



“This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a good place for all of us to live in.” ~Theodore Roosevelt

The American Dream

By Gina Perrucci Prickril



My parents outside our house in North Wildwood



“Our Little Shack”

Still standing tall despite numerous storms.

I believe in the American Dream. I believe that hard work and self-reliance can take you further than you ever dreamed you could go. And I believe in all of this because of my parents. Between the two of them, my parents had nine years of education - my Dad left school after third grade; my mom, after sixth grade. They married in Italy at the height of the Great Depression, and crossed the Atlantic in steerage class on an ocean worthy vessel called the Conte Grande. They awakened in a city whose streets were not paved in gold as hoped, but streets that were cluttered with soup lines and rationing centers. And yet, the Dream could not be dimmed. Even as the Depression eased, without education, my Dad was forced to find work in West Virginia, leaving his young family behind in Philadelphia. But find work, he did. Menial work making cigars in a factory, but work that would insure the survival of his family. Luckily he was able to return home, and until he retired in 1968, worked in the same cigar making industry, this time making Phillies Cigars. Even with his third grade education, my Dad never smoked. He knew back then that life was healthier without smoking. My mom worked as a seamstress sewing buttonholes by hand for fancy men's suits. She got paid pennies for each buttonhole, but I remember her practicing and refining her craft at home sewing on different kinds of fabric so that she would get the tension just right on the thread. She had pride in her work. My Dad did too, telling all of his six children that there was dignity in every job whether you dug holes for a living or you were the CEO of a major corporation. Do your job the best way you know how because it says who and what you are. Later when I was in high school and then, when I was only the

second person in my family to attend college, he would tell me, “I’ll never demand all A’s, but I will demand your best”. He had lived a life without the benefits of an education but the man was wise beyond his school years. As a family, we lived a humble life. Only now as adults do my siblings and I realize how poor we were. Granted, there were not as many things to distract you back then, but I think my parents used twice the energy to spend a dollar as they did to earn it. But life was good because we knew we were loved. Dinner was at 5:30 sharp with a table filled with homemade, and sometimes home-grown meals. And it was a table filled with people because dinnertime meant family time. My parents would share things about life that made me think about my future. I knew that this was their American Dream. I knew they had started life with nothing and had raised their six kids by the sweat of their brow. I knew only one thing for sure - that life is not easy and you need to be ready to meet it head on. That, at the end of the day, I would be responsible for who I became and what I did with my life. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of my parents. I smile when I remember my Dad telling us that the Constitution doesn’t guarantee us happiness; it only guarantees the right to pursue our happiness. Whether you make cigars for a living, or sew buttonholes for designer suits, the American Dream is there. Dream it, work at it, and make it a reality. My parents instilled a love of the seashore in my siblings and me and saved what money they could over many years in order to buy what my Dad lovingly called ‘Our Little Shack’ in North Wildwood. Of course they bought it just in time for the Storm of ‘62, but God smiled on us and our house survived!



My grandmother, Savina Carsillo. Her sole purpose in life during the summer was to catch as many crabs as possible!



My parents, Paul and Marian Perrucci, with Anna and Clement, my siblings, on the boardwalk



My Mom, my 2 sisters, Maureen and Paula, and I on the beach at Spicer Avenue with a members of the Budano family.



My Mom and 2 brothers, Clement and Frank.

This is the story of the how my parents wound up buying a house in North Wildwood. It really is bittersweet - I had never heard this story or, if I had, I had forgotten it. My brother Frank told me that my parents found the Wildwoods quite by chance when they were very young, when they only had 2 children, Clement and Anna. They came to Wildwood frequently. Then in 1950, my brother, Clement passed away at the age of 19. My parents, because of their grief, stopped going on vacations; the memories of my brother in Wildwood hurt too much. Still, my father would take day trips with my brother, Frank, to take him fishing and crabbing. They would drive to Seaside Heights on a Friday night, sleep in the car, wake up early, and rent a rowboat that they powered with their old 5 HP Elgin engine. As time passed, my parents slowly started to go on vacations again; they realized they loved the seashore and missed the peace and serenity of being near the ocean. Ironically, because of the memories of the time they spent with Clement in Wildwood, they returned and rented a bungalow from the Budano family on Spicer Avenue. When my parents began entertaining the idea of buying a house in the Wildwoods, it was my brother Frank who insisted that they look for a house on the water because he wanted to be able to park his future boat right at his doorstep. In 1961, a small house on Otten’s Canal came on the market. My parents made an offer to the owners and the deal went through. The purchase sent my mom back to work full-time to pay for the house. My parents raised the house because of the potential for flooding - but who could predict the flooding of March 1962? I remember them praying that our house would still be standing when we drove down to the shore to check for damage. Police were stopping all inbound cars on the Grassy Sound bridge - only those showing proof of ownership could enter the island. When my sister Paula (then 7 years old) saw our house standing tall, she said, ‘Our house is the best house in the whole world!’ We had 30” of bay water in the house, and our neighbor’s boat had floated over our fence and was now resting in our yard.

My sisters, Maureen and Paula, own the house now. If you sit quietly in the living room or on the porch, you can almost feel the presence of my parents and grandmother and hear the laughter of all of their children who knew that they were truly blessed to be at the shore and breathing in that sweet, salty air. Where else can you grow up learning how to feed yourself directly from the sea - from crabbing off our porch, to fishing in the bay and ocean, to being sent to the beach with nothing but our hands to dig for clams for dinner. We would carry the clams wrapped up in our beach towels and walk back home from the beach at 18th Ave. My mom and grandmother would wash, shuck, chop and cook those clams in the time it took for us to shower. Nothing better in life than to have home made clam gravy on linguini! The tradition continues as my sisters, Maureen and Paula, and I still come to North Wildwood with our families. In October, with God’s blessings, we will have an addition to the next generation of our family which continues the tradition of coming to North Wildwood!