

Thomas Phelan Biography

I was born on Feb.17, 1940 in Mt Vernon, N.Y. to Regina Giordano and Edward Phelan. The happiest memory of my childhood was the day my father returned from WWII and I saw him walking up our street in his army uniform home for good. I was six years old and missed him while he was serving in Germany. My dad was a hard-working auto mechanic in my early years and a stone derrick man in his later years. His responsibilities were to lift the stones on the facades and tops of buildings by cranes and derricks. I worked with him on both jobs and that was when I decided that I needed more education so that I would have more opportunities in life.

My mom spent her working life as a bookkeeper after graduating from Edison H.S. in Mt Vernon. She was a typical mom, doting on her family, which was not surprising due to her Italian heritage and upbringing. My early memories growing up include my family referring to me as mezzo 'iresce' and mezzo 'Italiano'. It wasn't until high school that I found out that there was no word 'iresce'. It should have been mezzo Irlandese. Senza educazione non si puo parlare perfettamente.

I lived downstairs from my grandparents in a predominately Italian neighborhood. My mom's parents spoke Italian (dialect) all the time so I grew up learning the language in order to communicate with them. Nonno came from Vallo della Lucania, Provincia di Salerno and Nonna's family came from further south in Calabria. Did I get my character from them? Who knows!

I was a good student in my youth so my parents decided that I would go to Mt St Michael's Academy for High School, eliminating the possibility of joining with the 'wrong crowd' in Mt Vernon. I did well in H.S. and won a scholarship to N.Y.U. In those days, they awarded scholarships based on academic merit rather than on only athletic ability. While in H.S. I worked mainly on golf courses, first as a caddy then later as a groundskeeper and also used my mechanical skills, taught to me by my father, to repair automobiles.

At N.Y.U. I majored in Romance languages and in my junior year I lived and studied in Madrid, Spain for a year fulfilling my requirement toward a major in Spanish language and literature. During the Christmas break, I traveled by train to Il Bel Paese to Vallo della Lucania to visit and live with my cousins, aunts and uncles on my Grandfather's side of the family. While there, we shared many stories and reminisced about the good old days and my Grandpa's youth growing up in Italy. This trip solidified my desire to be a teacher and impart these great experiences, culture and language to American youth.

Also while at N.Y.U. I was a fraternity member. No, it was not like you might have read. The experience was a very positive one and gave me a brotherhood in which to belong, in addition to my Italian heritage. I served in several offices of leadership as well as President of our chapter in senior year. That leadership experience was valuable in my intellectual growth and would serve not only in teaching but in leadership positions in the future.

Three days after graduating with honors from N.Y.U. I was lucky enough to marry my high school sweetheart and love of my life, Joanne DiPaolo, in the Basilica of Our Lady of Victory in Lackawana, N.Y., better know as Father Baker's Basilica. The only problem is that now I had to learn a new dialect, Introdacuese. From Neopolitan/Calabrese/Itrodacuese I still have problems getting the appropriate words. La Bella Lingua has never appreciated my spoken Italian. We lived in the Bronx for one year and bought a home in Mahopac in 1962 and have been residents here ever since. It has been the dream of a lifetime raising three great children and doting on our 6 even better???

grandchildren. It would take many pages to write about how proud I am of my three children Larry, Melinda, Sean, my six grandchildren, and why. One is as good if not better than the other. As with all Italo-Americans the height of a successful marriage is La Famiglia. God has truly blessed me with a great one.

My teaching career was unique, as I got my first and only teaching job at Valhalla High School where I

started teaching Spanish and French in the J.H.S. for one year. As the H.S. developed, I moved into the H.S. to teach Spanish. My whole career was at V.H.S. where I served as Foreign Language Department Head Teacher and President of the Valhalla Teachers Association for twenty years until my retirement in 2000. Also, during that time I was the Association's Chief Negotiator and Benefit Administrator for the district, handling all employee benefits, as well as, a full time teacher. One of my other responsibilities was to manage the extra student accounts for the district. My college experiences helped to develop those abilities.

The highlight of my life other than marriage and having children/grandchildren occurred in 1968-1969 when, with Joanne and at the time two children, we lived in Madrid and experienced living and traveling throughout Europe as a family. We traveled throughout western Europe with a 6 year old and a 3 & 1/2 year old, eventually visiting Joanne's hometown of Introdacqua, Province of Aquila, in Abuzzi. That visit led us to return many times to enjoy and participate in our heritage with old friends and relatives.

I was fortunate to be granted a sabbatical from my school district to enable me to study in Madrid. I thanked and repaid them by working my entire career at V.H.S. Too bad more sabbaticals are not awarded to teachers to make school districts richer and better.

Just as most teachers do, I continued my education part time in the summers and evenings so after my Master degree, obtained in Spain, I obtained more than 60 Graduate credits in order to refine my skills and increase my knowledge to better serve my students.

My skills led me to offer my services to the Italian American Club where I have served as Corresponding Secretary and Vice President but my best accomplishments have been the behind the scenes helping to improve the club, maintain its attractiveness and many other little things which aid in updating the club's appeal.

It is a pleasure to serve as an Honorary Grand Marshall for 2017. I thank the Italian American Club of Mahopac for this honor. I have lived a great life and am proud to tell any one that I am only half Italian, but it's the better half that has guided my blessed life.