

Preservation Ready/**An empty West Side house with a poignant story**

BY DAVE SEMINARA

The four-family house at 443 Prospect Avenue looks like something out of a Stephen King novel. The structure's wood plank front steps are peeling, the porch's floorboards are coming apart, the ceilings and walls are rotting, and several windows are cracked or boarded up. Neighbors say that the place was once a crack house, but it has long been empty. Built in 1920, in what was then a thriving Italian-American neighborhood, 443 Prospect was once a beautiful home.

I know, because my mother, Joanne Seminara, now seventy-eight and living in Williamsville, grew up there in the 1930s and '40s. She moved out in 1950 and has driven by the place on a handful of occasions, never getting out for a closer look. On a muggy day in August, we went back to 443 Prospect to find out what was left of the imposing house and sumptuous garden my mother remembered so fondly.

My mother's grandfather, Leonardo Riforgiato, emigrated to Buffalo in 1909 at age thirty from Montemaggiore Belsito, a picturesque but poor village in Sicily's rugged interior. It's always been a hard place to make a living, and legions of its residents have been coming to Buffalo for more than a hundred years in search of better lives. I visited Montemaggiore

Belsito in 2006, and nearly everyone I met there wanted to tell me about their relatives in "Boo-fah-loh."

Riforgiato was a survivor. Two of his brothers died during the Great Influenza of 1918-1919 that killed more than twenty million people worldwide. John Riforgiato, twenty-six, died two days after catching the flu; days later, Frank, thirty, grieving and delirious, jumped through a closed window at Columbus Hospital and died hours later from his injuries, which included a fractured skull. According to a story in the *Buffalo Daily Courier*, dated January 28, 1919, Leo and his two children, Philomena (my grandmother) and Frank, were "in a precarious state and fighting for their lives."

The elder Riforgiato and his children

survived, but the death of his brothers left him shorthanded at the family-owned newsstand he ran at the corner of Main and Court streets from 1914 until he retired in 1955. The family had been sharecroppers in Montemaggiore, but in Buffalo they made a respectable living selling newspapers, magazines, and comic books. Riforgiato was proud of the fact that his oldest son, Frank, became a doctor with a thriving practice on Niagara Street, and his younger sons, Steve and John, became successful businessmen.

In 1933, Riforgiato bought the house at 443 Prospect at the bargain foreclosure price of \$7,325 in the middle of the Great Depression. According to city records, the home had four apartments across 4,692 square feet; the two second-floor units rented for twenty-five dollars each, the lower units went for twenty dollars. Riforgiato and his wife, Rosaria, lived in one of the second floor apartments and rented the other three to relatives. Five years later, my mother and her family moved from their house on Arkansas Street to the first-floor two-bedroom unit.

443 Prospect



When we pull up in front of the old house on Prospect Avenue the day after my mother's birthday in August, I have to coax her out of the car.

"I can see it from here," she says.

I insist and she reluctantly follows me up to the front doors. The house has an air of shabby respectability when viewed from a distance, but the closer we get to it, the worse it looks. The doors are rotting, the siding looks filthy, and the porch and steps are stained and peeling. We don't have to knock to know that the place has been abandoned for a long time.

Standing on the crumbling porch, my mother says, "This is where your Aunt Gloria and I used to play. We called it Veranda Beach. It was our little space. We used to wait right here on Friday afternoons for Grandpa to come

home from work because he let us read his comic books from the newsstand. We didn't have a TV in those days, so that was our entertainment. But we had to be careful with them because he'd bring them back to the newsstand on Mondays to sell them."

My mother says that Leo was so frugal, he would patch holes in his shoes with pieces of cardboard rather than replace the shoes. On Thursday afternoons during the war, when meat was rationed, he'd take my mom and her sister, Gloria, and their little brother, Sam, to Canada to buy meat; in the summer, they'd go to Crystal Beach for a swim. He worked hard, and, on Saturday nights, Gloria and Joanne were responsible for drawing his weekly bath. He liked to have them fill the tub with Epsom salts because he stood outside in the cold all day, hawking papers.

Newsboy Brothers Die; Third Fights Scourge Which Attacks Family



Details of the vacant structure; archival images of Joanne and Gloria Riforgiato



House photos by kc kraft; archival images courtesy of Dave Seminara

Their world was very small. Joanne and Gloria went to school at Holy Angels and their mom, Philomena, wouldn't let them stray far from home for fear they'd catch polio. They could never afford to eat out but there were simple pleasures in the neighborhood—lemon ice at Muscarellas, basket cheese from Merlinos, or fresh bread with olive oil from Christiano's Bakery.

"You knew when they had just baked fresh bread," my mother recalls. "We could smell it from the yard."

A neighbor sees us snooping around in front of the house and introduces herself.

"No one's lived there since the eighties," she says. "Things got bad around here at that time. Drugs were everywhere. The tenants were running a crack house. DEA agents came, I think it was in '85 or maybe '86; they broke down the door, smashed out windows. No one's lived there since. A little old Italian man still owns the place, and his son comes by to cut the grass."

The neighbor (who doesn't want her name published) says that after a three-year-old girl was shot dead right in front of a church around the corner in the late eighties, the police started to slowly clean up the neighborhood. "These days, it's nice and quiet," she says.

My mother mentions that Leo took meticulous care of a garden he made with his own hands in the backyard.

"Let's go see what happened to it," I say, trespassing around the side of the house, and my mom briefly objects before following me.

Two of the back windows are boarded up, but we can still see that the interior of the house is a rotting mess. But as we walk toward a chain-link fence near the rear of the yard, my mother spots clusters of healthy-looking green grapes spilling over the fence.

"My grandfather's grapes!" she exclaims. "They're still here! He used to make wine but he was the only one in the neighborhood who liked it. They used to tell him, you could put 7-Up in it or use it to clean the pipes, because it tasted awful."

The gate is padlocked, so we can't enter Leo's garden, but it's clear that it's still intact—a bit overgrown and wild, but still beautiful in a raw, untamed



Leo Riforgiato with son Frank and with granddaughters Gloria and Joanne; Leo's grapevines survive in the overgrown garden

way. My mother explains that during World War II, the government asked Americans to grow "victory gardens" as a means of relieving pressure on the food supply.

"My grandfather never cooked," my mom says. "That was Rosaria's job. But he grew everything—tomatoes, zucchini, eggplant, green beans, apples, peaches, pears. A lot of what we ate came right from the backyard."

It's hard for us to tell what's growing in the garden, but Leo's grapes are a tangible link to our past, a sort of consolation prize for this bittersweet homecoming. Leo's grapes and a slice of my mother's childhood are still intact at 443 Prospect. But why has the place fallen into such disrepair?

According to the 2010 census, the City of Buffalo has a home vacancy rate of nearly sixteen percent, the ninth highest in the nation. The city lists more than 15,000 abandoned structures and has demolished an average of nearly 500 homes per year over the last decade, with the median price for each demolition at nearly \$17,000.

A public record search reveals that "the little old Italian man" the neighbor referred to is Sylvester Mesi,

seventy-nine, a longtime resident of the West Side. He bought the house for \$15,000 in 1969 from my great uncles, who inherited it after Leo died in 1963. As recently as 2011, the property was assessed at just \$20,000, but for some reason it shot up to \$50,000 in 2012. When I call Mesi, who lives right around the corner from the house on Prospect, he acts like he's been expecting my call.

"I remember Leo very well," he says in a thick Italian accent. "He was my grandpa's cousin."

Mesi came to Buffalo from Montemaggiore Belsito, Leo's village, in 1955. He worked at Bethlehem Steel for forty-five years before retiring. He owns "a few" rental properties and says that he and his wife go to the casino to play the slots every day. Mesi says that he bought Leo's old house as an investment property, and had no trouble renting it out, mostly to Puerto Rican tenants in the seventies and eighties.

"There weren't many Italians left in the neighborhood by the time I bought the place," he explains. "Italians are funny. As soon as somebody got a few bucks they'd buy a big house in the suburbs to show off. But we stayed here. Why should we leave?"

Mesi disputes the neighbor's claims that the place had been a crack house and was empty for nearly thirty years.

"It was a poor family living there—Puerto Ricans who were on welfare," he says. "Police came and were smashing windows and breaking down the door, but they didn't find no drugs. They were supposed to replace the windows, but they never did."

A search of the *Buffalo News* archives reveals that three persons, Jose and Jeanette Colon and Juan Mendez, were arrested at 443 Prospect and charged with second-degree criminal possession of a controlled substance and possession of drug packaging materials on March 23, 1994. Police found quantities of crack cocaine, pure cocaine, scales, packaging materials, a .25-caliber pistol, and \$3,300 in cash, but whether this was the incident the neighbor recalled is unclear.

Mesi claims that the home has been vacant for "only about ten years," but is vague on why he stopped renting the place, mentioning that his father had died and that he had "other priorities." He admits that the

place has fallen into disrepair— Mesi warned me that he wouldn't let me see the inside of the house because it was "terrible"—and says that it needs at least \$40,000 in repairs to make it habitable.

"I get calls from investors every day asking me to sell, but I'm not going to give it away to them," he says. "The neighborhood is going up and now people want to come back."

Mesi says that his mother had recently died at 101, and he had erred in selling her house in the neighborhood for only \$70,000. A developer made some repairs and flipped the place, getting \$169,000 just months later. "I'm

not going to make the same mistake twice," he adds.

Mesi also claims that he plans to fix the place up and rent it again, though he has no timetable and admits that the math is daunting. "I could probably get \$400 a month for each apartment, which is only \$1,600 a month total," he says. At that rate, it would take him many years to recoup the repair expenses. But when I return to the question of why he's had the property for all these years with no tenants, he starts talking about Leo's garden, and it sounded like he rather enjoys having this fertile little urban oasis all to himself.

"I go over to the house to get my tomatoes, my zucchini, my pears," he says. "The pears, they taste great. And I made some wine, too, back in 2007, but I haven't tasted it yet. I'm waiting for the right occasion."

After all these years, Leo's house is dead, but his victory garden is still very much alive.

Buffalo native Dave Seminara writes for the *New York Times*, *Outside*, AOL, and a variety of regional magazines.

Photos courtesy of Dave Seminara



Celebrate a New You in 2014



Hair & Spa Services

- Haircuts and Styling
- Color & Corrective Color
- Hair Extensions
- Facials
- Bridal Makeup
- Chemical Peels
- Hot Stone Massage
- Body Wraps & Scrubs
- Manicures
- Pedicures
- Waxing

5725 Main Street • Village of Williamsville • New York 14221
 Excuria is a Redken salon • Accepting all major credit cards



Appointments: 716.839.3106 excuriaspa.com