

Dear Organizers and Friends,

It is with deep gratitude, and with awareness of the sacrifices made by the victims, that I will walk on March 25, 2011 to commemorate the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911. I walk in honor of my mother, Anna, age 89, who is a retired seamstress and who has Alzheimer's Disease. Your efforts have given me a chance to reflect.

My mother, Anna Quadrino (nee Izzo, Russo) born in Italy, married my father William Russo, an Italian American World War II combat veteran, in her hometown of Montoro Superiore in 1949 after he had traveled to Italy from the U.S. to visit his parents hometown. Anna arrived in America in 1949, went to work as a seamstress. She also did alterations at home. My father William died in 1962. My mother married her second husband Louis Quadrino in 1976. He was a career National Guardsman and Post Office employee. He passed in 1995.

Anna was a member of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, Italian Dressmakers Local. Several years before retiring she was selected to be what we know as the Shop Steward (known in the factory as 'Chairlady') of the factory she worked in on McDonald Avenue in Brooklyn.

I visited her many times at the factory. The shop was located at the top of a long, narrow flight of stairs in a building just off Kings Highway. As soon as you reached the top of the stairs you could hear the intense cacophony of sounds: the relentless sound of zzzz's. zzzz's and zzzz's of sewing machines all working at once, punctuated by the 'sssss' sound of the 'Presser'. All of the seamstresses were women. Every day these women made incredibly crafted, intricate and delicate dresses and evening gowns of luxurious silk, chiffon, cotton and fine materials, cut and sewn together in a synchronized division of labor (piece work) by some 35 or so women (called Operators by the bosses). All this to not only meet the deadlines of the bosses for mass shipments of garments but for each worker to produce as much as they could to earn as much as they could for their families. And, needless to say, the wages were minimal.

Yes, I observed how hard they labored. But, I also witnessed the camaraderie and love they shared for each other. They shared their stories, the marriages, births, deaths etc. The Operators were amazing. At times they could sew a hem or sleeve or any piece while simultaneously talking to their neighbor and vice versa. The women made amazingly crafted, intricate and delicate dresses and evening gowns of fine materials cotton, silk, chiffon, etc with pleats and lace etc.. all cut and sewn (piece work) by some 35 or so women. I recall one of my mother's best friends was Felicia. She was a finisher..what we would now call Quality Control. Another co-worker was Mary Fourteen (14). Mary 14? There were so many Maria's and Mary's in the factory that they were known by their operator numbers.

Whenever any of the ladies retired the tradition was for the retiree to bring home cooked food, cookies and pastries. Everyone would then gather, usually at lunch time so as not to interrupt the work day, and celebrate. Refer to attached photos of my mother's retirement day in 1990.

As we commemorate the tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of March 25, 1911, I have a renewed sense of appreciation for the work my mother did and for the women and men, who over the generations have worked in clothing factories . That work continues all over the world.

I am also pleased to participate in a reading of the play, Labor of Love, on March 25, 2011 at 7:00pm at The Italian American Museum. I want to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the organizers of the commemorations that are taking place.I know there are so many people that made the tributes possible. My gratefulness is full for each of them; for all the organizers and participants of the commemorations.

Thank you.

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