



Grace Lilly Ann Mary DiRiggi
ROBS History Project
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My full legal name is Grace Lilly Ann Mary DiRiggi. I was named Grace after my mother. Lilly, Ann and Mary were all of my maternal and paternal grandmothers. They got just about everybody they could in there. I never had a nickname. I think there were only about three or four people in my entire life that called me "Gracie," but very few. It was my mother and her mother that made the decisions about my naming.

I've recently taken up new residence in Holbrook, Long Island. I raised five children and as they left, the house where I lived gradually got too big. That was why I sold it and moved to Holbrook. I lived in Brooklyn and Queens but never in Nassau County. I came to Brentwood about one week after John Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 and I remember that time very well. I lived on Strum Street in South Brentwood off Broadway, and Spur Drive South for ten years and then we moved to Oakdale. All my children attended Kindergarten in Loretta Park Elementary and then switched to St. Anne's in Brentwood, because at that time I was active at St Anne's. They then switched over to Connetquot to finish up Grade School.

My Eric is still at home. He'll be leaving as soon as he's able to save enough money but says it's too expensive to live on Long Island. He matriculated from Hofstra with an undergraduate degree in Education.

Susan is the only daughter still living at home. She's currently employed as a librarian at South Middle School, Brentwood. I have three others who are not working in the field of education. One son is working with Buildings and Grounds at Three Village Schools.

Knowing how each one of them and their personalities are unique, I'll try describing them for you. When at first I became a mother I thought they were all going to be perfect in every way like me, and it was going to be wonderful. The fact that I became a teacher made it easier to navigate the differences in their learning styles, because they are so different. Some are gifted, some have learning disabilities, some are in regular classes, some are more inclined to favor competitive sports and some are devoted to the arts. They're all different.

At the same time, I learned a great deal from my children. I was running here and running there dealing with all kinds of new awareness's that came about as a result of multiple intelligences, emotional intelligence, and differential learning. All of this was to me just part of being a mother. Though they were always present in our lives at the beginning some of those developments didn't even have a vocabulary or a label by which to identify them.

Personally, I was one of six siblings, and my brothers and sisters are also different. I have eight grandchildren. I love them all. They're terrific. I have five grandsons and three granddaughters. They're different. Yet that said, we have a strain of similar values running through our generations of family that has to do with the commonality of commitment to service that connects us all. We are teachers, nurses, physicians and civil servants some in first responding professions.

Simultaneously, the grandchildren especially, are very much into the creative arts. I may already have mentioned that my mother won a scholarship to Pace University that she never accepted. She married my father instead and proceeded to have six children.

I have a huge family, and there's been a lot of contact between us, especially in upstate New York, Staten Island and New Jersey. I'm always kidding them. When we visited a certain town I'd say, "*Oh, we have a cousin living here, or we have a cousin over there.*" We are a very large Italian family. I have a cousin who sang at my retirement party who's working on a genealogy and will be counting the number of our cousins. For sure, he'll know how many we have.

I was born on February 17, 1941 in Brooklyn, New York at the beginning of World War II. I can still remember sitting in a high chair when I was a baby. I have a fleeting memory of my mother washing dishes. There are a few more memories I have even from the time before I began going to school. I recall my uncle in uniform coming home after he was in the service. I have other memories too and they all involve family members.

My father was the youngest of four. My mother is the surviving sibling of six. At the beginning of the last century my grandmother lost several children right after they were born. One lived until he was about two years old. My mother survived, but then there were other children who lived about a week. My father served as an Italian member of the NYPD in a predominantly Irish Police force. His sister went to Normal School and became a teacher, so I actually have an aunt who became a teacher ahead of me. I have an uncle who was a Salesian Priest and came to America as a Missionary. His parents were both Italian, and he was also a teacher. My grandmother spoke only Italian. My father spoke Italian and English but insisted we all speak only English. I didn't have a close relationship with my grandmother. My younger brothers and sisters were all born after she died.

My mother's story was unusual. Her mother (my grandmother, the Mary after whom I was named), was born in Virginia. Her family has been here since the 1700's. She'd grown up with knowledge of that whole side of our family. Her mother's last name was Flowers and they'd been here since the 1600's. My grandmother was a rebellious young woman. I don't know how or why she moved to Brooklyn at the age of sixteen or seventeen while she was so very ill, but she met my grandfather (whose name was Manuel Rodriguez)

and married him. They'd eloped unexpectedly, and it took a while for her family to accept that she just picked up and left, because the family was Baptist and were upset over her leaving. Perhaps, adding insult to injury, he'd been born in British Guinea in South America. When I lived in Brooklyn, her first cousin also lived in Brentwood and Bay Shore and they would come to visit us there.

I was the first woman born in a traditional Italian family, and I believe the birth order absolutely influenced the person I am today. When my mother and father died my youngest brother called me up and said, "*Okay Grace, I understand that you're now the matriarch. You're it*". That was so because in the generation I came from even when my sister's argued and stopped talking to each other, no one ever ignored the last word or advice of the oldest daughter. They never did that in the generation that came after me. It was as if I'd suddenly become boss. Also, since I'd spent most of my life babysitting, the expectation was that I would grow up and marry a *college graduate*. My father believed the men in the family would all go to college but not necessarily the women. So when we did marry someone who was a college grad or who had a good job, we were considered to have been successful. The definitions were different.

Sometime back around the eighth or ninth grade I became aware that most of my best male and female school friend's mothers and fathers were teachers. My very best friend's father taught at Queens College and her mother was a music teacher. That was a hint to me that maybe I should look in that direction for a clue as to how I should prepare to make a living during my own life.

At school therefore, when I was given an assignment to interview someone, it would usually be one of those people when I was thinking of becoming a teacher. I had a large family including aunts and uncles I trusted, with parents who loved me and grandparents I could go to for answers to life's questions and for guidance and direction when it came to the choices I'd have to make regarding everyday problems. Nevertheless, my friend's parents definitely influenced me greatly.

Invariably, because I had five children, and because I graduated and went right back to school until I finished, and because I had a full time career and a profession to which I was dedicated, I think there was always a running choice I had to consider. It was a thread that ran through my life and career. I consider motherhood to also be a career. Exactly what amount of time, and energy should I anticipate expending? I'm sure that's still true for today's working women. It's an ongoing choice among daily priorities. I know, because I'm in that wave of women who came back or went to work after World War II. We were the first group that hadn't had mothers as parents who had worked or could show us what to do and how to navigate through life. Primarily we had to learn all that on our own without ever being shown what we had to do. We could never lose sight of our first priority: to balance nurturing children of the next generation and caring for ourselves. We continually had to balance blending time, energy and money with everything else we had piled on our plate.

One of the very first jobs I had was when I was sixteen years old and traveled to work by bus to a Woolworth's Five and Dime Store in Jamaica Queens. In those days Christmas was by far one of the most important Holidays of our family year. Every Sunday was a family day at our house but Christmas was special. Everyone came to my mother and father's house on that day. They lived in Queens Village then and before that they had lived in Brooklyn.

When I was a student in High School my favorite subject was English. I loved Literature, writing and poetry. I really enjoyed writing poetry. I was on the staff of the High School newspaper and helped put out the High School Yearbook. I was a member of the Spanish Club and a Cheerleader. I tried to do as many things as I possibly could and I didn't limit myself to scholastic endeavors alone.

Having consistently lived with four seasons I always favored the fall of the year. It was and remains my favorite among seasons. Whether it was because to me it represented a brand new year with fresh beginnings or high energy, brisk temperatures and the

explosion of seasonal color that autumn brought, it did and still does remain my all time favorite season of the year.

I attended St. Patrick's in Brooklyn where the children of the Brooklyn Dodgers Baseball team went to school. The Dodgers used to visit the school. Then my family moved to Queens and I went to St. Gerard Majella in Hollis. Next I went to St. Agnes Academic which was in College Point. After that I wanted to go to Queens but again my family wasn't very receptive at that time to the idea of girls going on to higher education. My brother was headed to Fordham University. It was important to my father that all the children receive a Parochial Education. He really couldn't afford anything. I was only about one year away from graduation when all my financial aid came through so I graduated early. They'd accelerated me and I was quite young. I had a purely academic program. We used to take four years of Latin, Physics and Chemistry, so when I finished I had nothing that was marketable except to go to college. Instead, I went to Grace Institute and was given a scholarship. They taught me business courses, and I was able to become a Secretary for two years before I got married and began having children.

That, with my father's approval, was a practical consideration I'd embraced. Following that I had taken one or two courses at St. John's University in Jamaica. I'd accumulated a few more credits by the time I came out to Suffolk. As the children were growing I'd go to Suffolk Community College and finish at Dowling. I got the Counseling piece at CW Post. I went back to Dowling for Administrative Certification. I got the PD (Professional Diploma Mental Health Counseling) at Post and started doing private internships. I did one for Family Therapy, so I am now a member of AMFT in order to be licensed in New York, another direction I could go in if I wanted to. I studied Addiction Counseling and went deeply into that area. Yes, I was driven but there is so much to do and so much to learn that I've never been bored and don't understand how anyone can ever be bored.

I was complimented when on the occasion of this interview it was suggested by a colleague that I with all my certifications and professional accomplishment had become "*A Woman for all*

Seasons.” Just like when I retired two young teachers (twenty eight or twenty nine years of age), come up to me and told me that they considered me to be a “*Renaissance Woman*” and reminded by another teacher who I respected, that *I’d remained true to myself.*

Yes, through all this I have had difficult days and I am as imperfect as the rest of the members of my human family with challenges that can pull me up short. I have a daughter that is developmentally disabled. I expect her to be a lifetime commitment. I’ve learned a great deal from her. Those are probably the two most difficult situations I’ve encountered and there is no end in sight for either one of them. My daughter is doing very well now and is doing a lot better than she has in the past. She works part-time so I worry not so much about today but about a time when she becomes the age that I am now. I worry about the time when I won’t be here. Who will be there to help her when I’m not around? That thought has changed my life, but I suspect it may also have made me into the person I’ve become.

The minute I came to Brentwood I identified with it immediately. I loved it. I felt at home there. It reminded me a little bit of Bay Ridge in Brooklyn, not because of the apartments or the houses but very much because of the people we remember when we lived there. There was a mix of people there that made it special. There was a feeling of community here that seemed downright familiar. As soon as I was ready to take on student teaching I wanted to come back. That’s why I returned. Mr. Puleo was Principal of the Freshman Center. My first assignment was as a content person reading content. I was in almost every classroom in the building. I was exposed to all different teaching styles. I can’t remember how many teachers I must have observed. I was able to watch how everybody was managing what they were doing. It was a great job. Then after one year I went to North Middle School and I worked there as an English Teacher. I met many friends who are still my friends, Joan Lange being one of them. Next I went to Brentwood High School and taught English. I was there, I think, for four years. Then an opening appeared at The Maslow-Toffler School of Futuristic Education at Village where the *Alternative* was housed. It lasted all told from 1974 through 1984. It was where I met John

Sherin and was interviewed by students and staff. My Department Chairperson, Gilda Mantin thought it would be a wonderful opportunity for me and it was. I was thinking about it on my way here today. We were so far ahead of the rest of the profession. What did we do? What did we have? We didn't have the terminology but almost everything else. We didn't have the labels but we had SIT Meetings with student representation. Today it's like the big thing but to the new teachers it's almost old practice that isn't seen as revolutionary. It was then. We were already aware of multiple intelligences and how we were going to work with kids. There were a few other things like block scheduling that people thought was revolutionary, that seem like yesterdays news today.

I have to tell you, our young teachers are up to the task. They can do it. You'd be so proud. Many of the people I met as teachers here when I first arrived are still my friends. They've been my friends for thirty years. Laurene Valmachos who was at the Center has been my friend all these years, Moe Green who is Director of Attendance. Edye Welch, (*Edye Tom*) at that time, Joan Lange who is still working and is Superintendent at Islip. There were many, many people who became close friends, people that I worked for and have a tremendous amount of respect for. It's a long line going from Tony Felicio, the President of the Board to Les Black and Mark Nizewitz. They give me the security to let me do my job. Conrad Follansbee, another leader among leaders. I'm very prejudiced about this. I happen to think that Brentwood has the very best staff. They're tops.

I always knew by virtue of being an adult and an educator that there were things I could teach and help students with, and I knew there were students who could teach and help me with things too. Since 1980 I have worked with students who back then would have been described as being *at risk*. That's a powerful group, because they need you more than anyone. It is certainly also true that when you work with *at risk students* you run the risk of putting yourself at risk as well. The energy you consume in that work is enormous. You are not going to win a lot of accolades for the work either. The only way to avoid burning out is to keep on nurturing and they'll

keep on nurturing you. It is a reciprocal effort of sharing our mutual need and love for one another

We are all very lucky in Brentwood especially if you are like me, who have had jobs that no one else ever had. Students who come back do so to nurture and be nurtured. Those are often our best “*paydays*.” We’ve spoken of something else referred to as the *ripple effect*. What we give to our students become gifts they give to their children and their children’s children that slowly and inexorably go on changing the world for the better through future generations. How lucky have I been? How lucky I am to have had the impact on the many lives in this community that I’ve touched so deeply and so profoundly.

On another front when I arrived I joined the professional organization on day one. At some point I decided to become a Building Delegate and to represent the teachers with whom I worked in that building. I’ve often described my investment of time and effort with the Union as grounding me. I could be as idealistic and altruistic as I wanted to become philosophically but my union work kept it real and kept me in touch with the way things are and showed me the limits to the changes I wanted to make. It provided me with an appropriate balance to my other missions and taught me the art of the possible. I considered Joe Hogan, the President of the Union to be a friend, and I always felt supported and trusted by my union as a member of the Brentwood team for each of the years that I served the District.

I’m extremely proud that I’ve been able to take advantage of the opportunity to work with the students I’ve been working with to help create some of the programs I know will continue after I’m gone. I think I’ve mentioned previously, that Edye Welch and I worked on grants, something about which she reminded me recently. We brought in close to a million dollars, and that gave us the ability to offer some programs and to be able to do a job that didn’t exist before and to see the impact they’ve had on students and on the District.

After working in education for slightly less than thirty years I finally did make the decision to retire. The reason that prompted me

was my complete physical exhaustion. I was putting in long days and was extremely tired. What I'll miss the most is working with the people and the students I worked with all of whom I missed and I liked. They kept me energized and feeling young.

We were told that students were first at risk around 1980. *No Child Left Behind* arrived some years later at the turn of this century about 2000. Yet even today there remains a group of students who continue to need something that for me is as yet undefined. I don't know quite what it is. I know a little bit about it, because I've been exposed to it more than other people have been. I think by virtue of my age and experience I believe I am the oldest alternative educator on Long Island. I think as a result of my age and experience I don't believe it's going to be by virtue of the word *Alternative* that things improve. Things will nevertheless continue to come about to help students. I've always wanted to be able to put my finger on that *unknown* by finding a way to provide young people with the assistance and ability to move on and push forward.

To those new teachers my advice would be: stick with it and keep on learning. Know you'll always need other people because we're all in this life together and if you don't have the answer you're looking for, somebody sitting right there with you or even next to you, does have it and they may even carry it with them right there. Get outside of yourself. Sometimes we think we're alone and the only ones that have experienced whatever it is and that just isn't so. There are always people around you that have a better answer. Everyone is here to help. You just have to find out who they are and trust them to help you.

There wasn't a single time during my career when I thought any one period was more significant than any other. I believe what I did for over close to thirty years was live a kind of *evolutionary transition*.

During my first four or five years I entered an apprenticeship where I was learning my trade. There was a second phase when I participated in the Maslow-Toffler School where all things different that were not being taught and given to students in the traditional high school were becoming routine in that environment. In addition,

I taught Night School, Summer School, Continuing Education and a Syracuse University Psychology Course at MT that was available nowhere else in the District. It was during this second teaching phase that I began to feel secure as I tried to work things out. I felt like I knew something and hadn't yet reached the point *when I approached fifty that I felt I knew nothing at all*. I'd learned that no matter what happens, everything can eventually be worked out. Just keep going forward and be forever patient.

It was the last phase that was for me the most rewarding. It was during a time when so many new teachers were being hired by the district to replace all those who were retiring after three decades and more of service. I built a kinship with them and realized how good they were and that it was going to be alright to leave when I decided it was time. Working with these young people energized me. When I began teaching I had been older than many of the other teachers who were there, but they were also some of the best and most experienced mentors and role models available to me at that time. It gave me the opportunity to work with and learn from some of the best people in the District.

When it came time to face the inevitable, the question, "*How do you want to be remembered?*" gave me an uncomfortable feeling. Thoughts of my late father's advice came to mind. He always said "*When it comes time for you to depart this earth remember to leave it in a little bit better shape than you found it when you arrived.*" That would apply whether it's the natural environment, the people in your life or all those around you. Try in every way possible to make a difference for the better in the quality of the lives of the people with whom you come in touch.