



**Grace Barber**  
**ROBS History Project**  
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In the Italian tradition, Grace Joy Barber was named after her paternal grandmother, Grace. Her mother wanted to name her Joy but had to give it to her as a middle name instead. Her family called her Grace Joy. Grace said, *“My grandmother had nine children in Italy, and all of the female grandchildren were named Grace. That was an Italian tradition. That's what they did. But fortunately, I was the only one born in the United States, so that there was no confusion in the family.”*

Grace was born in Jamaica, Long Island and grew up in Franklin Square. Her father had immigrated to this country when he was 19 in 1919 and married Grace's mother much later. Grace went to the Franklin Square Schools.

At the time of the interview, Grace was married for 41 years. She and her husband have three grown daughters and one grandchild, Gabriella Grace. In speaking about her family Grace said, *“I have my oldest daughter, Allyson Barber, and she is a lovely young woman who is also a teacher in Brentwood. She has been for many years an ESL teacher at the Freshman Center and is enjoying her profession at this time in Brentwood. My middle daughter, Jennifer Cavallaro is a dental technician, and she is married to Tom Cavallaro. They have a beautiful little girl. She's now three, Gabriella Grace. She is of course the center of everybody's attention, needless to say. My youngest daughter, Kathleen is married. Kathleen is married to Mark McContay. She has just gotten a job in Brentwood as a social studies teacher at South Middle School.”*

Grace has an older brother, Fred, and they both grew up in Franklin Square. To this day they are still very close. He and his family live in Farmingdale, and

Grace sees them almost all the time for holidays and other times. Grace said that they are a very close family.

The interviewer then asked, *"Now, it would seem that there are beginning to be a lot of teachers in the family. Is there some other quality or some vocation or interests that has your family stamp on it? Is there something that you can say can you identify with the family?"* Grace responded, *"In my family I was the only teacher. However, in my husband's family coming from Upstate New York, there are teachers. Well, many of them are in education. My husband and his two brothers are. His one brother was a Superintendent of Schools in Northville, New York, and his middle brother was, he isn't now, he's retired, but he was a high school teacher of math, and one of his sisters also taught. So they really had the education market taken over. My children were surrounded by educators most of their lives."*

Grace was then asked the age of her granddaughter. Grace said that she is going to be three on Saturday and continued to say, *"She is a very lively three year old, and she of course is bright, because I'm her grandmother. She's extremely bright, and people always say it's because we spend so much time with her, and we do spend a lot of time with her, but she is just naturally bright. She is a card. You know, she has a great personality and is very active."*

Grace was asked to speak about her husband... What kind of guy was he? Where did they meet? How did they meet? Where did they get married? Her response was, *"We met at the State University at Oneonta, and he was two years older than I was, so I met him when I was a sophomore at the State University, and I immediately fell head over heels in love with him, but he didn't realize that of course. We eventually dated, because I pursued the man...the poor man. But, anyway, we dated, and we fell in love, and we were married in 1961. He actually taught in Oneonta for one year, because I was finishing my senior year at Oneonta. We were married when I was a junior, and that was a really fine time in our lives. We lived in Oneonta until I graduated, and he got his Master's at Oneonta. His name was Guy Barber. We both returned to the Island to teach, and we both taught in the Elwood school District where he became a basketball coach and quite involved. I started in '62, but he started in 1960 teaching. There was no union at that time, so we were in pre-Schanker days. So, he was involved with organizing in the Elwood School District. He was also a basketball coach at that*

*time. I taught first and second grade in Elwood, and he taught fifth and sixth grade, I believe. We lived in Hauppauge. We bought a home in Hauppauge, and we lived there very happily, and we had our second child there. He at one point coached basketball, football and I guess it's field hockey...can't remember. He was busy year round. He had well, all of the sports, and then he got his Administrative Degree, and we moved to New Jersey, because he was appointed principal at a school in Wrightstown, New Jersey, which was at McGuire Air Force Base. And so he became an administrator of a primary school in Wrightstown, which actually was on an airbase. We were there for about a year and a half, and then we decided to come back to the Long Island, and he was appointed as principal in the Sachem School District where he, you know, he stayed until his retirement in 1995."*

What are some of the earliest memories that Grace had growing up? Grace said, *"I had a wonderful childhood. I had my mother. My mother's family was very close. We had a lot of family parties and a lot of dinners and food and great homemade pastas, and that was like a really happy time in my life. I always felt like I was a very good student. My parents thought that it was an important thing for me to do, and I did very well. I enjoyed school very much. I went to the Washington Street School in Franklin Square, and then I went on to Sewanhaka High School in Floral Park, because at that time, it encompassed five towns, and it was a glorious place to be. I had a wonderful time. I was in a lot of activities, and I was a cheerleader, and I belonged to the Future Teachers of America, and I was very active in high school. I had a lot of fun. We had a wonderful high school. It was big and very well populated, and they had the upstairs and the downstairs."*

What are her earliest childhood memories of her mother? Grace responded, *"My mother was big, and very loving. She was a very touchy feely person. She sang, and she held us, and we always were very secure children. We always knew that we were loved and cared for. She was that kind of a person. She loved to cook for everyone and take care. She was always taking care of her mother, her father, my father and her children. She was, and she still is, a very loving person. She is now 89 and going to be 90 this year."*

Grace was then asked if she knew anything about her parents' family histories. She said, *"Well, I do. My mother's family came from the part of Italy called Marche. They were very, very poor. They were from what I understand,*

*really poor, poor people. It's east of Rome. It's close to the Adriatic, but it's still in the mountains. They were from the mountains. They were very poor. They were uneducated people, and I believe that's why my grandfather and his four brothers came to this country, because there was very little for them at that time. I believe he probably came here in the early part of the 1920s, and he and his four brothers came here, and they settled in a part of Pennsylvania where I have many relatives still today. That would be Bristol, Pennsylvania, and they're there. Of the four families, of course, they had many children. My mother had six brothers and one sister, and, of course, all the four families had children and grandchildren and now great grandchildren. My father was also one of many. My father also came from a town near the Adriatic on the east coast of Italy. He, however, was the only one in his family who left. My understanding is he left when he was 19, right after the First World War. He had a fiancé who died of influenza in 1918, and my understanding is he was devastated and decided to come to the United States, and he did. He really traveled the country quite a bit when he got here. He attended night school, he became a citizen and he read and wrote the English language very, very well and spoke very well. He married my mother, and he was 35 when he married my mother. They met here. My mother was born here. He was 15 years older than my mother. However, she was also in love with him. Well, when I was very young, he did anything he could. My understanding is that during the Depression, he worked on the road where they built Jones Beach. He and very many immigrants worked on that roadway, and that was his job. He didn't bring home very much money. I believe my mother worked in the laundry. They lived in Jamaica, Queens. He later became a contractor with the three other men that he knew...friends. They were not family, but they were friends, and he did a lot of building as the Island started to progress, you know, as more people came to Long Island. He was a contractor back then, and so that was really his job until he retired."*

Grace was asked to speak about her brother and how they differed from each other. She said that her brother was a good student, although he didn't care that much for school. He went on to Adelphi University and then went into the service. He became involved with electronics at an early time, and he at one point had his own electronics company in the very early 60s. He was very interested in music and boxing and things of that sort. Grace said that she enjoyed reading a lot and was more social. She always knew that she wanted to be a teacher from the time she was a very young girl.

She was then asked the question, *“Were there any adult influences other than immediate family in your early life that had a profound influence on you?”* Grace said, *“I had some wonderful, wonderful teachers when I was young, a second grade teacher whose name was Mrs. Dalloway. She was very influential with me. She was just wonderful. I always wanted to be like her. I always felt that way. She was really, you know, what we would call the ‘Old Maid School Teacher’ with the little bun in the back of her hair and the shoes that laced up, but she was wonderful, and I loved her. But, the other person who really had a great deal to do with influencing me was my Aunt Mary, who was my godmother. She used to talk to me long, long conversations when I was a little girl about growing up. She had had some schooling, and, she always thought it would be good for a woman to be educated. And, she also thought that when you find someone that you think might be a good husband, you have to see how he treats his mother, because that will tell you how he will treat you years from now, which I always learned, and I don't know why I remembered it, but I remembered it. She had a great influence on my life. She was a very patient woman. She had a lot of patients.”*

Grace was then asked what was the toughest decision that she had to make. She said, *“Well, I guess the toughest decision I ever had to make was when I decided to go back into teaching when my youngest daughter was a year and three months old. I thought that I would like to go back to teaching, and there was a job available, and I think that probably was a very difficult decision for me to make. My husband was very, very happy about it. He wanted me to do whatever I wanted to do. He always encouraged me, and actually, he thought I should go back to work. He thought it would be a very good idea. And, I did do that. And that was when I first started in Brentwood in 1973.”*

The interviewer then asked, *“Who was the best teacher you ever had?”* Grace said that she had many, but she remembered a woman in Sewanhaka High School who was Mrs. Berglund who taught Social Studies. *“She was a fabulous teacher. She brought it to life for many people, and I think I was in high school before I truly understood the workings of the government. She was fabulous, and she made you understand the US government and how to become politically involved, and she was fabulous.”*

Grace was asked if she played any games as a child. She just remembered playing board games with her brother back in the 40's. She remembered Monopoly and some other game that had to do with a horse racing. Her brother taught her how to play the game.

She was then asked if she remembered giving a memorable gift to a loved one either that she made or bought when she was a child. Her response was, *"When I was very young, I remember buying little gifts for my mother, but maybe insignificant, but we used to like to go shopping a lot. She would let us shop alone when we were like 10 or 11 in Hempstead at A&S, and we were allowed to go off by ourselves. So, I would buy her a small candy dish or something of that sort, and my mother always treasured everything that we bought for her."*

What was her first paying job? When she was 18, she worked at Klein's Department Store on Hempstead Turnpike as a cashier during the summer right before she went to college.

What was the most important family holiday that she and her family celebrated together? She said, *"That would be Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Christmas Eve was always very big, and it still is. We always had the traditional fish dishes and a lot of a homemade food. My daughters are very good cooks, thank God, and they make the same traditional dishes that we made many years ago in my grandmother's kitchen because, everything was made at my grandmother's house in her kitchen, and then of course, my mother, but now my daughters make the food, and it's very good."*

In school social studies was her favorite subject, but science was not. She said she had trouble with science, but she did enjoy every subject. She liked English and writing, and she read a lot and did a lot of writing.

Her favorite season is the fall. She said she loves it, because the weather is "wonderful". It's not too hot, and it's really not cold yet. She said it is really good walking weather and a good time to travel a little bit.

The interviewer asked, *"Was there something you played with as a child? Do you remember any of your toys or particular gifts of a toy that you received?"* Grace said that she had a lot of dolls, and the reason was because her mother

came from a poor family and didn't have many dolls when she was growing up. Grace said, *"I'm sure I asked for some, but I got many more than I ever deserved to have. And, she also bought me Mademoselle Alexandria dolls in the 40s, which had to be very expensive in the 40s. So, I have those dolls, and I probably will pass them on to my grandchildren, because those dolls are probably valuable, but they're more valuable to me, because my mother bought them for me. She bought them in a store in Philadelphia called Strawbridges, I believe, in the 40s, because her family was from Pennsylvania, so she shopped there a lot."*

Speaking of family, she was asked if there was a particular aroma that signifies family to her. She said that it was the pasta gravy with meatballs every Sunday. To her that was a real home aroma.

What were the schools she had attended? After graduating high school, she attended the State University of Oneonta and graduated in four years. After that she taught at Elwood and didn't go back to school for quite a long while. After she started teaching in Brentwood, she went back to school and attended C. W. Post College obtaining her Master's Degree and ESL Certification there.

When asked what the happiest day of her life was, she said it was definitely the day she got married. And, when asked the worse day, she said it was when her husband passed away. He passed away at home on April 8, 2002 after a long illness. That was very tough for Grace.

She was then asked to talk about the year she arrived in Brentwood. She said, *"I arrived in Brentwood September of 1973. There was an opening for a leave replacement, and I also happened to have a wonderful babysitter who was able to take care of my youngest daughter... the other girls were in school. It was a great...a great thing for me to get out there and get back into it. Guy DiPietro told me when he hired me that I would have to be interviewed by Pete DiMento first and that it (the teaching position) would be for one year."* *"There were not very many people being hired at that time in elementary school because, the enrollment was declining. Mr. DiMento kindly interviewed me, and I taught second grade with Joyce Rosenberg and some wonderful other wonderful people in South Elementary School. I taught there for one year, because at the end of that year, they closed the building, because they were going to make it an alternate high school. And, so everyone got to pick three schools that they would*

*like to go to, if there was a job available, and of course, I didn't get to pick anything. But, I did, however, go to Northwest with Mr. Lotito. They called me ...it would have been the weekend before Labor Day, and Mr. Lotito said, 'You come right down here.' And I said, 'Where is it? So, I went to Northwest, and I taught fifth grade, and that was wonderful. I loved it. I worked with wonderful people. I worked with Clara Canavo, Lila Cantor...Oh gosh, so many people. Larry Berman. Frank Scavone. They were all wonderful. We had Christi Tedaldi who was in that building. We just had our wonderful faculty ...people really wonderful. We had great fun, and people always raising the bar. Somebody's doing something special. It was fabulous. And, while I was there, I do want to mention this, because this is important. While I was there, the portables in the back burned down, and I was in one of the portables with my fifth grade class. Larry Berman was in the other. So, when I arrived one morning, they said, 'Oh, gosh, you have no classroom, because they burned down last night.' So, Mr. Lotito put me in, I believe it was, the Bilingual Center Room. He moved them and he put me in there with my fifth grade, and he said to me, 'You know, Grace', he said, 'You can tell a good teacher, she can have a blackboard and so on', because I didn't have a book. I didn't have anything. So, I thought, well, I guess I'm really going to have to wing it for a while. And, you know, I have to tell you people stopped at my door with posters and books, and that was fabulous. The men and the women, they brought in paper. They brought in, oh, gosh, you know, like little things you decorate the room with, and I soon had that room fine. That first day they made me feel so good, because I had... no classroom. So that was fabulous."*

Why had she come to Brentwood? "Well, actually, I lived in Hauppauge, so I was very close, and I was talking about maybe finding a job, and because we knew some people that, you know, they were looking out for me, I guess. So, I must tell you that I also went to college with Guy DiPietro and Roseanne. So, while we were at school I knew Roseanne. I knew them from college. I don't remember saying, 'Guy, I need a job,' but I think that people were talking and maybe they said, 'You know, something would come up and if something comes up, please call her.' And I think that's, you know how it happened." At the time, Grace was working in the Hauppauge School District as a substitute. The job in Brentwood came up late in the summer. Grace had an interview with Pete DiMento. She remembered the interview, particularly because of something he had done, and a particular question he asked. Grace had listed the Elwood school district as a reference on her application, because she had taught there quite a few years ago. Pete called



there, but the principal had retired, and there was nobody there who remembered her. So, Pete spoke with the custodian there who remembered her, and he recommended her highly. The custodian said she was a great teacher. Based on that, he hired her. Peter also asked her what her living room looked like. When referring to Pete, she said, *"He was a lovely man."*

What were her first impressions when she got to Brentwood? Grace pointed out that when she first started teaching it was in the sixties when women wore dresses and skirts and high-heeled shoes. That's how she dressed when she first taught back then. When she got to Brentwood it was the seventies, so she found it very liberating to see women wearing pantsuits and pants. The fact that there were teacher aids too, was something different from when she had taught years ago when there were no aides. She found it very helpful at lunchtime with the aides staying with the children instead of the teachers. At the time Grace thought, *"Wow, we've come a long way! It was fabulous."* *"My impression of Brentwood also was that I always thought that there were many different ethnic groups...it was multicultural. I had a great appreciation for the kids. They were always fabulous."* Grace said that the people she worked with were wonderful people and very caring, and also the children were fun.

Grace was on the bottom of the seniority list in Brentwood, so the first 10 years she taught different grades, wherever there was a need. During that time, she taught every grade except for grade 6. She also taught in several different schools including South Elementary, Northwest, Village, Pine Park and Northeast. When she went to Village, Joe Karzen asked her which schools in Brentwood she had taught in, and she didn't want to say. He asked her why she didn't want to say, and she said it was because every school she worked in closed, and she didn't want to jinx Village. He said not to worry, because Village will never close down. In her second year there, when she walked in one morning, he said, *"You, you did it. Village is closing down."* When she was at Northeast, she taught in the Bilingual Center, because she had had several years of Spanish. When Chris Tedaldi took an administrative position, she asked Grace if she would like to take her position as an ESL teacher. Grace then went back to Post College to take some ESL courses and to get her ESL Certification, so she could fill the position at Pine Park.

Besides her job description, Grace was asked what her own purpose was for coming to work each day. She responded, *"I always took my job very...I always felt that I...I had those children for 6 to 7 hours a day. I was in place of the parent whatever grade I was teaching, and I always reminded the parents about that whenever I should meet with them. So I always felt that the full responsibility to these children whatever the preparation was for the year, whatever the curriculum was...I always felt that they deserved the best of me."* When she was at work, she said she just thought about the children and did not think about anything outside of that each day from the time she got to work until the time she got into her car to go home. *"I always had a lot of fun."* *"I enjoyed my job until the day I left."*

Grace was then asked if she still had any contact with some of her former students. She said she had, and in particular, when her husband passed away, one of her former students came to his wake.

She was also asked if she kept in touch with some of the people she worked with. She keeps in touch with Barbara Sweeney and Tish Foissette. She also keeps in touch with her former teacher assistant, Mirnia Rodriguez, who moved to Florida.

Grace was a member of the BTA and was also a Delegate when she taught in Pine Park. She always felt that the BTA was more than helpful, especially during the time when people were being let go, and she was low on the seniority list. The Union kept her informed of her status. The Union also helped her in the process of trying to get back into Tier 1 when she was planning on retiring. She was also on the SIT Team (School Improvement Team).

Grace was then asked, *"Who was the funniest character you ever met during your professional life...the funniest person on the job? Anyone come to mind?"* Her response was, *"One person? A lot of people come to mind. I don't know if we can go there? We had wonderful people at Northwest...we were young then."* She mentioned Arthur Goldstein who she said had a great sense of humor and had everyone in hysterics. He was a very funny person. He played the piano for the children too.

When did she decide to retire? Grace retired in 1998. She had had 30 years in teaching. One day she was talking with one of the teachers from Twin Pines in the parking lot who said, *"How many good years do we have left? I'm starting to think about retirement."* That got Grace thinking, *"You know, she's right. How many good years do we have left?"* So she decided that day that she would retire and informed the district that she would be retiring the following year. She gave the district a year's notice. Her husband had all ready been retired for 2 years. She said that the best thing Brentwood did was to have that one day Retirement Seminar organized by Carmela Criscione, where you went from person to person to get retirement information. It made the retirement process easier. Grace said, *"That was so classy, so great."*

What was her first year's salary? Grace said it was \$5100, and she thought that was fabulous to get paid so much for what she loved to do.

What has she been doing since retiring? Unfortunately, within about 4 months of her retirement, her husband became gravely ill with cancer. Visits to Sloan Kettering, operations, doctors etc. *"That really took up the next four years. It became a full time thing to do."* When he passed away, then the grieving process took time.

Looking back on Grace's professional life, was there an accomplishment that she was most proud of? Grace felt that she always gave it her best shot and was always pretty pleased with herself. She felt that her students did the best they could possibly do too. When she worked with the ESL students, she felt that the Kindergarten children showed the most progress over a year. The children were very nice to work with. It was nice to see how far they had come from September to June. They make a lot of progress. For Grace, she said that that was always very fulfilling to see that.

Now that she is retired, what are some of the things she does and doesn't miss about her job? She not only misses the children, she especially misses the people she worked with. She said that the people who work in Brentwood are fabulous people. Grace said that she was happy and really lucky to have worked with the people she worked with. *"They were wonderful."* What she doesn't miss is getting up early every morning. She's definitely a night person.

If she had a magic wand and could make 3 changes in the district for the kids, what would she make happen? Grace said, *“Our kids are special kids in Brentwood. I would try to get Newsday out of the way first...I would get a little more State Aid for the district. Our kids need a little more help.”* Asked to give advice to new teachers starting out, Grace said, *“I would advise them to care about the children more than they care about showing people what they can do in their classroom. I also think that it is very important for the young people to know how important the unions are, because they experience a very nice comfortable lifestyle in teaching today that maybe all of us didn’t have in the beginning, and I think it is very important to tell them to be careful and keep it that way. So, I think they all have to be very strongly involved with the Union, because I believe that that is the backbone of teaching.”*

*“Was there any historical event that occurred during your time teaching?”* She mentioned the assassination of J. F. Kennedy. According to Grace that was devastating. They tried to keep the students calm at the time, because they knew what was happening and were talking about it.

Did she have a favorite year in Brentwood? She had a lot of favorite years. She had a lot of fun at Northwest and Pine Park. She was asked to complete the following 2 sentences each in one word: *“Brentwood students are...”* She replied, *“Fabulous.”* *“Brentwood teachers are...”* She said, *“Professional”.*

How would she like to be remembered by her students? She said, *“I would like to be remembered as a patient teacher, because I think I was very patient.”*

In concluding the interview, Grace added, *“All my family knows how much I love them and how much I loved Brentwood, and of course having teachers in the family is a great accomplishment for me, and I’m very thrilled about it, so they know that. I’m sure they do.”*