

Madeline Musengo Perry: Italian Cookies, Good Eating, Las Vegas and Engelbert Humperdinck

Madeline Musengo Perry was born on August 19, 1902, the oldest of nine children born to Carmella and Anthony Musengo. She currently lives in an assisted living facility in Agoura Hills, California. At 103, Madeline was the oldest grandmother we had the privilege of interviewing.



Madeline Musengo Perry was the oldest of eight brothers and sisters born to Italian immigrant parents. “My mother was born in Italy,” she said, “and she landed at Ellis Island.”

Madeline grew up in Chicago, where her parents eventually settled after spending some time living in New York. “My father had a brother and sister in Chicago, and my mother knew some families there that lived in her town in Italy.”

Madeline said her parents always treated her well, but she always had to do things for herself and her younger sibling. “My mother didn’t speak English. We worked hard.”

The oldest of her eight brothers and sisters, she always had to help her mother. “I had three brothers one after another and there was a lot of whooping cough that went on those years. Somebody told my mother that those boys had to go down by the lake - that it would be good for their lungs. So I took my three brothers on the bus and we went down to Lake Michigan. Whooping cough was terrible. Then I had a sister five years old who died of pneumonia. It was so cold in the winter time in Chicago.”

At the age of 21, Madeline married and started a family of her own. “In 1929 we had the stock market crash. Hoover was president at the time, President Hoover. He was a Republican. It was a bad stock market crash. We all had bought homes that year and we started losing them one by one, until Franklin Delano Roosevelt got in and he helped us all get our homes back. He helped us a lot, and I’ve been a Democrat ever since.”

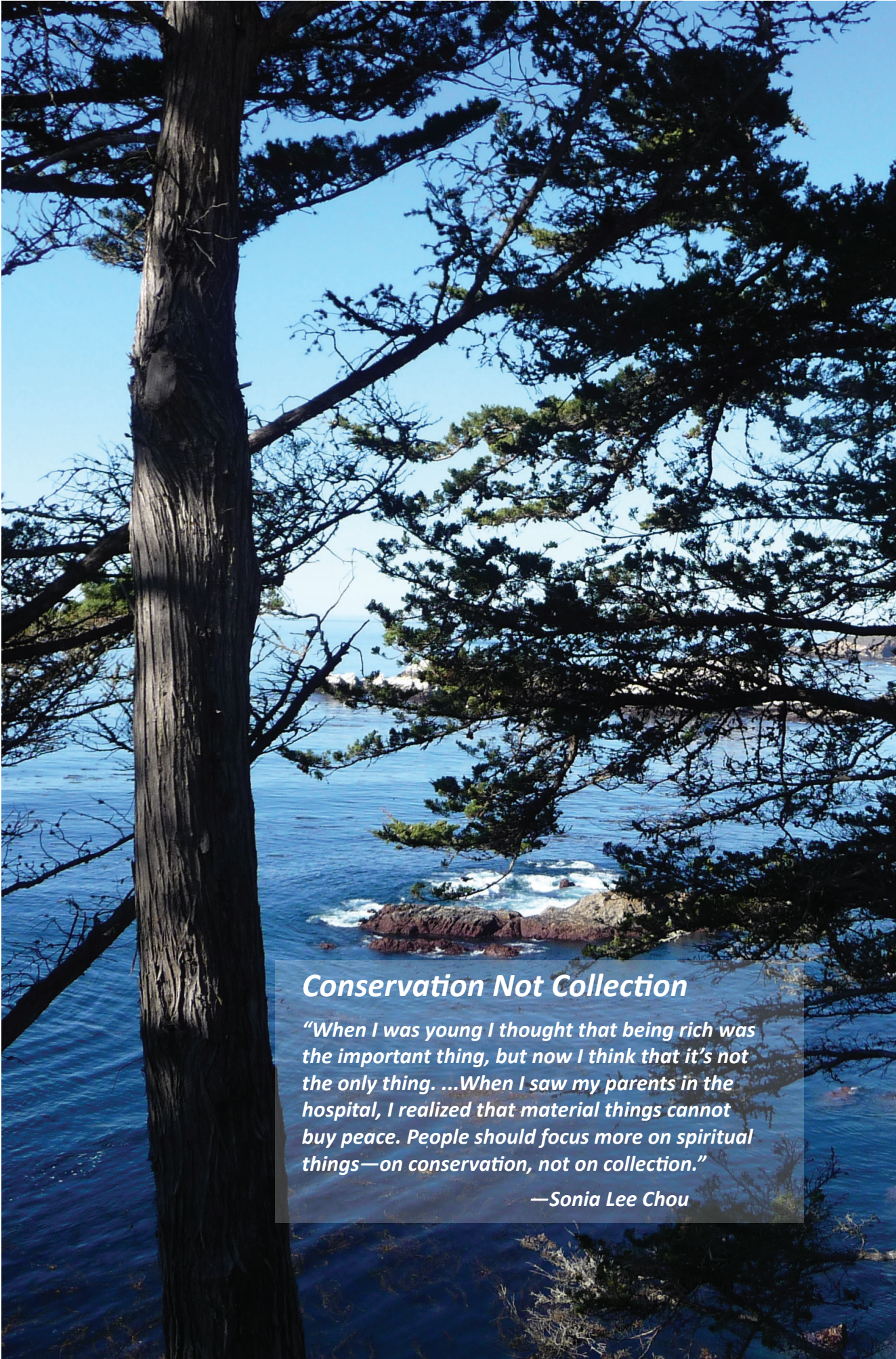
Madeline says she is fortunate to have a daughter, now 80, and a son, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great grandchildren. "When they come to me, I don't even know who they are, I said enough already, I can't keep up with them."

Madeline said the most difficult experience she had to overcome was losing all of her family members to death. "That's the hardest thing. My first grandchild died of cancer at the age of 39 and left three children for my daughter to raise. She had a wonderful husband, a wonderful home, three children that adored her. That gets me, why, why did she have to die? She was a good person. That was my hardest thing. Even though I did lose brothers and sisters, but grandchildren are closer."

When asked the secret of her longevity, Madeline couldn't point to any one thing. "I always was a good eater, but that's it," she said. "I enjoyed food. I kind of always watched myself, put a little weight on, take it off, put it back on again. I always made all my food. I made all the pasta by myself. I cooked a lot of sauce and gravy; I used to make Italian cookies. They went by the dozens."

"I drove my car up 'til I was 95 years old. I used to go to Las Vegas once a month. I used to go every month to go and watch Engelbert Humperdinck. He was my favorite singer. Although he was from England, he did have homes out here. I enjoyed his voice, I enjoyed his music. Whenever he would come out this way I made sure I'd see him. I was 95 years old the last time I saw him. He heard about it and he came down from the stage and he came up to me and he gave me a kiss! And he gave me one of those hankies he used to throw out to the audience and he made sure I caught one. And that was the last time I saw him, although I got a bunch of his records. When I went to Las Vegas, I was happy. I've got all kinds of pictures of him on my walls and magnets of him on my refrigerator."

Her favorite Engelbert Humperdinck song? "Please release me, I'm not in love with you. Let me love again, so please release me," she sang. "That's the song that made him. He tried everything until he sang that song."



Conservation Not Collection

“When I was young I thought that being rich was the important thing, but now I think that it’s not the only thing. ...When I saw my parents in the hospital, I realized that material things cannot buy peace. People should focus more on spiritual things—on conservation, not on collection.”

—Sonia Lee Chou