



Richard P. Spina
ROBS History Project
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He introduced himself to Karen Storjohann and to our potential audience as Richard Embarto Pasquale Spina. We learned he'd been born in 1947, in Queens County, in the City of New York, where he attended PS 1 in Jackson Heights until Third Grade. As the largest wave of migration in history from New York City to the suburbs got under way, his parents moved with him to Syosset, Long Island where he was enrolled in 3rd Grade in the Syosset District. As the building boom continued he moved from class to class attending many different buildings over the next few years until he arrived in Tenth Grade. That was when, he found himself for the first time remaining where he was for the next three years until he graduated from the twelfth grade in High School.

His family on his father's side immigrated to the United States in 1897. They were part of the wave of Italian immigration to the U.S., that occurred at the turn of the Century. His father was born in 1914 in "Hell's Kitchen" in New York City. He was the only child from a family of eight to attend college. The reason given was that he had been sickly as a child and instead of going out to work in support of the family, he remained home, stayed in doors and learned the value of reading to occupy his time. By the time he was in Junior High School and High School he had become a serious student. Richard's grandparents recognized that and along with other members of the family encouraged him to get into a "good" high school and to go to college. He then attended Fordham University.

What was interesting, out of Richard's generation of cousins (there were fifteen of them), only Richard's brother and he, himself were the only ones to attend college, while all his cousins children went to college. There was that first generation that didn't get into college but going to college did have an influence on the rest of the family that followed. While being sickly might have had the reverse effect, in his case with no television, no radio and no other distractions to capture his attention, reading became a primary focus and actually contributed to his later success in life.

His mother was a war bride. His father married her in World War II. She came from France and was of Italian heritage. An interesting footnote to this story is that my mother's father, who at the time was a known opponent of Mussolini during the war, the local priest came to their home in the middle of the night to warn the family that the very next morning, the Fascists were planning to arrest him. They literally grabbed the valise, threw in what they could, my grandmother and my grandfather and my mother who was then six month old, ran for the French border and immigrated to France to escape from the fascists in Italy. They went through the same immigration problem that immigrants going into this country today experience. They didn't know the language, they were looked down upon because they were looked down upon because they were a minority group in France, and he thought that experience being related to him and the other experience that his paternal grandparents had in New York City coming into this country made him very sympathetic to them when their families were trying to make a new start. I really identified with that, not that he was trying to make a new start but just growing up here made me feel that we should extend ourselves as much as possible to our new students who come from other countries. The last time Karen had looked at the numbers she said we had students of sixty seven language groups here in Brentwood.

Your mother must have had to come in under some very stringent Service regulations. *“Yes. Yes, It took quite a bit of paper work. My father was an officer and since he had been to college, he did volunteer at the age of thirty to fight and he was all caught up in that whole idea of, you know how African Americans wanted to fight as a group to show that they were really solid, the Japanese had their group of soldiers who wanted to show that they were loyal, well there were a lot of Italians from the New York City area who wanted to fight against Italy, remember at that time Mussolini and Hitler were part of the Axis powers but at that time Italians-Americans really felt that they had to demonstrate that they were loyal Americans by fighting against the Axis Powers. Because he volunteered and had a college education he became a ninety-day wonder, A Second Lieutenant, and actually fought with Patten’s Army and fought his way up the boot of Italy seeing some fierce action and then met my mother in France”.*

My father passed away about ten years ago and part of the reason I’m doing this right now is that I’ve always believed we should document the story of his campaigns. You see I’ve heard all these stories, but I’ve always thought it would have been great if we could have saved all his stories for posterity.”I was raised on ‘Victory at Sea’ every Sunday and I would have things pointed out to me by my father, “I was there”, “ We did this”, and “This is what really happened,” I always felt that it was important that we try to save as much of his experiences as possible.

Your father clearly had a great influence on your life. We have to remember that he grew up on the streets of New York. Consequently he became street smart. Probably the thing that influenced me the most was his expression that “Actions speak louder than words”I have to say that the curse he gave me is that as a result of his influence, I became a workaholic. Rather than talk about doing it, I just did it. Probably a major influence in my life and a strong influence for good.

Richard has two sons. One is named Christopher and Chris, is twenty three. He was born on Christmas Eve, so you can figure out that connection. He graduated last year from the University of Delaware and he's working for a company called MVR Homes which is a major home builder in the South. He's living outside of Baltimore and is studying to become a Project Supervisor, in other words he will be in charge of the development of twenty or thirty homes that are being built. So he is in a training program for that while my younger son Marc, is finishing up his Sophomore year at the University of Delaware as a Communications Major.

The first paying job he ever had was doing yard work on houses around his neighborhood; cutting the grass or weeding. From there he went to newspapers; when he had a paper route for about two years. After that when he was almost fifteen he started working in a supermarket. He was making the minimum wage whatever that was in 1958, probably about a buck and a quarter to a buck and a half an hour.

Rich was a Chemistry Major when he was in College. He had a Bachelor of Science Degree and had no intention of going into education. What he neglected to mention was that his father had been a teacher and was in fact the Chairman of the Math Department of Oyster Bay High School for about fifteen years when they lived on Long Island, from about 1950-1970. When Rich graduated from College the Viet Nam war was going on and it looked like pretty much of a sure thing that he was going to be drafted. To say the least, he wasn't crazy about that idea but then his father suggested that if he went into teaching, he'd be eligible for a deferment. Since his father was already a teacher it didn't strike him as a bad idea. He thought about it and did apply to some companies for jobs but at that time it was really difficult to find work. He would have had to relocate either to eastern Long Island or move out west to get work as a chemist. That's why he started applying for teaching jobs because they were giving deferments.

Remember, this was 1968 and just before that there had been a Math Teacher in the Brentwood School District whose name was Ronnie Genise who was really at the cutting edge of new ways of teaching mathematics. As a matter of fact he eventually left Brentwood and went into private industry and became a Vice President of one of the major publishing houses in the country. Rich thought it was Houghton Mifflin. Ron became their Math Consultant and was very successful at it. Richard's father, being a Math Chairman was attending Conferences all over the State on mathematics and he offered him a prophetically piece of good advice.

You know, and you have to remember, when Rich lived in Syosset, the Long Island Expressway ended – It didn't come all the way out. You had to get off the expressway and take back roads to come out to Brentwood. He was told *"it's all the way out on the east end we'll have to look at the map to show you how to get there, but it's a very innovative school district as far as Math is concerned, and since he was a Math Teacher and Rich had enough credits to be certified in Math he said - "Call Brentwood, and Why don't you go out there for an interview?"*

In those days anything on Long Island out past Huntington was considered to be in the middle of nowhere. *So he got in touch with the District and spoke with Carmella Criscione, which was really the first face that I saw in the Brentwood School District, and she said that they needed a Science Teacher, because I had enough credits to be certified in Junior High School Math and Science at North Middle. So she gave me the directions. We were in the old Administration Building in front of the Library then and I went and met Ed Palovchek. Ed interviewed me for about fifteen minutes and he said, you know, we just filled the Science position but they need a Math teacher at West Middle. Would you be interested in teaching Math? So, I said Sure! He gave me the directions to go from North Middle to West Middle which if you know the geography of this district was not easy and I did get lost and I was in somewhat of*

a panic. I eventually stumbled across Southwest, so I walked into the front office of Southwest, and said I'm looking for West Junior High School (at the time), and they said, you're close and they gave me directions and it wasn't too bad. So I got there a little too late, I then interviewed with Jeff Dwyer, Bill Lapp, and the interview went for about a half hour and they offered me the job and I said, Fine! And that was when I started working at West for eighteen years and it was a great experience.

One of the things we know you did at West Middle School was to bring in Computers. Tell us about that. *“Two of the people in the Brentwood School District that were truly at the center of the cyclone of the computer revolution here were Tony De Marco and Charlotte De Champs. They were the ones here at the High School, and it primarily is a budgetary thing, the High School always has more money than anybody else. It should be the place where things are started and experimented with. Those things that then become successful can be passed along. At the time we had Math Labs and it was really felt that computers could help kids with remediation in Math. And so it was really Tony and Charlotte that delivered the first computer at West. I was just totally fascinated by it. I got into a couple of actual verbal arguments with the Math Lab Teacher at the time because I wanted to take it home over the weekends to work on and learn how it works and write programs because at the time there were no programs for these computers. If you really wanted to do anything original or meaningful you had to learn Basic and write these little computer instructional school programs at the time. We'd work until two or three o'clock in the morning Friday and Saturday because I had to bring them back by Monday. Because there was only one in the building and of course I almost had to remortgage my house because with insurance because that was the only computer. But we went through that, and I really took to it. And I wrote a lot of programs in Basic. One of the things that I wrote and this sort of gave me a leg up when they started writing the computer consultant programs, was we had a school store and they wanted to know what*

was selling and what was not selling, Dolly Phillips who was now the Principal at West Middle and Cathy Marone they were in the school store and had to do an inventory at the end of every week. And they would count up how many pencils there were etc. They would add up the money and see what they needed to order and also determine if there had been any theft. **(Phone call temporarily interrupted interview)** So I wrote a program that actually tallied up, by them entering what was left would give a print out of how much was sold and then how much money should be generated from how much was sold. That was pretty impressive to other people. And so when they started talking about putting in computer labs, my name naturally came up at West and when they interviewed for the position I was one of the few people who could actually demonstrate that I had been using technology and I understood it, so that helped. But the Administration at West was also very supportive of using technology and as you may know (Karen) your husband Alex purchased a Commodore 64 for us and we were one of the first schools to have that and we started working with that. There was another gentlemen who worked with me at the time who retired some time ago Larry Summers, who was also another Math Teacher. You know, we were able to show that we were doing things that were helping kids. And so Administration was willing to work with us to build that up. We had our own little network of Commodore Pets in the early stages, and then the thing that really turned things around for Brentwood was Guy DiPietro put a Bond Issue through about fifteen years ago, and part of that Bond Issue was Technology. And Pete DiMento who was a retired Principal from the District, Ed Palovchek who was also a retired Administrator really felt very strongly that Computer Technology was the thing that we should be doing with our students having them learn and they pushed with Guy DiPietro to have the Technology installed. The first Bond Issue basically put a Computer in each Building. They were stand alone Computers, but they were at the time state of the art computers for what schools were having. That was really what started it.

Didn't you also do work at the Teachers Centers helping teacher to receive training in using those programs? Right! Any program can only be successful if teachers are introduced to it properly through in-service and of course Gerry Brophy has been instrumental in helping us introduce many programs and recognizing early on that computers are an important asset to the school district and we worked together at the teachers center to set up a computer lab for in-servicing and we've put together in the last few years one of the best in-service programs in the state, we call it PETA –Participation in Technology Advancement - and it's an eight credit course, eight one credit courses – the teachers have a choice of either taking eight credits courses and getting twelve credits toward their pay scale or they can get a laptop computer. And for those teachers who have maxed out on credit courses this is an incentive for them to take it. But what's really unique about this certificate program, is that we start at the very basics, literally how to start the computer, how to save files, how to print. The last course that they have to take is actually a curriculum course that they have to do with their students. And this serves two purposes, (1) It walks the teacher through the process of creating an instructional project that they have to use with their kids and (2) we take those projects and start to build a cadre of lessons by teachers in Brentwood that relate to our demographic and our hardware and our software and we take those successful outcomes and we put them on our intradistrict network webserver called BARON.

It's now only the second year that we've installed computers in most of the sixth Grade classes. We installed them in the middle of last year and this is only the conclusion of the first year. It's really going spectacularly well; not consistent in every class of course. We're getting students who are doing really phenomenal work. I really have to admit that Mary Pat Lyons, who is an Elementary Teacher and now is an Elementary Math Consultant, has for the last five years been my Assistant at the District Instructional Media Center. Her responsibilities are on the

Elementary level, and she has done a phenomenal job of preparing the kids as they moved up. We're getting so many reports from the Teachers at the Middle Schools that the kids are so well prepared that the projects that they are able to do are so beyond being able to use the programs that they are now being able to implement them. We're getting kids being able to do phenomenal work with Hyperstudio, Powerpoint, Appleworks, Desktop Publishing. Four or five years ago as a committee we put together what we would hope Seventh Graders would be able to do with technology in a series of outcomes. We're doing just about all of them now with Third Grade. So what we thought five years ago would be a challenge for seventh Graders is now routinely being done by Third Graders, so, it's really improving tremendously.

Given the thirty-four years you've had In Brentwood, is there one year that was your favorite? *"Boy, that's a tough question. How about one that stood out that wasn't my favorite? Oh, It was a horrible year. I was chosen for Grand Jury for the Southwest Sewer District. I thought it was going to be for thirty days like most Grand Juries are. It turned out to be two or three days a week for seven months. Which meant that I had subs in my classroom, I was teaching eighth grade math at the time and the kids just didn't relate to me and by just about January, it was horrendous. Every time I would try to establish myself I would be out of the building. So that was really a horrible experience. And the thing was I felt I was entrapped because they really didn't tell us the scheduling of the Grand Jury. I thought it would be for three weeks and be done with, you know. They never told us it was going to be this kind of a schedule so that was a horrendous year, but in terms of a good year, I have to say that I really always enjoyed teaching, I always enjoyed kids, what I can say is that as an Administrator and I have been purely an Administrator for the last six years – as a Coordinator, I really do miss working with kids. As an Administrator I really do enjoy working with kids and watching them develop and grow, I enjoy that relationship of kids coming back after leaving your classes, and talk to you, really, that relationship is something that I miss. But I'm going to have to say that all the years have been very good.*

Which of all your accomplishments is the most significant? *This surprises most people when I say it.* The greatest pride that I have is in working with Barbara Mascaro and developing the Elementary Library Program. The technology part of it, even though I enjoy it, I love it and it's great, was almost a given. Parents wanted it, the district wanted it... funding, they gave me the wherewithal to develop that. The Elementary Library Program which most people don't know, – there was none. For thirty years the Brentwood School District did not have, except for a very short time, an Elementary Library Program. Basically for the last twenty-five years we just had clerical help watching the libraries but we did not have a program. I always felt very strongly that libraries were very important and very key to a child's education. So Barbara Mascaro and I worked very hard to sell the idea to Les Black, Christie Todaldi and eventually to the Brentwood School Board. We worked hard in developing the program and getting librarians hired because this was a whole new venture. We're really seeing the fruits of that labor now with kids gaining by having librarians in the Elementary Schools. I feel very proud about that I feel very accomplished that as an Administrator I was able to facilitate that program being developed in the district.

Karen Storjohann added her own personal perspective to what Richard was saying by adding that in Northeast Elementary she and the staff of the building were fortunate to have Eleanor Bazata because although she was trained as a Clerk she was certainly able to know her way around the library.

What was Richard thinking about doing going forward? He said it best *"Well I've been lucky in that since I have been fortunate to be able to develop a technology program in Brentwood and it's really so robust and so all encompassing that it's really educated me so that on August 1st I'll start a new career working as the Assistant to the Director of Marketing and Sales of a Company in Hauppauge to really develop and expand their Education Programs.*

It's basically about setting up technology programs in other school districts that are not quite as advanced as we are here in Brentwood. I haven't really allowed myself to get completely excited about it yet because I'm still doing what I do from day to day. Every once in a while as I'm driving home I'll think to myself, this is really going to get exciting now. I'll have an opportunity to get really creative and to play with technology". So I am looking forward to it. And I'll take four week's vacation in July as a bonus. Karen asked Richard about the phone call that had interrupted his interview. It was from a young lady that's a writer with The New York Times and is writing an article about Wireless Technology. She's anxious to interview him about what he's doing. He told us that Wireless Technology is the latest technology that we have introduced here in Brentwood that features thirty wireless computers in every building. It's sort of like a portable lab that can go into any classroom at any time and we're one of the only districts in the area that have actually instituted that and she was asking certain specifics like, How did you finance it? How do you implement it? That sort of thing. "I'll probably be about three of four lines in her article", he said. "She just wants to get some of our experiences with that", he said. Karen admitted that this was something that had come to Brentwood after she had left and she asked if Rich could tell us a little more about it. He said, "Sure!" "What we do is - the computers have the ability to communicate with other computers wirelessly rather than through a cable. That's why they call it wireless, there are no cables involved but they have to communicate through a receiver or to a Bay Station that's what it is called and so we take a Bay station and we plug it into the network and now all the computers within about a three hundred foot radius can communicate to that Bay Station. So that if you as an English Teacher wanted to work with your kids in that classroom just bring the computers (laptops) in, open them up, they can get their user accounts, they can print they can go out on the internet, they can do anything they want. Anything they need to do and it's portable. Now the reason why we're moving into that is because (1) we're running out of classroom space, although I

could probably set up one or two computer labs in every building in the district but we don't have the room to do that. So space is at a premium. Now, the other thing that is happening is that the explosive use of computers is forcing us to set up computers that are dedicated to a specific subject area. There is only a finite amount of storage on the computer, there are only so many different types of applications you can put on one computer so what I'm hoping is that we'll be able to take thirty of these wireless computers and let's say, set it up for English, take another thirty and set it up for Math, then thirty for Social Studies, Science and Math and these will be dedicated just to programs for that subject area. The beauty about it is that two or three teachers could share that wireless lab and so if you needed it on Wednesday, no problem, bring them into your room open them up, use them. You may only need them for one or two periods. It's sort of like the way we share TV's and VCR's today. But now it would be a whole Lab. (Karen: "So then your single Computer Room could then store enough space for fifty classrooms as opposed to only 36 students being able to fit in a Lab at the same time. Exactly! And that's the model we're looking to develop. I know when I retired just a few years ago time in the computer Lab was at a premium. It was precious and scarcer than hen's teeth and couldn't be utilized by everybody in the building. Rich:"If you had 60 teachers and everybody wanted to have a week in there you couldn't do it". That's a fantastic improvement with only a small fraction of the population interested in using the available resources.

Well Rich, Is there anything else you would like to say? "Well, the thing that I would like to say is my old rule based on my experience in the Brentwood School District, working with a lot of Districts in Nassau County, Suffolk County and upstate New York, we say it an awful lot amongst ourselves but I also hear it a lot from people outside of the District, "WE ARE A VERY UNIQUE DISTRICT. We really do get along, by and large. A lot of that had to go to Tony Felicio. He has been

part of the continuity of the district over the last thirty years and that's not to say that we haven't had differences of opinion. But when you experience or you see the differences in other school districts you find out that it really is great to work in Brentwood. We really do take care of our own. Sometimes I kid Les Black, "Yeah, we take care of our own, almost to a fault". Sometimes we're too compassionate. Maybe sometimes we should take action about certain individuals. But we are compassionate, we give people the opportunity to really do the best that they can, Then again we're only one system and we are not perfect. Many of us understand the history because we've been here for thirty years or more and nobody is out to.....

I have never had to justify anything I wanted to do to the Superintendent's Office or to the School Board. I've explained to them what I want to do, and they said go ahead. They trusted my judgment implicitly. And they trusted the judgment of everybody. That's not to say that there haven't been problems from time to time. We really have been given the opportunity to be as creative and hard working as we wanted to be. That's what I really enjoyed about Brentwood and from my own personal experience whether I was a Math Lab Teacher or a Computer Lab Teacher, Classroom Teacher or an Administrator, I never met a wall. They allowed me to work as hard as I wanted, to accomplish as much as I wanted. I appreciate that, I really do. I think we should be very proud of the work that we do in Brentwood. Most people really don't understand the difficulties of our demographics, our low property wealth, and yet the district has held together succeeded in many, many, areas and we've succeeded in getting along.

Karen added her own thought by contributing to what Rich was saying. "There hasn't been a person to sit in this seat in all these years that I've listened to or, of all the ones that I've heard, that hasn't said something similar about how wonderful it has been to work in Brentwood. The diversity, with all the problems we hang together and make the most out of it. That really is a lovely thing."

Thanks for coming in. Thanks for asking me.