

A Love That Will Never Look Away

Sons of Italy Member Honors Late Wife



BY MILES RYAN FISHER

Eighty-seven-year-old Joe Mulholland visits his wife's grave three times a week. After sixty-five years of marriage and two years since Jane's passing, he still makes the drive from Ocean City, Maryland—where they had retired—to the Gate of Heaven Cemetery, a Catholic Cemetery in Dagsboro, Delaware. He brings her flowers and lays them on her grave to let her know that she is, and will always be, in the front of his mind.

When he initially made these trips two years ago, Joe stood at her grave, picturing the wife he had lost, reflecting on all the qualities that made her the love of his life. When he did so, he couldn't help thinking about how much she loved being around babies and children—and how much they loved being around her.

"I've seen times," he said, "where we'd be walking into a store and a mother would be holding a baby, and my wife

would walk in and the baby would put his or her arms out. There was just something about her that attracted babies."

With this in mind, he decided to see if the cemetery had a place reserved for infants. He asked a worker, who gave him a map of the cemetery and pointed him in the direction of a little area called *Holy Innocents* that was reserved for the burials of infants and young children.

When Joe got there, he noticed that even though the area was marked on the map, there was no visible indicator in the actual area itself. He stared at the flimsy plastic grave markers, some without the names of the very young ones they memorialized, others covered by dirt and overgrown grass. As he looked upon the neglected area, he thought of his wife, of her love for young life. "My God," he said. "I have to do something about this."

It wasn't the first time Joe had expressed that sentiment with Jane in mind. He'd said almost those exact words more than seventy years ago when he was just sixteen years old and growing up in North Philadelphia. He'd arrived at a friend's birthday party with a girlfriend beside him. It wasn't long before he looked across the room and saw another girl, one from West Philadelphia. He saw her blue eyes. He saw her light hair. "Wait a minute," he said. "I got to think about this."

Her name was Jane Lucci, and Joe came to discover that like him, she was half-Italian and half-Irish. Her father, Savario Lucci, had died when she was just two days old. He'd contracted peritonitis, a condition that developed from appendicitis in which the thin tissue that lines the inner wall of the abdomen becomes inflamed and can lead to infection. After he died, her widowed mother remarried and left Jane to be raised by her Calabrese grandparents.

Meanwhile, Joe eagerly described his Italian half, which came from his mother's side. Both of his grandparents had been born in Italy—Giuseppe in Naples, Campania; Giuseppina in Lucca, Tuscany—and immigrated to Philadelphia, where they met. Giuseppe worked as a barber, Giuseppina as a seamstress. Giuseppe's original last name was Guglielmotti, but was shortened to simply Motti. They had a daughter—Joe's mother—who grew up Lucy Motti.

Upon sharing their family histories whose halves seemed to fit perfectly together, Joe and Jane started seeing more of each other. A year after their serendipitous encounter, Joe enlisted in the Navy, finally old enough to join the war effort. He served in 1946 and 1947, guarding Japanese POWs in Guam and the Marianas Islands. He also gained experience in aerial photography, which



Bishop William F. Malooly blesses the Holy Innocents memorials.

would serve him well after his discharge. All the while he was overseas, he spent time writing Jane one letter after another. They never lost touch.

Just ten months after Joe returned from the Pacific, he and Jane married. They embarked on their new life in Philadelphia, where Joe took a job as a cartographer, mapping different countries and requiring frequent travel to Central America. They had a daughter named Kelly and moved to Takoma Park, Maryland—a town just outside of Washington, D.C.—where Joe took a job with the Army Map Service, at that time the premier map making agency of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. In 1988, after forty years in the workforce, he and Jane retired to Ocean City, where they resided until she passed away on September 22, 2014, just three days before their sixty-sixth anniversary. She was eighty-five.

"I'M SO PROUD OF THE SONS OF ITALY LODGES. I'LL TELL YOU, I LOVE THE SONS OF ITALY. GOD BLESS THEM, THEY ARE WONDERFUL PEOPLE."



The renewed Holy Innocents area at the Gate of Heaven Cemetery in Dagsboro, Delaware.

Soon after her passing, Joe found himself in the Gate of Heaven Cemetery's office, speaking with Deacon Don Lydick about the *Holy Innocents* area. He found that many parents of the young ones buried in that area were poor couples or single mothers in abusive situations who had difficulty affording permanent graves. This, Joe decided, was going to change.

With the help of Deacon Lydick, he contacted the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington asking what it would take to provide permanent graves as well as a monument that identified the *Holy Innocents* area. They told him the project would take at least \$4,000.

Joe launched a fundraising campaign that would last for more than a year. “It was its own blessing,” he said. “Because it kept me busy while I was still grieving.”

With the help of his grandson and his grandson’s wife, he started a website to raise funds. He also received support from his Sons of Italy Ocean City Lodge #2474, of which he’s been a member for twenty-six years. The lodge raised funds, and as word spread to surrounding lodges, many of them initiated their own drives as well. After thirteen months, Joe had raised a total of \$8,672—almost a quarter of which came from efforts made by Sons of Italy lodges.

“I’m so proud of the Sons of Italy lodges,” Joe remarked. “I’ll tell you, I love the Sons of Italy. God Bless them, they are wonderful people.”

On September 11, 2016—almost two years after Jane’s passing—more than two hundred people accompanied Joe to the *Holy Innocents* area following the 9/11 Memorial Mass at the Gate of Heaven Cemetery. When they got there, they saw a granite memorial monument resting in the burial section with “HOLY INNOCENTS” engraved along the top. Below the engraving were the names of those buried. In front of the monument lay thirty-one granite plaques, one for each infant and young child. Bishop William F. Malooly, who presided over the 9/11 Memorial Mass, consecrated the renewed *Holy Innocents* area.

Now when Joe visits this area, he looks upon the work that he has done—work in the memory of his wife and in the memory of all the young ones who didn’t have the opportunity to live the life that he’d been blessed with. A



Joe and Bishop Malooly after the ceremony commemorating Joe’s work in honor of his late wife, Jane.

life with the woman he loved, the woman whose blue eyes he’d looked into sixty-eight years ago. And even though she’s been gone for two years, he still can’t look away.

“I still have my bad days and good days,” he says. “But God Bless me, I had a wonderful wife.”

Miles Ryan Fisher is the Editor-in-Chief of Italian America magazine. Contact him at mfisher@osia.org

THE SONS OF ITALY AT WORK

The following lodges contributed to Joe’s wonderful cause:

- Grand Lodge of Delaware
- Prince of Piedmont Lodge #475 (Wilmington, DE)
- Giuseppe Verdi Lodge #2457 (Wilmington, DE)
- St. Gabriel Lodge #2035 (New Castle, DE)
- Caesar Rodney Lodge #2359 (Dover, DE)
- Ocean City Lodge #2474 (Ocean City, MD)

Joe would like to thank the following individuals:

- Joseph Facciolo, State President, Grand Lodge of Delaware
- Vito Potenza, Lodge President, Ocean City Lodge #2474
- Sal Castorina, Past Lodge President, Ocean City Lodge #2474



Joe with Grand Lodge of Delaware State President Joseph Facciolo (left) and Caesar Rodney #2359 Lodge President Michael Roca (right).