

A Tribute to my Dad, Leo Preziosi, Sr. by my brother Stephen Preziosi

The Beginning

My father was born on March 4, 1926 in Freeport, New York. The son of the great combination of Italian and Irish immigrants. His father was Aniello Preziosi (whose name was later changed to Angley by one of his teachers) and his mother was Adelaide Sweeney. He had 5 brothers – Joseph, Sonny, Johnny, Pauly and Father Peter.

We constantly heard stories about them growing up in Freeport and what a great place it was to live. The tales of my father's youth were peppered with characters larger than life and as colorful as he was. Listening to these stories you had to follow a maze of nicknames. There was Guychi, Spiny, Jeep, the Duke, The Greek, Nicole, Legs, the chinaman, and of course no story was complete without the Black Rat.

Baker shop:

This was the cast of characters and My father's youth revolved around my grandfather's bakery. The Angley Preziosi Bakery, started by great grandma Anna Preziosi, was the centerpiece of countless stories and the beginning of a life long love affair with the fine art of baking bread. My father and his brothers grew up in and around the bakery and learned to work and love the dough that became the bread that was their sustenance and their livelihood.

The stories my father told from my grandfather's baker shop were as sublime as the bread he baked in our home. Somehow these stories always focused around some mischief involving my father, his brothers and his cousins.

My father brought the great tradition of baking bread to our house. Growing up, there was always freshly baked bread, in loaf pans, Italian bread, scaletta bread – all kinds. You could come to our house on any Saturday and find my father kneading dough in the kitchen, letting it proof and putting it into loaf pans or winding the dough to make the scaletta.

My father's work filled the house with the great aroma of baking bread, another symbol of his great love for tradition, for us and for family.

His Love For Family

My dad's love for family made him the organizer of great family gatherings. He was always the glue that bound us together. Our house always seemed to be a place for joyous gatherings and countless family events. He was happiest when he was surrounded by his people, laughing and telling jokes, or just sharing a meal.

He Organized the family picnics, originally started by my Uncle Johnny in the 1970s. For more than 20 years the picnics were the events that brought our family together from all over the country, allowed us to catch up on the latest family news, and play marathon games of bocci, horseshoes and cards.

There were also the Minesta parties that he helped put together: these parties were truly special. It was always a male only affair held either at my Uncle Joe's house and then at Uncle Nick's place. They were attended by the same great cast of characters that my father grew up with. There was Guychi, spiny, Nicole, the judge, the duke, legs, the greek and of course the black rat and so many others.

They were great gatherings that included food, fun, storytelling, jokes and more food. But most importantly love, family, friendship and laughter were on the menu.

The picnics and the parties were the best, but nothing was better than when my father was together with all his brothers. The six of them together was not just a gathering, it was an event. More than the storytelling and jokes, the six of them together in the same room was captivating and electric. The energy they created and the satisfaction of being together and the love they had for one another made these the most memorable moments of my youth.

My father was never happier than when he was with his family, my mom, my brother and sister and me – but he was truly ecstatic, and ever grateful to my brother in law Gene and my sister for giving him 3 grandchildren – Francis, Amy and Jenny. He was the proudest grandfather and was constantly talking about, thinking about or writing to his grandchildren.

The Adventurer

But before all the great blessings of his family my father's had a more than interesting youth. He was a traveler, a seeker of new experiences, and a truly great adventurer.

Before there was ever a Jack Kerouac, before there was ever "On the Road". My father traveled the United States and to the west coast, to Oregon, California and Washington State in search of adventure.

It was the late 1940s, just after WWII and my father hitchhiked, walked and hopped freight trains to the west coast. He called it "HoBoing". It was his sense of adventure that took him there and was the source of countless stories that we heard growing up.

It was in Oregon that he became a lumberjack. A real lumberjack. And lived in places called logging camps and in houseboats on rivers or he slept in the woods. We heard stories of him conquering true giants – as he felled the mighty redwoods and the great sequoias, and was part of a crew known as "Toppers" – responsible for scaling 200 feet to the tops of giant trees to cut all the branches off before they were felled. The tales from Oregon were almost mythical, larger than life and were the captivating stuff of his life and our imaginations.

But his adventures there were not just his personal history, they were so much a part of the greater American story. He cut down the trees - that made the lumber - that built the houses in the post WWII boom that was happening in America. Let's not forget that many of the houses and towns

right here on Long Island were built after WWII entirely with the lumber that came from the west coast.

Storyteller

His adventures in Oregon were an endless source of stories. I don't think I ever heard the same story twice from my dad. There was a countless cast of characters - all from a simpler time when hard work, honesty and charity were the norm.

But his personal experiences were not the only stories he told. I think his imagination was the greatest source of his stories.

There were countless versions of the Grinch that stole Christmas, depending on how much wine was consumed at Christmas dinner.

And if you grew up around my father you inevitably heard the story of a creature known as the South African side hill catawamper. This was a creature that he allegedly encountered in the woods of Oregon as a lumberjack.

And the story went something like this: this was a small animal with four legs. Both of its left legs were much shorter than its right legs so that it could maintain its balance as it ran counter clockwise on the slopes and around the sides of mountains. This animal had a long tail with a ball on the end of it that it would hit lumberjacks with, knock them down and steal their tobacco products and chewing gum.

Somehow we were so enraptured by these stories that we never bothered to ask how a "South African" catawamper/catawampus made its way to the woods of Oregon. But that was the power and magic of my dad's

imagination and storytelling. We were enraptured, we were entertained, we were infused with the great love and energy that my father had for us and for the love of telling stories.

Music and Poetry

Our house was an amazing place to grow up in, it was always filled with great music and poetry.

My father had a great love for music and was always singing a song or whistling a tune as he went about his day. He introduced us to the music of his generation. We knew Harry James, Glenn Miller, Xavier Cougat, Boots Randolph, Duke Ellington and countless other big band leaders of the 1940s - their music constantly filled our house. There was always a record on the record player and my love for music was definitely inspired and nurtured by my father. I'll always remember him dancing in the living room with my mother or just singing along with all the great records.

And yes there was poetry. My father constantly left poems for my mother written on post its and pasted on the walls and mirrors of the house. Like all the things he did, he had a unique way of expressing his love.

The poetry was not just for my mother though. He wrote poetry for me, my brother and sister as well. In our house, every Easter Sunday you didn't just get handed an Easter basket, that would be too easy. In our house you had to hunt for your Easter basket.

When we were kids we would wake up Easter Sunday morning and there would be short poems on each of our dressers. Each poem was carefully crafted by my father - but they were not just a poems, they were actually clues that would send us on a hunt throughout the house looking for the next poem or clue hidden somewhere in the cushions of the couch, behind paintings, in cabinets – wherever the poem or clue would lead us. And that poem would lead us to another and then another until finally we found our Easter basket.

And he made my mother hunt for her Easter basket as well. It was always a joyous scramble as you can imagine the four of us running around the house looking for his poetry. But more than us, I think my father enjoyed watching this scene. He would sit in his chair and laugh and watch us trying to decipher his cryptic clues, looking inside cabinets and under seat cushions. It was crazy, it was maddening, it was chaotic and we loved every minute of it.

These were the kinds of creative acts of love we received from my father.

Lessons

We not only received love from my father, but great lessons for life. My dad was never one for long speeches or high-minded words. He taught us through his example and by his actions. He taught us kindness, faith, forgiveness and love for family.

Faith: my father was a man who had great faith in God. Although he could ill afford it. He sent me, my brother and sister to Catholic school because growing up with God and faith was important to him. He constantly told me to keep the faith son, keep the faith. And these were not just his words, this was his example, this was the way he lived his life.

And there was prayer: every night before we ate dinner there was prayer. My father never left anyone out of his prayers – and when I was a kid, and really hungry and dinner time those prayers could get pretty long. But I guess that was the lesson of patience.

He taught us many other valuable lessons:

Years ago I knew a person that had wronged my father, they had deeply wronged him. To the point where it had become a life altering event for the worse. But my father never held a grudge, he never had any hatred in his heart, because that was not his nature.

In fact, years later, he went out of his way to help them, he went way out of his way to consistently help them when they needed it most.

Through his example, by the way he lived, he had taught us the profound lesson of forgiveness.

The Great Marriage: more than all of these lessons my father taught us love by his example and through the great marriage that my parents had and the love they have for one another. My father's dedication to my mom and her dedication to him is the single greatest love I've ever known.

They grew up next door to each other and have known each other their entire lives. It is the quintessential love story, the stuff that movies are made of, but more than this it is the kind of love that would make the movies jealous and teach us that the greatest thing in life is to love one another, cherish one another and to always keep each other close.

A man who knew my father his entire life once said of him that whoever met my father liked him. And that was so true.

I thank God for the gift of letting me walk this journey of life with him, even if just for a little while, too short a while.

So I'll take his example and hold it in my heart forever, I'll love my family, value my friends, bake some bread, look forward to seeing him again one day, and I'll keep the faith.