

**Name of Interviewee: Vincent Tango**

**Recording Identification: Vincent Tango 4-6-18.MP3**

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**Additional Materials: TV34 interview, two articles written by him.**

**Date: 04/06/2018**

**Interviewer: Angelica Diggs, Donato DiGeronimo.**

**Location: First Montclair House Community Room on 56 Walnut St, Montclair, NJ**

### **Introduction:**

Vincent Tango was born in 1944 at Mountainside Hospital. His first family home was in an apartment on Pine Street; when he was five, the family bought their first home on Cedar Avenue; they later moved to Columbus. Despite his family being poor, he enjoyed a happy childhood, with the recreation programs in the parks during the summer and ice skating in the winter.

He attended Montclair public schools. From a very young age, he was very interested in Montclair High School football during its glory years. He remembers trying to play football under Coach Clary Anderson, but his sister was concerned he was “too skinny.” He fondly remembers Coach Clary Anderson’s encouragement and concern for him. Coach Anderson suggested he go out for track instead.

Mr. Tango moved to Los Angeles, CA in 1983, but returned home often and had very fond memories of Montclair as his hometown. While living in California, he earned a living in advertising as a graphic artist. He subsequently started painting scenes of Montclair and has exhibited and sold his painting. He also produced greeting cards and postcards of his paintings.

While he loved the character of Montclair and the name recognition and familiarity he found here, he feels that the township is becoming too commercialized.

He was very involved in gathering historic films and videos of Montclair High School football games and making them more readily available. He has many recollections of stores and restaurants and hangouts in Montclair.

### **Timestamps:**

[0:00]: Vincent Tango was born on September 12, 1944 at Mountainside Hospital. He has two birth certificates, one from Glen Ridge and one from Montclair! [Although he didn’t understand why one was issued from each town, it is because the hospital straddles the town line and that was the policy at that time.]

[0:30]: He was born on Pine Street. He proudly reported that his mother came from Italy in 1919 when she was 9 years old. His grandfather, Vito Ruggiero, sponsored Vincent’s mother and her sister, Vincent’s Aunt Josephine and brought them over from Italy. Vincent’s parents were one of the last couples to be married in the old, wooden Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church. [late

1930s] He recalls that he was surprised to see photos of the old wooden church, which he'd assumed was a simple building, but it was actually really nice, with beautiful stained glass windows. The current [Our Lady of Mt. Carmel] church building was under construction on the same site with the wooden church when they his parents got married.

[2:00]: He lived on Pine Street until he was nearly 5 years old. The church owned the residential building in which his family lived, on the edge of the current Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church parking lot. His family, and the others in the three-family building, were told they had to leave because the Church had plans to construct Our Lady of Mt. Carmel School there. He describes the family as working poor, in an apartment with no shower or tub; kids were bathed in the kitchen sink. The family was paid to leave and his mother went to Vincent's father's uncle and got a loan to buy their first house on Cedar Avenue, near relatives (Aunt Rose, who was also grandmother of one of the interviewers, Donato DiGeronimo). He notes that while neither of his parents had a full education, his mother was "a genius with money." Vincent went to Nishuane School from kindergarten through sixth grade. In fifth grade, he moved to Columbus Avenue, and although he should have transferred to Grove Street School for sixth grade, a Nishuane teacher picked Vincent and a cousin who lived on Oxford Street up each day and brought them to Nishuane for sixth grade, too. In hindsight, Vincent wishes he had transferred to Grove Street School so that when he got to George Inness Jr. High School he would have known more of his classmates from the neighborhood in which he lived.

[4:50]: He went to George Inness Junior High School for 7th through 9th grade, and then Montclair High School.

[5:10]: On Cedar Avenue, two of his three sisters went to football games and many of his older relatives had played football for Montclair High School. He remembers being a very young child and the men in the family discussing the high school football team prospects, etc.; he became very interested in football through them. Montclair had a very good football team back then, with very few losses. By the time he was old enough to go to games, his older sister Rosalie would take him. He got to see Aubrey Lewis and many other players. He wanted to play football, but he was very skinny. In his junior year, he joined the football team. It was a great team with two High School All American players on the team and only one loss that season. At that time, kids were not kicked off the high school teams. Vincent remembers trying really hard to be a good player, but during one practice Coach Clary Anderson really yelled at him for his form as a running back. He vividly remembered after that practice when Coach Anderson, whom Vincent describes as "one of the greatest football coaches ever," sat him down and told him everything that could go wrong if Vincent did not follow the fundamentals. Vincent felt that Coach Anderson still tried his best to teach Vincent how to play, even though it was unlikely Vincent would see much playing time. Coach Anderson also tried to tactfully convince Vincent to join the track team instead, so he wouldn't get injured, but Vincent really wanted to stay with the

football team. Finally, while running plays in preparation for a game vs. Teaneck, he was practicing against the first string defense and High School All American Bobby Anderson and High School All American Ben Mobley who both tackled him, resulting in a significant ankle injury. He got a bad sprain in one and a hairline fracture in the other. Coach Anderson never said, “I told you so,” but instead would stop him in the halls as Vincent moved around on crutches and him if he was keeping up with his rehab and encouraging him to be in “tip top shape” for the track team. Vincent acknowledges that he was good at track, as his size did not work against him there.

[10:50]: He emotionally recalls how Clary Anderson did his best to avoid embarrassing Vincent and constantly encouraged him. It was a major disappointment to Vincent that he didn’t succeed at football, since he’d been such a big fan from such a young age. His sister Marion, however, suggested years later that had he played football and never had the disappointment of not being able to play, he may never have written his book on the history of Montclair; if he had played and actually been out there on the field, he may have gotten it out of his system that way. Vincent recalled that Coach Anderson used to tell the players to save their energy for the game, and he’d have the Montclair team walk onto the field instead of running – a tradition the Montclair team was known for that might also have been a ploy to psych out the opposing team.

[14:15]: They speak about Vincent’s artwork, which focusses on Montclair. While living in New Jersey, Montclair was a big part of his life. He moved out to Los Angeles, California and realized how important Montclair was to him. He met many people who could not move back to their hometowns. Sometimes their hometown was too dangerous, provided no jobs, or otherwise made it difficult to return. When people asked where he was from, he always replied, “Montclair, New Jersey,” not just “New Jersey.” But he also would constantly hear people complain about New Jersey. His sister Marion, who worked for MGM in California, encouraged Vincent to take pictures of Montclair when he visited home, so he could show people. So, he did that. He remembers standing on the corner of Bellevue and Valley, which was not his neighborhood growing up, but he would spend time in Upper Montclair – mentioning the Valley Diner, Geismar Kaplan [former menswear store at corner of Valley and Bellevue], the clock in front of the bank – and he thought to himself, “welcome home, Vin.” He was doing graphic art at the time for advertising, but he would eventually turn to painting Montclair scenes. He created eight different pieces at that time. He had moved to California in 1983, but returned to Montclair often, and specifically in approx. 1988 for a high school reunion. His sister encouraged him to sell reprints of his artwork. He started by making them available to his former classmates after the reunion. Then he got a call from Ellie’s Closet, a store that had been on Church Street, and the owner requested to sell his works. He also got some coverage on local cable television.

[21:40]: Vincent recalls being interested in art even as a very young child – drawing army guys and Montclair High School football players! He usually says he became interested in art in high school. He does drawings and paintings, never used oil for his paintings, mostly acrylics.

[22:07] Vincent notes his love for Montclair, even though there are some things he wishes were different.

[22:15]: When he was a very young kid, his close friend was his cousin Rocco lived in Paterson. When they visited Montclair, it was like they visited the country. They would go ice skating on Edgemont Pond, even under the lights, as depicted in one of Vincent's paintings. They would meet at the steps in front of the pond [on Valley Road]; the boat house sold hot chocolate and coffee and rented skates. He and his cousins used to meet and play in the park. Growing up in Montclair, kids had everything they needed for fun, even for a relatively poor family like his. He was able to do everything “the rich kids did” as the activities were not expensive like they are today with travel teams, etc. He remembers going to the park next to the Grove Street School (that building is now the private Derron School). In the summers, the park would have a recreation person there to host activities – horsehoes, chess, ping pong, etc. They used to build Go-Karts and race teams from other parks in Glenfield Park, build sailboats and race them at Edgemont Pond, and sports teams to compete with the other parks. His sailboat didn't do so well – you can see it in one of his paintings. He has created pictures of these activities, even including a Camp Glen Gray [cub scout/YMCA] camp t-shirt on one of the figures. The parks were always full of people, and he specifically recalls how active Nishuane Park was on summer evenings and how diverse the crowds were there, with many African Americans.

[26:10]: He recalls a time of racial unrest in Montclair in the 1960s when he was young, but he didn't experience it directly. He recalls his Cub Scout Den Mother; she showed absolutely no prejudice and modelled behavior of inclusion. He remembers her as being wonderful.

[30:30]: While he went to Montclair High School, the town was still very Republican, and many of those individuals were wealthy. He remembers that as an Italian he could not have a relationship with a girl from such a family. Vincent agrees with one of the interviewers, Donato DiGeronimo, who remembers restrictions for certain ethnic groups: Italians were not welcome north of Watchung Avenue; Blacks were not welcome north of Claremont Avenue; but there were some exceptions for families who had businesses in other parts of town and who lived on Wildwood, for example. Vincent remembers a lot of African American families on Gray Street off of Grove Street, which is almost as far north as Watchung Avenue; it is surmised that they may have historically been employed at the Glen Ridge Country Club, the Marlboro Inn [at Watchung and Grove], or been employed as domestic help in Upper Montclair.

[33:00] When asked if he has a favorite painting, Vincent replies that he doesn't. They recall that he'd done paintings of his homes on High Street, Cedar Avenue and Columbus Avenue that have actual photos of family members included in them; those were not sold. He did use photographs for reference for his paintings but didn't work directly from the photograph.

[35:00]: He's asked about hangout places. The biggest hangout place in high school was Bonds [on Valley Road in Montclair]. His sister Barbara was five years older than he was; she attended Nishuane and then Hillside. After high school, she used to go with friends to Dunnell's (sp?) on Bloomfield Avenue. His sister Rosalie went to Hillside as well, and they hung out at a place called The Spot (also featured in one of his paintings), right across from the Wellmont Theater. Vincent went to the Valley Diner in Upper Montclair. Once when he was in Junior High [he attended George Inness Jr. High], after walking through the Olympic Shop in Upper Montclair, where he liked to look at the clothes even if he couldn't afford them, he was invited into the Valley Diner by another young guy he knew. His friend suggested they frequent the Valley Diner to meet the Mount Hebron Jr. High School girls who hung out there, so they then would be friends with them already when they all went to high school. From then on, he started spending time there. The owner of Valley Diner used to love having teenagers there; many of the other store owners did not like the teenagers in their businesses. The Valley Diner owner was an ex-sailor, and Vincent included him in his painting of the Valley Diner, as well as athletes with Montclair High School jackets, which was later published in a magazine, *Diners*, with a caption that erroneously identified the scene as "college co-eds descending on an East Coast diner." Vincent enjoyed creating the paintings of Montclair. He used to enjoy coming home for Art in the Park in Montclair.

[39:50]: Vincent moved back to Montclair from California in 1999. Even while in California, he was painting Montclair. He edited some Clary Anderson football film clips, with help of some of his sister Marion's contacts at the MGM studio in California, and sold them, and he was invited to help with and sell at Art in the Park in Montclair. He would see many family and friends and made enough from selling his work to pay for the trip. They would have a "cousins night" and a few of his cousins and their kids—including cousin Rocco from Paterson and Mark Ruggiero—would show up to see him off. By the next time he returned home, many of his family members and friends had passed away, including two of his sisters and his cousin and best friend Rocco. This made it difficult to continue making art and return to Art in the Park. When Art in the Park was moved from Anderson Park to Clary Anderson Arena, he was even less inclined to return. It was moved to the parking lot of the [Montclair] Art Museum, but by then he had gotten out of the habit of participating in it. He exhibited and sold his artwork at Ellie's Closet, at the old Louvis's (the Montclair Char Broil). Around twelve stores – including Grove Pharmacy – also sold his greeting cards and postcards.

[46:10]: Returning to his parents, the interviewer inquired about Vincent's parents' line of work. His father worked at Nick Soda's poultry market on Glenridge Ave., in a neighborhood that was primarily Italian residents. His mother worked in various factories and as a housekeeper. His mother did not have much education but was wise and others sought her helpful advice. Both of Vincent's parents arrived in the U.S. in 1919; his mother was 9 years old and his father was 11 years old. His father's family settled in Paterson. His parents met when they were in a mutual friend's wedding party.

[49:07] Vincent describes his artist style as more primitive.

[49:43]: The interviewer returns the conversation to football memories. He knew that the old game film reels that were still at Montclair High School were rotting away, and it turns out some of those reels were not very important – some were just scrimmages or incorrectly labelled. He started to go around asking others for tapes of the football games. He worked with a coach who created game DVDs, and asked if he would like to put all the film and videos of the MHS football games onto DVDs; they were sold but Vincent wanted no money for his involvement in the effort. Vincent remembers one particular game, Nutley vs Montclair, 1966 season. He really enjoys watching that game. There was a televised game in 1956 – it was on Dumont Television, Channel 5, a big network at the time, and [Allen] Dumont lived in Montclair. It was significant that this high school game was televised in color with a professional announcer, Chris Schenkel (sp?), on both radio and TV. Vincent missed that game because he wasn't old enough to drive himself there and so he had to go with the family to his grandparents' house in Paterson; his cousin/best friend Rocco had bought tickets to go to Paterson's Hinchcliffe Stadium to see Paterson East Side play Paterson Central (Paterson Kennedy). He sat with his cousin at Hinchcliffe but listened to the Montclair game on radio at least. It was a really big game.

[53:56]: When asked what makes Montclair special to him: Montclair became special to Vincent when he was a kid just because of the huge amount of activities to do, all inexpensive or free, so his family's economic status never prevented him from being involved. What bothers him now is that it is becoming too "Beverly Hills" and commercialized, losing the "mom and pop" attitude and familiarity and everyone knowing each other that he remembered. He missed that very much when he lived in California, but when he returned to Montclair he was sad to see that familiar quality wasn't evident any more. Vincent recalls enjoying the town parks. There was a TV show called "I Remember Momma" [late 1940 through mid-1950s] and the beautiful actress who played the daughter Dagmar lived in the carriage house of a big estate on Pleasant Avenue. He recalled his sisters going to see Althea Gibson play tennis in Nishuane Park. As adults, he and his sisters Marion and Barbara recognized that the father from "Good Times," John Amos, used to hang around at Nishuane Park when they were younger, although he didn't live in Montclair. The opera singer Andrew Gainy lived near Vincent's family's Cedar Avenue home, and he recalls hearing him practice.