



Virginia Ann Datre
ROBS History Project
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Hello, I'm happy to be here with Carmela Criscione and John Sherin and to thank them for the privilege of doing this video. Of course, as everyone knows, I'm Virginia Ann Datre. I was born at 321 Broom Street in New York City on December 11th in 1920 at 2pm on a Saturday. My mother's name was Lillian and my father's name was Charles. They're the ones that brought me into the world and gave me my name. I was supposed to be *Vinchenza*, but my mother wasn't too happy with it, so the nearest name to it was Virginia, and that's why I'm Virginia Ann – I was Virginia Ann DeLeo (my maiden name), and now I'm Datre. I have some beautiful early memories. The one thing I haven't had is someone to share them with and that's why this experience is going to be great.

The earliest memory I have is when I was about two and a half years and my mother took in her six brothers and sisters because my grandparents had passed away; three boys; my three uncles and three aunts. She took them in - she was a bride of only four years. She took them in with her and my father and we had to get a larger apartment. We moved to 44 Prince Street, right opposite St. Patrick's old Cathedral, and that's where my childhood was lived. To my uncles and aunts I was their little pride and joy. Broom Street was a fourth floor walk up tenement and 44 Prince Street was a two family dwelling. I can remember holding hands with my mother as we walked down the stairs in our first home. It was in the very heart of "*Little Italy*" where I spent my earliest years. I do have

photograph's but not as many as I would like. The value of my mother taking in her siblings the way she did was a life lesson and example to me of the greatest gift I could ever have imagined because it gave me a tremendous sense of pride and family belonging. My mother's youngest brother eventually became a priest and was the first Italian boy to be sent from St Patrick's to Rome. I was his little treasure and when we saw him off when he was leaving for Rome, I threw an apple into the water so that he'd have something to eat. I called it a 'mapple', and it became our password all through his years and my years. He finally became a '*Benedictine Monk*' and was stationed in Colorado.

My two older uncles got married and my older aunt did too. The two younger aunts lived with us until they also got married and moved but that was many years later. So, all the children lived with us until such time as they moved from Prince Street, Broom Street and later on from 276 Mott Street and 288 Mulberry Street. "*But tell me what street compares to Mott Street in July*" was once a lyric by Rogers and Hart that I've sung the words to many times in my life. It was a favorite of mine. There were a lot of nice memories, there really were both good and bad memories. I lost a younger brother at the age of thirteen. He was an altar boy; served six o'clock Mass every morning and when he was waked, they dressed him as an altar boy. I have so many memories of that. Of course, his death was a downfall for my mother and father. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage, at St Patrick's old Cathedral school. I didn't know my grandparents on my mother's side. I only knew my grandmother and my grandfather on my father's side but they passed away when I was about twelve. My grandfather was only in his mid thirties and my grandmother died during the influenza epidemic in 1918. My mother was eighteen when she was married and twenty when she took in the children. Her father arrived in America when he was two years old and her mother was born in New York City. Her father and mother's family's had both come from Sciacca, in Sicily. I always wanted to get there but never did.

My mother was a great seamstress but never worked outside the house until much later on. My father worked in the Garment District. He was a gem

because he took care of all those children as if they were his own. That experience gave me great family values. It has been the dominant factor in my life and nearest and dearest to my heart. Even like my friends, my workers and my seniors, they're all my extended family. I have three great, gorgeous, wonderful children of my own; two boys, Thomas, Richard and Michele, who is my gem. You asked about my siblings. I only had the one brother Anthony, who is deceased and the one sister Lillian, who recently passed only about six months ago. She was the depression baby and was the reason I came to live on Long Island.

Well, my sister and her great friend Catherine Macelli, Carmela will remember the fighter, were so close since they were in the carriage, they all came from down town, and they were going to get a house together. They were going to buy a joint house. They kept riding out to the Island and coming and coming. They couldn't find a place so they decided they would buy a house next to each other and they came out to Brentwood. They found the 'Chesterfield Homes', and that's where they established themselves. The road was not paved yet.

I lived in Brooklyn when I was first married. My landlady was selling her home because she was going to live with her daughter and I had to find a place. I never thought I'd ever get out this way. I said to my mother, "*Were only going to get to see Lillian once or twice a year,*" *that's God's forsaken country*", and every word is true, but my sister said please come out and visit before we take possession of the home. So we rode out and made it a picnic day. We made sandwiches and sat opposite the Ross Sanitarium on Suffolk Avenue and had our picnic there. Then we went to see my sister who was on Vanderbilt Avenue in Brentwood and we were happy to see her but we said Lillian, how are you going to be able to live way out here. Three months later I had to eat my own words. The reason why was we couldn't find a place in Brooklyn or Queens and thought we'd take a chance in 1957 to come out here. I had to borrow money from my aunt for the down payment which we didn't have and our big mortgage payment was \$87 a month. That's why I had to go to work to pay for the mortgage on the

house.

Today, my son Thomas is a Builder in business for himself, with Datre Construction. Richard works for OTB (Off Track Betting), and Michele is employed by United Health Care. I'm very proud of them all. I have eight grandchildren, Tommy, Richard, Gia, Gina, Paul, Michael, Richard and Joseph and I have eight great grandchildren with two more on the way.

Gina is a spin-off of Michele and myself. You can tell how we are really related. Gina gets the highest rating for family values. She's really very family oriented and takes after--- we could be thinking something and we'd call each other at the same time. It's almost like being psychically connected. She has the interest in family history too. She says, "*Grandma you make sure we get a copy of that list that you've made*".

Thanksgiving and Christmas are big family holidays but there has always been a great deal of family contact maintained between us over the years.

I remember living through the depths of the Depression and how bad it was. I remember my father's depression too which was severe. He was one of those men who literally sold apples on the corner to feed his family. He sold them for 5c on the street, and many a night that was what we had for supper. They couldn't afford to pay the rent so they went to live with my uncle in Corona, Queens. I remember being poor while knowing that everybody else was poor along with us. We weren't any different for that reason from anybody else. Everybody was in the same boat. We didn't really know the essence of just how bad it really was. It was bad but as children, of ten or twelve we didn't pick up on it. As adults we now reflect on it all and can understand what was happening to appreciate the sacrifices that were being made between the families in order to help each other out of the hole they were all in. Those traumatic memories have infused today's older generation with the knowledge and importance of appreciating what family experienced then and it has imbued them with their sense of family values. "*I just got goose bumps when I thought about that.*"

Sometimes today I think about the material things we're able to buy. I can't believe this is actually happening when we had to make so many sacrifices. When today young people can just turn around and snap their fingers to make it happen and it's there, even if they are paying for it with credit cards and all.

I think my uncle Dom, the priest had a great influence on me as did my aunt Nettie, who was the youngest of her generation. I think I picked up on a lot of their values from the way they saw life.

Some of the toughest decisions I ever had to make had to do with my mother's mental illness and her sickness. It was quite a struggle that required great sacrifice. After my brother passed away and then my father passed away she had a nervous breakdown and suffered from dementia. As a matter of fact we went out to Colorado where she was supposed to live with my uncle Dom to become his housekeeper but mentally she couldn't take being so far away from the rest of her family so we came back to New York and I took care of her. My mother was seventy-eight when she finally passed but caring for her was a struggle.

When I was young I attended the Old St Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School where I was taught by the nuns where I had a Sister Josiefer, who was a great gal, and I was her pet. Then when I was in Kindergarten I had Kindergarten teachers I remember too and I guess I saw the cute looking boys and I pinched one and I got punched for it. I wore a uniform too. Yes, I did. I wasn't an athlete. I considered myself a lady, one who wore "*a hat, gloves and nice shoes*".

The three greatest gifts I've received have been my three children: Thomas, Richard and Michele. My first Secretarial job was with my aunt who worked for an Insurance Company the name of which I cannot immediately recall, where I was paid \$55 a month. This would have been in 1939 and before the War.

I remember going to the World's Fair in 1939. It was a way to get away from it all. As a young girl after school I used to like to go home and bake. We had a coal stove at home and that was where I baked my best apple pies. I helped my mother of course, and there were all the usual chores to be done. I don't think I was a problem child.

I loved geography as a student and I was pretty good at math. I wasn't too happy with either Latin or French. Latin gave me more of a problem. I took a little more interest in French. Once my grandparents were gone we didn't speak much Italian at home anymore; -- we spoke mostly English then; unless they didn't want us to hear something they were talking about, that was different -- like a couple of favorite words.

I think I used to look forward to the Christmas Holidays because it was the time of my birthday and also a festive time of the year. Thanksgiving was a next favorite holiday. I always enjoyed the arrival of spring and summer and after them I think I liked the autumn. The aroma of garlic frying in oil for me is still reminiscent of a time of family gatherings

As previously stated, I went to Cathedral High School where we were required to be proper young ladies. I was there all the way through where I was an Irish-Italian. Only a General diploma was offered and that's what I achieved before graduating. My professional training began after High School when I attended Delehanty Business School for one year.

My proudest realization has been in realizing how much I am loved by my own three children.

I will always remember my initial impression of Brentwood when we moved there. *"It was country, it was country. The trees, the roads unfinished, we couldn't even get in my sisters dirt road with the car. It was on Vanderbilt Avenue. In fact, I was supposed to live on the same street with her but the house wouldn't have been available for us so we, went over to Nostrand Avenue where the house was completed and that's where we lived for thirty-eight or thirty-nine years.*

We had formerly lived in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn on 49th Street before coming out here and yes, of course we were all Brooklyn Dodger fans. We had attended a meeting of the Civic association on Nostrand Avenue and I said to someone, *"Do you know where I can get a job?"* That was just about a month after we had moved in. I moved to the Island in March and then in April of 1957 someone with the school district said to me, *"Well, they can use help in the cafeteria if you'd like to enquire to see if anything is available"?* So that was where I went. I was there for just about a month when they found out that I was a Secretary. Martha Enright had spoken to me and she said, *"Virginia, You don't have to be in the Cafeteria". You've got to go upstairs"*. There I spoke to Martha who told me Gloria Torres, was out on a leave of absence so she said *"I'm going to introduce you to Dr. Hoyt."*

I was introduced to Dr. Eugene Hoyt, but I thought he was the janitor. He never was dressed in a way I expected him to come to work. He said, *"I'm Dr. Hoyt."* He asked me how long I had done Secretarial work. Then he asked me for my credits and credentials. He seemed very happy and he said, *"Okay, You're hired."* It was all very informal and he told me I'd be hired the next day. When he told me he was the District Principal I don't quite know what to expect.

So I got the position and I worked with Dr. Hoyt. Shortly after, Gloria Torres returned, and I met Leigh P. Stewart who was the greatest man. He really was the gem of a man. I worked with Tom Hastings and went right down the line with all of them. It was so invigorating, and busy, busy. You didn't have time to think about it because you just did it. Leigh would call me up Saturday night and say *"After Church come on in, we have to make a payroll."* Everything was done by hand – all the teachers checks. And you just went. There was no hesitation. I'd say to my husband. I have to go in. *"Okay!"* and that's what we did. After hours; off the clock -- And then when I really got on the threshold, I'd take my mother and my daughter in with me at night, the Principals would be having their meetings, and they'd separate the purchase orders and I'd put them in the envelopes and

stamp them and there was no stamp machine – I was very much the “Generalist” I did everything from ordering thumb tacks to tractors and encyclopedias. The motto in the District was, and I don’t think anyone would deny this, *“If you want anything or you need anything, just call Virginia”*. I’m not bragging I’m just stating; and I hired all the girls and I interviewed them. *“I loved what I did and I had to.”* It became such a part of me that it was my family. My purpose every day was to be there, to supervise, advertise, invigorate, feed them, and even clothe them. What do I mean? There used to be a dress place over in BayShore and it was a little bit less expensive than if they went to stores they usually patronized. The girls would go to the shop and bring back dresses and they’d be here for whoever wanted them or could use them. We’re talking here about the girls who couldn’t afford to dress the way they needed to so as to appear presentable and as professional as expected. In addition to all the other roles I performed, I was also a mother hen.

In addition I am President of the Brentwood Senior Association and I have at least thirty or forty of the people who were in the Brentwood Schools in my group. I was also active in this group while I worked for the district. I started the Brentwood Secretarial Association and got involved in that and along with it came the Long Island Association of Educational Secretaries and President of the Brentwood Association. I was President of the Brentwood Homemakers. I have for the last twenty years been President of our Brentwood Seniors Association; Brentwood Senior Club Number One. How you might ask, did she find the time to do all that? *“I did it”, “I just did it”*.

I felt bad because I don’t feel I gave my children the opportunity to do things together because I was so busy that we couldn’t go places together that we might all have loved to visit and see with one another. I simply became involved and they accepted it; more than involved I became committed and I have for my whole life.

Leigh P. Stewart had a retirement party. That was a big one I planned and organized it on his behalf. I did all the parties. She said, *“I think God put me here as an organizer, otherwise I don’t see how I could have done it, honestly and I think my daughter is following in my footsteps.”*

(Sigh!) I believe “Unions” have been there for the good of employees in States all across this country. I believe unions have grown and continue to exist for the benefit of working people. When I came to Brentwood there existed only the Teachers Association that changed when they joined with the New York State United Teacher’s – NYSUT. Eventually, The Civil Service Educational Association – CSEA – of which I became President also became a Union, representing participating clericals in the district. We were happy to be able to get the Secretaries and others what they truly deserved and it took us a long time.

Would you like to know how I met my husband? “It was on a blind date. A friend of my husband Tom arranged it. We went to a movie. Honestly, I was less than impressed with him after the one date. It was at a time all the boys were away in service during the War. He had family values which really impressed me. He steadfastly pursued me until one day I finally gave in. We were married in 1945. Tom wasn’t called into active service because he had a brother that was ill and unable to serve and another brother who was already serving. That enabled us to spend a lot of time together and our relationship gradually became more serious. He got on his knees one night and asked me if I would please marry him. I couldn’t say no, so I finally said yes and we were married for forty-nine, almost fifty years, before he passed away in 1993.

I didn’t make the decision to retire. it was made for me when my health began to deteriorate. My doctor advised that I pull back on the amount of stress in my life because I had very high blood pressure which almost caused me to stroke out. I slowed down by eliminating a lot of the stress. I probably would have worked a lot longer but I had to make that decision. In my case I put my energy

into all the organizations I was committed to sustaining. I've been very proud to be able to say that I've been part of the growth and development of the Brentwood School District, the largest public school district on Long Island which has grown to become the sixth largest district in the State of New York. I witnessed it all from infancy to maturity while knowing only too well that I was an important part of it right from the very beginning.

My last assignment in Brentwood prior to my retirement from the District in 1978 was that of a Confidential Secretary. I was assigned to work with Frank Mauro when he was the Business Manager. The total length of time I served in all my roles was twenty-one years. I took the utmost pleasure working with people I considered my friends while being able to exchange thoughts and impressions, sorrows and laughter. We had a "cute" expression, I don't know, maybe I shouldn't say it but, when any one of the girls was having difficulty with her spouse, and they came in the next morning – if they came in with their hands lifted like this, (arms raised in front of them with both palms forward), then we'd know they didn't have a good night. Then this mother hen used to see what she could do to make them feel better. So I was also counselor, advisor, and mentor at the same time. – talk with Ellie White. She'll tell you.

Under the heading of regret, the only thing I might be able to say I'd do differently would be to travel and see the parts of the world I would like to have visited. At another time in my life I would love to have become a reporter or a teacher. If given the opportunity to go to college and complete my education I dreamed of going into one of those fields. My passions were geography and math. I would probably love to have taught either one of them.

My early heroes were Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin just to name two of the movie star singers I enjoyed. President Franklin D. Roosevelt died when Tom and I were on our honeymoon during the spring of 1945. It felt to me like I had lost my grandfather again. People thought he had brought the country out of the misery they had been in, ended the depression and began his fourth term as President. I remember the loyalty oaths of the 1950's and the murder of JFK in 1962. I also recall the many tears shed everywhere in America on that afternoon.

Even now I miss the people I worked with along with the camaraderie. Although, I'm lucky because I still have that with our senior group. We lost touch for a while but now that they're seniors too, it has come back and that makes up for a lot of the things we might have missed.

Every year was my favorite year. They were all my favorites. When I began my hair was dark and now it's white. I would like people to remember me as I am now. I want to say this. It was great working with Frank Mauro. I kind of adopted him as my son because I was that much older than he was when he came into the District and I think he respects me for that. I keep in touch with him and many other people I have known. I am not alone and life is good.

The world has changed. The culture is changing. Many of the old family values are no longer in fashion. Sometimes it might seem that the world has been turned upside down. Technology is moving so fast that we can't keep up with the changes before they're replaced. There are young people hoping to find a job in school like some of us did. For those thinking about becoming a support person right out of high school who will look to your replacement for a position how can they possibly advise such a candidate other than to say: *When you take a position you have to want to do it. With that comes the dedication to do it well. Bringing that dedication to whatever it is that you do will provide you with the satisfaction of knowing you're always doing the best you can. The more dedicated you are the more you will learn and the more success you will achieve. Your accomplishment will build upon itself and people will begin to notice you for your attitude. Your reputation will precede you and build a base of support to lift you to positions beyond your dreams. Believe in yourself and other people will too.*

If possible I'd still like to visit Italy and see Rome in particular and maybe adopt you John, as my son too. Do you think I could do that? *"Absolutely!"* Thank You. This has been wonderful.