

D'Agostino, Rocco #21 *

Mr. Rocco D'Agostino D.O.B. August 21st 1920. honoured by John D'Agostino.



My father passed away on November 14th, 1993. It was one of the most difficult days of my life as I had only then realized that with his passing, the man who I admired most in life was gone, as was the person who passionately inspired, encouraged and challenged me to achieve to know and do more.

My father left elementary school in his native Italy at a very young age – not as a choice, but rather as a result of severe economic times in the 1920's and 30's. While in school, he excelled at all the courses he studied. Learning was his passion and he truly loved school because it was a place where his knowledge grew. At his bedside a few days before he died, my father told me that the biggest regret in his life was not being able to pursue his education.

Out of necessity, as the oldest child in his family, he became the major breadwinner for his family as a very young teenager. All but forced to abandon school, he started out his working career as a mason's labourer – hauling buckets of cement, bricks, and blocks from dawn to dusk. He didn't

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complain too much about his unwanted career and continuously brought home enough money to help raise his brothers and sisters.

After World War II was over, he used his masonry skills to help rebuild a war torn Southern Italy. He quickly became proficient at building, repairing and renovating virtually anything that he chose to tackle. Bridges to homes, he was a perfectionist and this trait showed in the quality of his work.

He married the love of his life, my mother, Angelina Morabito, in the early 1950's and went on to have four daughters while still residing in his native Italy. Not satisfied with the working and living conditions in Southern Italy, and being concerned about the future of his children, he decided to follow his brother's lead and make his way to North Bay in 1957 at the age of 37. He left everything he knew and loved in the hope of finding a better life for his family. My mother and four sisters remained in Italy until 1960 when he was confident that he could properly care for them in Canada. He learned a new language, a new culture, new construction methods and new business techniques in a short period of time

While in North Bay, he quickly found work as a mason and steadily proved that he was an able and skilled tradesman. After a few years of working for others, he decided to start his own masonry company. His business quickly flourished as a result of his perfectionism and ambition. With the addition of three sons to his family, he was even more determined to make certain that none of his children would ever experience the denial of an education like he had experienced. Being driven by this, he took well calculated risks and began a home building business. Over the years I am certain that he built hundreds of homes in North Bay and Area. He made sure that we would never have to quit school because he could not afford to send us.

And so I grew up; with a determined and able father in the construction business. It was there that I really learned what hard work is all about. I worked in the family business six days a week when school was out. Ditches and trenches were dug, blocks and bricks were laid and cement and concrete was mixed and poured...all backbreaking jobs...over and over. My father would often say: "do you want to do this for the rest of your life? If you don't want to have a sore back every night after work, stay in school. That way you don't have to do this for a living." He also drilled into our heads an old Italian saying: "il più che sai, il più che vale" or "the more you know the more you are worth". He put each of his seven kids through school to a point where we had all completed at least two university degrees. Education was literally drilled in our heads: "Once you have it, no one can ever take it away from you".

Growing up on construction sites, I saw the good and the bad of what hard labour can result in. I am sure that my back troubles today come from my years of working on the construction sites. "Use your head, not your back" he would regularly say to me.

My father earned a good living by this type of work, and seeing this, at one point after completing my first university degree, I had decided to remain in the family business and not accept a position in law school. "If you have an education, you can choose not to use it. Without education, you do not have a choice for your future". He convinced me to continue my education and go to law school on that basis. "If after you have completed your degree, if you still don't want to be a lawyer, you can always be a home builder." I hear these words in my head every time I encourage my own children to try their best at school. I never really understood that my father didn't want me to follow in his footsteps and take over the family business. He had no choice. He had to be a mason to feed his family; that was all he knew. He would have loved to have been given the opportunity to become a teacher, an engineer, a doctor or a lawyer but the choice was not his.

I have come to realize that he lived vicariously through us as we pursued our quest for higher education. Through the satisfaction of seeing our successes in school and our professional lives, he too succeeded. His legacy lives on in our minds and souls and no one can take away his legacy from us. So dear father, your children's lives are what they are today because of the relentless encouragement you gave us to pursue higher educations. The degrees earned by your children are

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your crown jewels not ours. You are not just a leaf in my life, you are the tree. Thank you for inspiring me.