about any unfortunate events that have happened in Montclair, and how they affect the community, Giuffra immediately took a more serious tone by this question. He went into great detail on a very sad event that took place on May 21, 1995. He didn't want to give the individual's name, but he told of the man who worked for the town and whose family resided in Montclair. This man walked into the post office [then on Fairfield Street, in Watchung Plaza], where he had worked part-time, with a gun to rob it, ordered 5 people to get on the ground, and shot 4 of those people to death. After this tragic event, Giuffra recounts that members of the town walked hand and hand up Montclair Avenue to the scene at Watchung Plaza -- over 5000 people, religious leaders and the mayor, along with the citizens, to show respect to the people killed. There is a memorial rock nearby, and Giuffra has become close friends with one of the widows. Giuffra started to tear up after telling this specific story. He names two of the postal workers that worked there that he knew: Ernie Spruill and Scott Walensky.

[47:27]: The interview closes on a less somber note, with the simple but strong question, "What is your favorite thing about Montclair?" Giuffra immediately responded, "Oh, there's no question...the people, the people." In fact, he points out that he knows several others being interviewed that day, including Nancy Arny, whose mother was one of the founders of the [Montclair] Historical Society, right in her kitchen with Jack Chance [former Montclair Township Historian]. He clearly loves Montclair, and he reiterates that he hopes to be here forever.