



**Antonio Sparrow Messina**  
**ROBS History Project**  
**Feb 15, 2001**                      **67**

Tony began as we requested, by providing us with his full family name. Speaking with confident self-assurance he introduced *Anthony Sparrow Messina*. A few moments earlier while still off camera we'd learned that six months before he was born, his birth father died. The newborn and his birth mother were believed to be on their death beds. The attending physician predicted it was more than likely they would not survive the year. But they did. We learned that a brother of his birth father had come up with a piece of paper that claimed everything Tony's father owned henceforth belonged to that brother. The lawyer who Tony's grandmother's family hired six months down the road, committed suicide over a love affair gone bad and all the papers got impounded. There were so many problems while he and his mother were still on their death beds, his grandmother being a pious woman, made a Novena to the Blessed Virgin and said, *"All I want is my children. On behalf of my grandchild I relinquish any claim to his father's estate. You can have anything else". And that was what happened.* His maternal grandmother then stepped up to fill the hole in his life. She became the center of the family and was most responsible during his life for holding their family together. He was given the middle name, Sparrow in honor of his birth father. Tony described his foster father whose last name he bore as well as a good and decent, even generous man. It was his grandmother however, who raised him in spite of her never having learned a single word of English. A few years later, his mother who also survived, married again and that was how he became a Messina. His grandmother handled everything while speaking only Italian. She would tell them, *"If you don't know how to speak Italian, you don't eat"*. They were the Cousamanos; wonderful people. They were the only family he ever knew. You know? *"When he started writing his memoirs he realized how important that woman was in their family."* She called him Antonio. And being the oldest grandson, he was the favorite in the family. There was never any question about that. His sisters remind him of it all the time.

Presently, Anthony lives in Dix Hills. He has two sons. Glenn is a medical doctor and Gregory is an electrician; Local 25. They're both married. One of his sons is going through a rough patch, making him uncomfortable with discussing it. As far as his grandchildren are concerned, we asked if he saw any qualities in them that he had seen before in generations of family. Rosé lea is the oldest. She's five years *and attends a nearby Montessori School*. His son called him up and he said, "*Guess what Dad?*" "*They had a counting contest and she counted to one hundred and ten. He said, "No one came close". Tony said, "Well? "That's heredity".* He visits them all the time.

Talking a little more about the circumstances of his birth he clarified that he had been born in Brooklyn, in 1922. He first lived in Green Point. Later on he moved with the family to Williamsburg until he was a teenager. By 1928 or so they remained in Williamsburg. They lived there for a number of years until he enlisted in the service at the beginning of WWII.

He remembers a time when his father had a small business much like a grocery store in Coney Island. It was a mom and pop type thing until a franchised Bohack operation and a competing A & P opened up nearby making his continued operation impossible. That was when his father closed the business and moved the family to Smithtown, Long Island. The journey by automobile began late at night and didn't end at their destination until very early the next morning. He remembers them pulling up to an old house where for the first time he heard strange sounds of nature he'd never experienced. It was the repetitive call of a Bob White as it resounded through the empty stillness of an unfamiliar rural setting.

We stayed there from early spring until late autumn and the winter came in. It was then that "*the experiment*" was over. My grandfather had wanted to go back into farming. Well when the experiment ended we came back into the city. He'd come from Palermo, Sicily where he'd inherited all the family estates. His family went back hundreds of years. He had vast estates. Tony got this information from a distant uncle who was raised on his father's farm in Sicily. He said you couldn't believe what a vast piece of land it was. He had orchards and his own private lake in which they stocked fish. His mother's father said you just didn't want to become a farmer. His name was Manteo Cousamanno. He was always a business man. Even when he first came to America he owned a fish store. He ended up becoming a food peddler. He had a horse and wagon in the

early 1930's and he used to go buy from the vegetable market and go around peddling his produce. He had his own route. He said, even in the height of the Depression they managed to survive. Asked if he remembered the Depression he said he remembered when the NRA first came in and his mother got her first paycheck. He remembered it was \$10 and they celebrated. You know? It was just terrible. His family didn't suffer the way many other families suffered. His grandfather was always into fruit and vegetables. His grandmother was always a great cook. What happened was, when they came back from Smithtown, they moved into an area where a lot of relatives already were; Cousins and sister-in-laws they all lived in Williamsburg around Marcy Avenue and Ellery Street. They all lived right around there. Some of them had railroad flats. We moved into whatever apartments were available and so it was like now the family was enlarged. So when it was the holidays it wasn't just us it was the whole group. Holidays were like a three or four day affair. The women would start making their cookies about three or four weeks ahead of time. They would all get together at night and bake and work while the men would play cards or whatever. The family experience was excellent. In fact, my mother, after the grandparents died, my mother sort of kept it up. When my father (Messina) died, she lived with her daughter and all of the rest of the children moved to within two or three miles of her. So we were always together. Even up to a few years ago she would call up and say "You gotta' come for dinner tonight." "Why, What is it"? "It's my Birthday"

*"I'll tell you, when my mother passed away we had the services over here at St. Matthews Church in Dix Hills, I never saw a church so filled with people. This was a woman eighty eight years old, and the place was filled with people because she was so open minded and so on top of everything, you couldn't talk with her she would give you a whole discussion and so, yeah, she knew what she wanted and when it came to finances she lived from CD to CD. I would explain to her, you know Ma, I know this bank gives you a quarter of a percent more but I have to go to the Bronx. I calculated the cash and I said, Look, it's going to cost me this much to get there, and I said you know it's going to take you more than two years to recoup that money"*

Was there a word or a phrase you might use to capture the essence of your step father? *"He was just a wonderful guy. He really was kind and very generous. We worked together and he had this bakery thing and we used to deliver bread to individual houses, right behind the door like they used to deliver milk? In the*

*depression days that's just what we did. So we would go out together at night, and the route was from about two to seven in the morning. So we would get together and we were together for all of these years from the time when I was about twelve or thirteen to the time I was about eighteen we spent all that time together". Then his parents must have been like your parents too? Yeah, Most of them were in Europe, in Sicily. He had one brother here who objected to the marriage. "In 1922, you didn't go around marrying a widow with children. And so when he became interested in my mother his brother was so upset that he went back to the old country and they didn't bother with my father at all. He too bonded with the Cousamannos and in fact when he was reading the articles I wrote they became very close. We were always together. Always! If we went somewhere, the grandparents went with us".*

His mother went on to have three children with the Messinas. Two of them became teachers and the other fellow went into business for himself. So, after Anthony went into teaching his sister followed suit. One taught in Dix Hills and the other taught in Commack. Once Tony broke the experiential barrier by demonstrating that a professional life was possible for them, it was easier with him as a role model, for them both to pursue careers in education.

*"Italians used to say if you went to school, you were lazy. They wanted you to go to work. That was the old adage. But my father was different. He always wanted an education for us. Anthony grew up in the old neighborhood himself and he was just about the only one that went to college because everyone else didn't. All the fellows that he grew up with didn't go to school".*

*"In his family and being the oldest of his generation Tony came to appreciate the degree to which money was the primary cause of most of the problems a family had to face. Once parents pass on all of a sudden there's animosity between the children. Well, he would never allow that to happen. He remembered when his mother objected to someone his brother had married. She was so upset she told him, "I want you to cut him out of the will". I called up my sisters and I said, "Listen! I know what mom wants, but we're not gonna' do it. I'm tellin' you right now. He gets his fair share. I don't wanna' know from anything. We've gotta' live together as they go on. We're gonna' tell her we're gonna' do it but we're not. He kept this type of philosophy right through to the point where his mother died. He took care of the estate and made sure that everyone got their fair share. What it has for the family is this.... We all trust each*

*other. We trust each other because we don't seem to have that greed."Oh, I gotta' have this, I gotta have that. If I learned anything from family, I learned that and as a family there is no animosity among the brothers and sisters."*

We were poor. In the thirties I remember we were very poor then. There weren't any big gifts like you might see today. However, the families, the cousins, mostly the cousins, I never realized they were cousins because you see the brothers and sisters of my mother's side, I realized they're my uncles. But these other people that we used to call cousins, I didn't know how they were related until I found out my grandfather and this woman Maria Brajonni were brother and sister. She had a family and one of her daughters had about five or six kids and so naturally they were all grown up, and so that side of the family it didn't feel like we were related but we were. We would get together. We all lived pretty close. There were a few friends that lived close too and they joined us. We had great times I'll tell you. The front room of these railroad flats were sealed because it was like walking into a refrigerator. During holiday times they had small chairs, like wicker chairs all around and they'd have a kerosene stove a big tall one and that's the way they'd heat up that room. Central heating existed already but we didn't have that. They would have a piano in there and for the holidays some people knew how to play the piano, someone could play the mandolin they'd get together to sing songs and then there were the younger ones that became the clowns and they joked around and there could be as many as thirty or forty people in that space you know? And parties generally went for at least three days.

His uncle Sal and his Aunt Anna, that's his mother's sister and brother, they were very influential in my life. When I was living with my grandmother they were still bachelors yet and they treated me like the little kid. They were already pretty grown up and I remember my uncle Sal gave me my first ever Lionel Train. I'll never forget that! (That's one of my hobbies). I used to have a set up in the city and when I moved out here I thought I'd fix up the whole thing and so forth, I put the wood up in the attic, and I never got around to it. So now I just display 'em on a shelf. Mostly Lionel? Yes, Mostly. And do you have the big ones too? Yes, at my age I have the big ones too. In fact, one of my sons started buying trains on the internet. He gave me a couple of trains that I never even saw as a kid. He gave me a couple of sets of standard gage because he knew I wanted them, so he gave them to me. Anthony decided to become a teacher by listening to his inner voice without anyone else guiding him. Since Tony had such a difficult time during the early years he found if he didn't envision something it wouldn't sink in. As a result

he used to struggle and struggle to envision a theory behind his interests and fortunately for him he lived at a good time. The radio came in about 1935 when GE put out that little radio set and somehow he got interested in electronics. He just didn't understand how a piece of metal could communicate sound and he got interested in it. In those days the only literature you could get was from *Gerardi* who had written a book called *Radio Physics*. What he did was when he described a condenser he described the old Marconi condenser's: Leyden jars [Leyden jar - Google Search](#) and that would become a condenser but then as they came into the paper condensers and the tinfoil he didn't bother to drop one out he just added and added and added so the book was about this thick (18 inches). If you read it from the beginning it was like coming over with Columbus, until he got interested in the theory of electronics and he had to try to envision how these things occurred, how electrons flowed and so forth. As he was having more and more success at it, he gave some thought to trying to explain these things and he would explain how he would envision it and he found that they would understand what he was talking about. So, little by little as time went on, if he explained it to anyone, someone in the family or a technician, he would understand it, you know? And little by little he felt that he didn't mind getting up there and talking to people. He enjoyed that.

If you picture a boy six or seven years old, who can only speak Italian, all of a sudden they put him into the school. *"There was no such thing as bi-lingual or anything, you just had to struggle. When they put him into this Kindergarten, I remember meeting this one fellow and we became friendly. His name was George Gross. Fortunately for me we were practically in the same class all the time. My early years were in Junior High 148 only for the first year then we went to PS 164 from the second year up to about the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup>. We were together for all those years and then we went back to the Junior High, we ended that and then finished up in eastern district. We were together all of that time. George was a middle child and I recall when he told me to write the name "City" on that index card as to what college I was going to go to and I didn't even know what City meant. I said, "What's City"? He said, "Its' okay. My brother goes there and it's a very good school." So I put City on the card and low and behold, comes Christmas week I got a letter from City College that says I've been accepted on my average. George wasn't accepted because he had goofed off so much during his senior year and was so "upset". Tony explained further that he had had to struggle through all his years in school while George was a boy for whom everything came easy. He was a very bright student. While Tony struggled for every advance he made near the*

end of school George began to relax and to take it easy as Tony continued to give it his all and their paths crossed. In their senior year Tony had about a 93 or 94 average and George must have had a 90. But he was a brilliant boy. He went on to graduate from CCNY. In fact he became a teacher, one of the professors there and finally after the War they needed so many civil engineers in Europe he married the only woman civil Engineer to graduate from City College at the time and I think that they moved to Europe and I never heard from him again.

Tony's first paid job was serving as a Lab Assistant at Erasmus Hall High School which was a four-year public high school located on Flatbush Avenue between Church and Snyder Avenues in the Flatbush Section of Brooklyn. He had by then received his Bachelor of Science Degree in Physics and had already earned Permanent Certification from the State of New York to teach Math and the Physical Sciences. He had yet to receive a License to Teach in the City of New York and it was for that reason that he could only qualify for a Lab Assistant position. When he saw the first graduating class go through, he felt he was not using the bulk of his talents to his complete satisfaction and he knew himself well enough to recognize that had he remained he was almost certain to become depressed so he went back to CCNY having been paid \$265 for the month. Tony remembered one fellow by the name of Bill Lindler. He seemed to be a typical Biology Teacher. He had a tremendous sense of humor, was a very thin fellow but just full of the devil. He was funny as hell. One day he was sitting in the Physics Office talking to him and in the back of the office somewhere a little bell rang. (Bling)! He stopped his conversation and he ran like hell someplace. I'm lookin' at him and wondering what happened? About fifteen minutes later he came back and I said, *"What was that all about"* and he said, *"Oh, you know, when they used to give you the check years ago, you had to go down to the lobby to pick it up, they'd ring the bell and teachers that were free would go down and sign for their check. He said, you know I've been here for twenty-five years and I've still never been able to become number 1"*.

So far at this point we hadn't asked Tony about the love of his life and she hadn't yet come up during our back and forth, so I asked him straight out how he had met her. He said, *"After I got out of the Army I was kind of bitter. I was not a person to be regimented and I felt that I had learned to dislike the army completely. When I got out I felt as if the best years of my life had been taken from me"*. I did serve a purpose and I did what I had to do. He had a pretty responsible job. He was a Communication Inspector. He had already had all the

training for it. It was a job that was wide open because they needed a lot of people. His job was to inspect all the equipment before it was sent over. When he came back he felt kind of depressed. He was already twenty six years old and felt that he had missed all his teen aged years. He was sitting home one day and all of a sudden this girl come up to the house and I asked her who she was looking for and she mentioned my sister's name. My sister was going out with somebody else and they arranged a double date for this girl. They hadn't shown up yet and I was still home and that's how we started. After we met, I asked her out and learned her name was Clare and we've been together ever since. In fact we just celebrated our Fiftieth Anniversary together. And I was telling her, *"You know Clare, we've been together for at least fifty two years. We believe in doing everything together. We don't take separate vacations. We've never been apart. Even from the moment we met, we just went on and we've always been together. She's a very...she loves animals. She's one of the kindest people I've ever known. She's really kind, I mean, she's still subbing. I said to her, "Why are you subbing? Well, she says, the children treat me so nice. In fact today, she says. Oh, they treat me so nice. The children like me and she goes with these Special Ed kids. In fact today, she was called this morning and came back with the car because she had three or four periods free and she said, D'you know what happened today? I'm in charge of music...and this seventh Grader gets up and starts playin' the violin. She says I couldn't believe how beautiful it was ... and this seventh grader said to her, Oh, you know I always loved the violin and then another student got up on the piano and they performed a whole spontaneous arrangement together". She said to me, "You can't believe what a beautiful sight that was."* She really enjoyed herself today.

Tony gets up every morning about six or seven o'clock and retires about twelve to one o'clock and that hasn't changed over the years. He tells Clare, *"If I fall asleep on the couch, let me fall asleep on the couch. It's generally the best sleep he gets."*

He and Clare live right here in Dix Hills and they have no intention of moving anywhere else or to any other climate. When I asked him if he had a favorite season he answered spontaneously with one word. He said, *"We love Christmas. We love Christmas, in fact I hate to tell you but I put up a Christmas tree about six or seven years ago and I put seventeen strings of lights on it. It was an artificial tree and when I took it down I couldn't find anything the very next year. It took me about a month and a half before I found all the parts and I said,*



*D'You know what? I'm not taking it down any more. The kids are out of the house. I'm not taking it down anymore. So the tree is up all the time and the people know so when they come in there are ornaments on that tree that date back to the turn of the last Century. People come in and they say "Hey! I got an ornament for you, I say, put it on, and they do. Clare loves Christmas too. We both love Christmas. And we live in a Christmas house.*

People come in and I say...."*what am I goin' to do? I enjoy it. That's it. I set up a couple of complete Villages. You know? with the Department 56 things? You know those...I used to love to make the train layouts but I used to have to make my own houses. This way I found them already made. So in my den I have a village that's nine by six. It's all laid out with lights. It's been up for about five or six years now. We don't take it down. My granddaughter loves it.*

Did he remember anything else from his own grade school experience? He said he did. *"One time he remembered being sick and out of school for over a month. He had a teacher called Mrs. Reilly, he said he'd never forget her. When he came back in, they were taking the mid-term exam. I told her I was out five or six weeks. She said, well you got to take the test anyway. I took the test. Needless to say, I think she gave me "8" on the card and they were so sensitive that they would put you in the class according to how well you performed on the test. So the smartest one was in the first seat, first row and the "stupid" ones were in the back. I was naturally in the back. When she went over the test I found that the first question where she marked me wrong, I saw that I was right. She made such a stink over it that I didn't bother going up there anymore. Finally when the final came I took the test and had gotten a ninety. But I was sitting somewhere near the back and I remember she went and looked at every paper all around me and unfortunately for them, they didn't do too well. She moved me to the second row, second seat. And when she went over the test the one I got wrong was marked right so I got 100%. So I got up and I told her. Well after a little stink she puts me in the first row, first seat. But when the report card came and the final grade came in I got a big 65.*

It was inevitable that I ask Tony when he had first come to Brentwood. Before he arrived in 1969 he said he knew absolutely nothing about the community. His family had moved to Dix Hills in 1966. He had gotten sick over the summer, and then there was a big layoff from Sperry's where he had been working. His Department Head didn't protect him, because he'd been out sick,

and the downsizing came at an unexpected time, and he was left unprotected. Sperry had a category of five and on that occasion they laid off a total of three categories of their employees. Tony was employed up to that point as an Electrical Engineer and Project Manager and was clearing a decent income from the defense plant. Perhaps coincidentally the year prior he had seriously considered changing careers and returning to teaching, but he didn't know what he had to do to reactivate his NY State Teaching License. He was unaware it had continued to remain active.

When he worked in New York City he'd been required to take another exam. In fact he took the NYC exam. He'd passed every category on that test. They had (1) the Lab, (2) the Interview, (3) the Physics Test, (4). English Test, (5.) some other test and passed them all. While he was being interviewed, at that time mind you, he was already taking a lot of engineering courses. So he was up on the latest stuff that was going on in the field of engineering. The panel was very interested. They kept him talking about all the technical things that were being done. He didn't notice a little old lady in the back on the side with grey hair. She was writing and writing. But he didn't think anything of it. Well, they rejected him because he had a *"dentalized tee"* in his speech. He became so furious that he resigned from the existing position of Lab Assistant he already occupied on the spot. He went back and said *"Forget it! I don't want to be here anymore."* He went then to Bendix, where he was immediately hired. He didn't realize the State License wasn't valid in the City. He didn't think that his State License would be valid on Long Island as well. So he thought about it and he just wanted to get there because as an Engineer, he had an opportunity to write manuals on the equipment that he wrote and he had to explain them and he enjoyed doing that. It didn't bother him at all. At first when he got laid off he decided he wasn't going to work for a year. After working for 17 or 18 years he felt that he was entitled to take a year off and he wanted to live. He wanted to paint. He wanted to start painting. He wanted to do some of the other things that he was interested in. But in the meantime they started laying people off all around him. So he started and meanwhile after about six months he decided, *"You know I better do something about this."* In fact, there was one engineering company that called him up and said, *"We heard about you. You were working on this particular project with these other people. Well, we want you to come in for an interview"*. So he went down. They were located somewhere over in Huntington. And he interviewed for the job and they asked him all kinds of crazy questions. Then the guy says we want to hire you as a technical designer. I told him, *"No"*. *"Not as a technical designer. You*

*either hire me as a Project Manager or I'm not taking the job."* Now mind you, he was unemployed at the time, went home, and got a call from a second company. He said we want you to come down for an interview. Tony said, "As what"? The man said, "*As a technical designer*", Forget that Tony replied. "*What should we do with your application*"? The interviewer asked. Throw it out, Tony said. And that was it, the last contact with engineering and he never looked back.

That was when (1969-1970) Tony began seriously looking for a permanent teaching position. He interviewed at several places including Commack. He went first to the Physics Department at Commack where they were talking about the environment and everything else. He turned to go into the auditorium where a guy that was talking to a large audience was "*totally out of his wack*". Tony came from industry. He knew that what the person was saying was completely in error so you can imagine that interview didn't go well. He then went to BOCES and BOCES offered him a starting salary of \$7,500 and he turned them down. He next went to Commack South and low and behold, the Principal of that School who was a man named Mr. Moel had a son in law with whom Tony had worked on the Atlantic Missal Range Program where they were charged with outfitting two troop ships with radar etc. They were very good friends. So Tony called him up and he said he would talk to Mr. Moel on Tony's behalf.

Tony went to Commack South. He hadn't been teaching yet but he did have his student teaching experience at Stuyvescent High School in Manhattan under his belt plus his fifteen years of engineering training and experience. So this fellow comes up and says to him, "Okay. Come up here and take over my class. Tony took over the class where the teacher had been teaching Lenz's Law. Tony even remembered the topic. It happened to be an Honors Class in Physics. Lenz's law states that: "*The current induced in a circuit due to a change in a magnetic field is directed to oppose the change in flux and to exert a mechanical force which opposes the motion. The opposing currents will repel each other as a result*". Well Tony went through that lesson like it was no problem at all. He showed them experiments, he called on everybody in the class. Tony even called on the teacher of the class. He had told them he expected 100% participation and said if you're in my class I expect everyone to participate in the lesson. After the class was over the administrator asked Tony, "*How long has it been since you were last in a classroom*"? Tony told him, "*about fifteen or sixteen years*". He said, "Boy, You couldn't tell." Tony said, What is there to tell? I know more than any one of those kids. Besides I've been working with the equipment and by the way, I went

through twenty of your power supplies before I could set up even one in the lab. I said to myself, how come you don't get a couple of your honors kids to write up a one-page specification and determine if these things are to specification? You just sent them out to be calibrated they come back and there all out of calibration. They didn't do anything! P.S He never got the job in Commack but he knew why.

When he came to Brentwood, he was hoping to find an opening teaching Physics, the subject he loved most and the one in which he had been trained. He was disappointed to learn that there were no openings available in the Physics area. He decided to take advantage of the openings in Mathematics instead. George Gates interviewed him and Ed Murphy, participated and made him feel comfortable. Six months before he began his search for a teaching position in earnest, he was experimenting with painting. He painted a painting called the core section of a swimming pool with the swimmers on top swimming and you could see all the geometries. I remember I had made this large canvass and I did a few other paintings too. They were talking with him and they asked me what I was interested in so I talked with them about some of my paintings. He wasn't in the interview room for more than ten minutes when he was asked, "*Would he sign a contract*"? Tony told them he didn't want to sign a contract just yet because he had an outstanding interview with St. Johns University. They had an opening at the college. Tony said he wanted to remain uncommitted until he had that interview. He went there that afternoon but didn't hit it off very well. They offered him \$10,000 and he said he didn't want to accept the job for that amount so he returned to Brentwood and he said, "Okay. Give me the contract and he made it official. That was in April. He signed it for September. Tony was asked if he knew David Martz. Oh yes! He knew Dave pretty well. He knew Everett Reese, Joe Forte. He knew Guy DiPietro. When he was thinking of retirement, from the very beginning he'd decided he wanted to leave when he was fifty five. But then *when his career was interrupted and he started teaching he knew that plan was over*. At the time he was only 61 and the district offered a \$7,500 incentive to retire so he went to Guy DiPietro and said, "I'd like to retire next year. Would you give me the incentive next year?" No, Guy says, "*We want you to hang around. We want Guys like you to retire when you're about seventy.*" Surprisingly, the following year New York state offered a three year incentive for people like him to *retire*. So he did at the age of 63 in 1985. That's how it happened. He knew Guy and he was a very nice man. Did he know the Board President Tony Felicio? Yes, He knew him very well too. Ralph Ruggiero, put him in charge of the Future

Teachers of America, the Lions Club, and I knew the people from the Lions Club too. But that was a time of split sessions and I was assigned to the afternoon session from one to six fifteen. So in the morning I would get up and read the books and so on because it was a different format. And I recall one of the Chairmen saying to me, "It's going to take you a few years before you master geometry. *"Are you kiddin', a few years?"* By the end of the term I had at least a half dozen of my non-Regents Geometry Class kids taking the Regents and passing it. So, from that time on they started giving me at least three Regent's classes a year. Did he make a lot more money as an engineer than he did as a classroom teacher? No not really. As an engineer his top salary was \$18,500. When he started in Brentwood he started at about \$14,000 something. *"No question about it he still took a cut in salary to become a teacher. But then again you've got to remember, you had summers off, you had holidays. As an engineer if they called me in to work on Saturday, I didn't get paid because I was "Administration".* I attempted to remind him, when he looked at the benefits, working as a teacher he was really doing something he wanted to do. As it turned out, he said, *"Yes! As I got along with the youngsters, especially in those first few classes, coming in as an outsider, I would listen to some of the kids and I would realize that there was a communication gap between the generations."* I asked if his early experience helped him to better relate to some of his students since he'd also had it very tough during the early years. What helped Tony a lot he admitted, was *"applying the knowledge he acquired growing up. His knowledge of electronics and his knowledge in designing were both extremely important to him"*. He didn't know if I was familiar with the quadratic formulae. I wasn't. *"Well, he said, they have a little radical sign. When they say the square root of four, -- people say two; two times two. How about the square root of negative two? It doesn't exist. That quadratic formulae has the formulae  $B^2 = 4AC$  and the terms take on physical characteristics, there's a natural frequency of the system. Everything vibrates at its own frequency – like a bottle that you blow into---you get that one tone, there's the inertia of the system, and the frequency of the system. There's always that pull back. That's  $B^2 = 4AC$ . When in the physical design, when you put in the numbers and they turn out to be negative that means that equipment could not be designed. So if I were designing a bomb, I would make it negative because as soon as the things moved around and became negative it would explode. You see? Now if I were designing a fighter plane and I was putting the autopilot in there, I wouldn't want that plane to vibrate because it had a natural frequency. So the designs would always be many designs away from it's own natural frequency. Also I wouldn't want it to become negative. I wouldn't want the whole system to*

become negative because that plane had a  $B^2 = 4AC$  also. And so we would have certain parameters that we would have put into our design so that that didn't happen. Ok? No matter what condition the plane went into it would not osculate."It's strange" he said, "I never had the opportunity of teaching physics but I did have the opportunity of teaching math, and later on after I began to develop my own techniques before I would start a class I would go through an orientation period. I would teach the youngsters that algebra was nothing more than what you did with arithmetic, only you do it with letters. I would give them two large numbers and I would say multiply them, or divide them or do whatever and when they tried to multiply and divide them it would take them half an hour. I would say, now, if I were a scientist, I'd say let this be A and this is B. Now I want to multiply  $A \times B$  and I'm all done. I'm on to thinking. So there's the importance of Algebra. It's nothing mysterious. The only thing is you gotta' learn the rules you use for Arithmetic and apply it to these lessons. Then when you go into Geometry you're gonna' learn that a line consists of an indefinite number of points and they intersect at just one point, a very important concept, one point. So that when you have a graph or put an axis on something and you call off a number on this side and a number of that side you could locate anything in space, at any point you can provide structure to the entire universe. And René Descartes came up with the axis and he did that. So when you get into Geometry you get into learning what you can do with lines, make a triangle and make all different kinds of figures, you talk about how these two angles meet, they talk about angles between two lines, talk about the right triangle, suddenly there's this particular right triangle that says  $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$ . The difference is that it's an equation. That's the first time that you've seen an equation. Now, when you apply your mathematics and you can make a triangle you want to see how high a plane is you make a triangle you measure from this distance and you look up and you measure the angle you can actually now use calculations to measure the height of buildings and whatever. That brought into the equation and you get into the point how you manipulate these equations to get the right number." I could feel his passion, but he was not to be deterred in the least from making his point in our discussion. He continued, "Up and down motion, they call that harmonic motion, that's the way the world generates – it goes around and around the solar system, - and it's important you understand how harmonic motion works because it leads you into frequencies, it leads you into communication and so forth. I said, so now somebody came along and said, you know that axis we were talkin' about, for locating anything in space, well what if we made this one time, we said this is one second, two second, three second, see what happens from one second to two seconds to three seconds, Well!

*That is the calculus. Once you put the time into the axis, you are now talking about the physical world and motion. Everything happens according to certain...I could see a sort of organized approach to mathematics. When they came out with this sequential math I thought that was terrible!! Because they teach 'em a little algebra, a little geometry. They don't get that real feeling. How can you use a little of this to solve a problem in Trigonometry . No! They can't so now they're gonna' memorize it. Then when they came to SET theory and everything else, I remember Mr. Gates telling me, You know Tony, he says, the reason you're having trouble with SET Theory is because you weren't taught that way. I said, George, why don't you cut it out? Every book that I look at your SET Theory, those books on the bottom with the Bibliography I've read every one of those books when I was studying, so I said, How come the fundamentals are located in those books. I said, I understand it very well. When I was told anything multiplied by one is one, that was enough for me, I didn't have to say that's the identity element of multiplication, which is another word that they can't even spell. It's just something else to clutter up their mind. Identity element of multiplication, identity element of subtraction; they put it down, they've got empty SETS they've got full SETS, all they're doing is cluttering up their mind with SET theory that's only good for a theoretical guy who wants to write books and advance mathematics. But a guy who's a practical person or an empirical person or an Engineer, Hey! He wants answers he don't want "what he's gonna' call this answer".*

*You know Tony, what strikes me, is the fact that you went to several interviews where they passed on you before you came to Brentwood because you clearly challenged their knowledge and their expertise and yet when you came to Brentwood within the first ten minutes of your arrival they said, "Here's a Contract. Sign here!"*

*Brentwood, he said, was a great system! I liked all the Administrators I worked for, they were just great! I liked the teachers I was working for and I loved the students. I went to school in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and when I came here they reminded me of the "good old days: Yes Sir! Some kids couldn't speak English, I couldn't speak English. The first year I came here I remember I was teaching Algebra in this class and this little girl in the front seat she was turning around and talking to her friend, so I said to her, Ann, Don't you want to get married, and she looked up at me and she said, Yeah! I want to get married. Well, if you don't pay attention, you're not going to get married! You know? You have to pass two Tests. You have to pass a Math Test and a Blood Test before they give you the License.*

*She was either so innocent or so naive, she just looked up and she said, "Really? Why do I have to know Math? "So", some other kid said to her, "To count your children, stupid". Now that was the first year. How would you describe this district to someone who had never set foot here? He said, "Brentwood is a cross section, you might say a microcosm not just of the State of New York but it really represents a cross section of all the States in this region of the country and all the kids here get along. Most other districts that have the supposed reputation for being so exclusive and high and mighty, if you let a little minority group get in there they get all upset and begin to get suspicious and everything else, but here that didn't happen. For the most part....I'll tell you, Mr. Yankowski did a great job. When I first came here, on the first day, we were in the auditorium and the Principal of the High School, I believe was a Mr. Miller, and he was explaining their rights to a full assembly of kids. And somehow they completely misread him. He was trying to explain what rights they were entitled to expect to receive while they were in school but they totally misunderstood what he was attempting to explain. They revolted. Now here was my first day back teaching after an absence of fifteen years in industry and there are young people running all over the school grounds and throughout both buildings. They assigned us to different corridors to make sure that no one got hurt. I think it was the next day or the day after that the Board of Education and Central Administration fired Mr. Miller and Mr. Yankowski was appointed the new Principal, he came in and he was like a blessing. Everything immediately calmed down and the school went on for the next ten or twelve years until he retired and everything was just great. He did a great job, had a wonderful sense of humor and was perceived by students and teaching faculty alike as having been a fair and honest Administrator.*

Prior to applying in Brentwood Mr. Messina had completed student teaching in one of the finest Public High Schools in the country. His NYS License was issued through CCNY (City College of New York) while any professional preparation he had came to him on Manhattan's Lower East Side at 15<sup>th</sup> St. in Stuyvescent High School. It was the exact building a few years later where in 1997, another first year teacher Frank Mc Court, authored *Angela's Ashes*, a Pulitzer Prize Winning Memoir that earned him literary credentials as celebrated Teacher of High School English. Their stories from different origins, derived from a common experiences.

Tony began by observing his Cooperating Teacher, Mr. Crowley, or Cromney. He was feeling uncomfortable with elements of the teaching approach



being used and thought the class should be taught differently. The teacher finally relented and let Tony take over the instruction to teach the way he wanted to. Tony was sure his visual approach was a better match for those students so he began to teach them using a more familiar rhythm and pattern to match the means that resonated with him too. He got along very well. Each student teacher from CCNY was expected to come up with individual Projects. His had to do with integrating a stepping switch into an alternating current circuit. Then with the stepping switch you could study at what phase (in a three phase system), so you'd be visually able to determine in what phase each one would be. He'd put lights in there and each switch would turn on that bank and then hit it again. He remembered doing that for them. You know, I don't know what happened to it. I left it there. I had already completed all my undergraduate work, so I enrolled at NYU and I was going for my Masters Degree while I was still doing my student teaching at Stuyvescent. I was taking a couple of courses at NYU at the same time

When I came to Brentwood, I remember Mr. Reese was setting up the radio station and so we communicated for a while and it just wasn't going well. There were lots of problems but Mr. Reese kept it going. I was involved with other things by that time and I didn't work with it any more except for maybe six months or so. There were a lot of headaches getting the system up and running. It was just a radio station but they had a lot of trouble. It finally took off several years later. The success of (WXBA) can be attributed to Mr. Reese who really dogged it out, you know?

Beyond the job description we all had as individuals, each of us as self-motivated people had our own reason for coming to school each and every day. There was a purpose that kept us on track each morning. What was it for Tony, we wanted to know? *"You know, I felt like ...., I told them, we can all accomplish what we have to accomplish if we all learn self discipline. We have to be self starters. Things just don't come naturally except for a few blessed souls. Most of us have to work hard. Self discipline is extremely important. It's a matter of becoming self motivated in order to want to do it. So I would always give homework, I would always organize it on ditto paper so that this way I didn't have to spend a whole period of time trying to decipher where and what was. And also I would like to mark the papers and return them all the next morning. I got myself organized that way and I wanted to get them organized to such a point when they did their thinking, clean it up and put the solution there so that if they went back*

to their work a year later they would know what it was all about. A lot of students who were in my class, they thanked me for teaching them to do that.

With the calculus people, Most of them went on to college and they came back and I was kind of pleased. About 40% of them came back. So I was pleased to hear from them. You know? And they were doing pretty good too.

It's funny and probably one of my flaws I guess, 'cause I didn't participate in the Union activities or get involved in the different organizations. I didn't have time. There are a lot of things I want to do and to say "I have to go here" and "I have to go there", "I just don't want to do it". We responded by saying we did not agree that that pattern of his represented a flaw of character. Rather it reflected a choice on his part, a focus. Each of us has our own particular thing that we're motivated to achieve. It's what each of us is here to do as far as we can see it.

Did he maintain contact with any of his former students or with previous colleagues with whom he'd built lifelong friendships? From time to time he sees Mr. Ruggerio. Bill Truggo, he taught at Ross. *"We're very good friends and I see him quite often. I see Joe Forte every so often when we run into each other. He runs into former students as well. He said we'd be surprised". One night, my son went out on a boat he had from Bay Shore on the South Shore. It was 2 am and he wasn't home yet. I was worried so I called up the Coast Guard, this and that and so I said let me go down to the ramp where they come in and as I'm driving through one of my students was there acting as an attendant. Just shows you how it's a small world'.*

Was there anything he was leaving unfinished at the end of his teaching career that he would like to have completed differently? As he looked back at his career Tony told us he enjoyed every bit of it. Whatever it was he enjoyed it. Even as a Lab Assistant, when he would be depressed watching these kids going out into the world and he would feel like he was wasting his time sitting behind and waiting. He enjoyed that as well. He enjoyed the engineering. He did a lot of design work and then he taught. He has enjoyed some the writing he has accomplished. When his mother passed away he was very depressed. He had just seen her die. When he feels depressed he thinks. He just keeps thinking. And he tries to write. He wrote these words: *"My thoughts are like a nameless breeze lacking direction and meaning and incapable of formulating my feelings, Oh, dearest Mom, how you will be missed. I abhor the day that brought on this*

*sadness. In life I loved you. Now my solace are decades of memories of a vibrant lady who will live on in my thoughts until some tomorrow casts its shadow on this life. Be off sweet spirit into those unimaginable dimensions accompanied by earlier loves which you once held in your solace with the promise that we shall meet again unfettered by physical burden, free to soar with boundless love in that everlasting realm of a timeless domain. Adieu dear Mom.*

I wrote that and I consider it to be about the best piece of writing I have ever done. I wrote it in about half an hour. We told him we thought it was inspired writing. He said, “*I can’t write any other way*”.

Was the retirement from teaching difficult for you? Or was it a relief? “Not at all, he said. “I took to it like a duck to water.” In fact, I told my mother, “Mom, I’m retiring”. She said, “You can’t do that. How would it look to people if I had a retired son”? That’s the way she was. She was a free spirit.

What was his last assignment? Teaching Math in the Sonderling Building. He started teaching in Sonderling and he had always loved teaching there. He also had taught Geometry in the Evening School Program. In fact, he had taught so many Geometry courses that he organized his notes into a book. Overall, he said he had taught in Brentwood for “at least” fifteen years. He never published his work because they came out with this Sequential Math he was not at all fond of. Tony had his own techniques for teaching certain things in Geometry. Geometry, he said, was a very difficult subject for students to get a hold of. And yet, he would point out to them that it was probably the most important course that they would ever take in their life because it shows you how things are organized. In every organization, even in our government, you violate the rules, you get fined. I said, if you were in outer space and you were watching them playing baseball and the guy says I want four strikes to be out and he says oh no, its three strikes and you’re out. He says, No! He’s got his axioms he’s got to work with. He says, he can’t. Every institution that you are going to touch works according to the rules that you are going to learn in Geometry. Everything! Even your family and the way you raise your kids. So to me I taught many, many, many, courses in Geometry. I used to have a minimum of two courses in every semester. At night I would teach a course and I did that for a number of years. Besides Geometry what other courses did he teach? He taught Trigonometry and Calculus. Every once in a while they’d throw in an Algebra Class but Algebra was the glass they gave to him at the very beginning. He retired when he did because he still wanted to do the things

that he wanted to do; write, paint and so forth. He'd done some of those things already. He'd painted about forty canvasses. He's written about thirty articles and pieces of prose. He has his own books and is writing the story of his family, which is important to him. He wrote tributes similar to the one he wrote about his mother for different people that were important to him and his intention is to incorporate them in his book as he goes along. He has shown them to no one and continues doing it for his own enjoyment and for that of his family.

We hope our interview will become part of that legacy and will be appreciated by those family members who are interested in watching and listening to Tony. He has also passionately enjoyed several lifelong hobbies he continues to favor; model railroading, stamp collecting, and postal history among them. Whenever he hears someone say, *"Oh, I don't know what to do."* He says, *"Give me the time. I'll tell you what to do."* Honestly, he's busy all the time. In his single days, he used to love to go dancing. He still loves to go dancing. Even now, when he hears the big bands, he still goes crazy. And do you know, he has an acre of ground, that he landscaped the whole acre by himself? He has his own pool that is all landscaped, and he's the only one who takes care of it. He cuts his own grass, he plants his own whatever, because as you get older if you don't become more physical, you're going to pay for it. So you have to lose weight, eat properly and keep exercising.

When I was a teenager I read a book, "Mansions of Philosophy", by Will Durant. It was completely over my head. In fact, now that I've re-read it, he writes in the preface, look here. The metaphysics is very difficult so, go to Chapter Five. Basically, it's a book on Philosophy, at one time philosophy encompassed all knowledge and the windows in the mansions represented the sciences. What's happened is the different sciences have abandoned the mother and they've gone off on their own. At one time people had a philosophy of life. Now they don't. You come to school to find a vocation. He wrote that book in 1929. In it he predicted how families would fall apart, women would find independence and freedom, people would hardly see one another as family members any more. One worked in the day, the other at night and so forth. He said all families will be torn apart. Ethics and values will be shredded and by the year 2000 we'll be at a low point. Did Tony believe that's where we are now? Yes he did. No question about it. But he's enjoying his retirement years and loving watching his granddaughter grow up in her innocence, joyfulness and youthful exuberance. He expressed his concern about our voucher systems in education with funds being taken away from public

education and seeing cuts to public education budgets. In his opinion he believes the whole future of civilization depends on the success and essential transformation of public education. The Dark Ages provided one example of what will happen to us again unless we safeguard the quality of education for future generations.

He really didn't want to say anything about that because he didn't know how today's educator's have been trained. They might just have been trained "cold turkey" where you learn a system of codes, like that and you learn. Unless they went into a philosophical approach to life and learned that there's more to life than just a job. *Whatever* you may choose to do is just a job. There's nothing sacred about it. Even when he painted his canvasses there were times when he was painting some routine part that was just tedious. *"I remember when I was painting a roof of something and it took me four days to paint that thing. I didn't enjoy that. What I enjoyed was after the painting was completed it gave me a sense of satisfaction. In life when I look back, it was only those things that I completed; my college degree, teaching a course, getting the kids through the Regents that gave me great satisfaction. Now I don't know what advice I could give to these people unless I were to say, said just go at it, and be as creative as you can because that's what God gave you and if you really are a religious person and you don't want to insult your maker, then use what you have. I'd like to leave by concluding with this recommendation to other educators of the philosophy of life that I've followed and I've found to be most conducive to becoming an all around good person during their lives. We hear many people say I'm going to become a doctor, or a lawyer. I don't hear them say I want to become a good person right off the bat. You know? And yet you see people who are doctors and they're good doctors because they know about life. Even the scientists, the scientists will develop a plane and never give a thought to the destruction that that plane is going to bring about to the world. Or for example we were so happy to split the atom but didn't think about the destruction it would cost us in the number of lives that will be lost. We ought to first consider the consequences on the overall picture of civilization of our actions. If what we know to be civilization is to survive at all we have to consider our actions and the impact those actions will have on life as we know it and what they're going to bring on. He didn't know if they're going to do that. It will take meditation and thinking. People don't want to do that these days.*

When Tony Messina retired from Brentwood, the district lost a great deal more than a calculus teacher. We lost a very good man and mentor who forever will be fondly remembered and missed. He was truly, "*A Man for All Seasons*;" one of a kind.