

# We Were a Village

By Nancy Gentile '53



Growing up in Grand Crossing – St Francis de Paula parish – in the 1940s and 1950s was a lot like living in the pages of *“It Takes a Village”* for my blue collar, immigrant Italian family life in the neighborhood was defined by two things: the factory whistle which blew at eight o’clock in the morning, twelve noon, one o’clock in the afternoon and five o’clock in the evening, and the Church bells which rang every morning to call the faithful to Mass. The neighborhood men who worked, worked in the factory for around forty dollars a week. The neighborhood women took their children and spent the first hour of every day in our beautiful little church, chanting a Latin Mass.

As it turns out, we didn’t have much, but we thought we had everything. In Grand Crossing in those days, we lived with our extended families. When my brother and I were born, we lived in the same apartment building with our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and tons of cousins. We had no money, but we had plenty to eat, in warm kitchens that smelled of coffee, lemons, and oregano. We had all the company we could want. And plenty to do –we sat together for hours, playing cards and board games, listening to the radio, telling stories and singing songs. On summer evenings we were outside, sitting on the stoops, socializing with the neighbors.

Our neighborhood was a safe place for children. We were looked after wherever we went--no restrictions were placed on adults—raising the neighborhood children to be responsible adults was their collective business. As my brother and I walked the three blocks to school at St. Francis, there were sentinels all along the way, greeting us cheerily, making sure we were okay, and stopping us from creating mischief. Neighborhood ladies, all of whom were friends of the family, had unspoken permission to look after us—and to keep us in line!

And when we got to school, there were the nuns—women devoted to teaching us to be the best human beings we could possibly become—tough, fair, compassionate. They were lavish with their time, attention and praise, and just as lavish with their discipline. We knew the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior—and learned this beyond the shadow of a doubt. They also seemed to know just what we needed and when we needed it.

One of my favorite stories is of a teacher in a religion class one day. I wish I could remember her name, but it's lost in the mists of time. I must have been in the first or second grade—that age when everything to do with God and faith is mystifying and exciting. We were talking about heaven. The nun was explaining the system to us. If we were good, we'd go straight to heaven, provided we'd been baptized. If we were bad, we'd go to the other place. And if we were venial—only guilty of misdemeanors, we'd end up in purgatory for a while, contemplating our sins. But, heaven, well that was the place of eternal happiness.

I raised my hand. The good nun called on me.

I asked, "Is there ice cream in heaven, Sister?"

She asked, without hesitation, "Could you be happy in heaven without ice cream, my dear?"

I answered, "I don't think so, Sister."

And she replied, "Then there will be ice cream in heaven for you!"

It's still my favorite description of heaven.

After school, we'd head straight for the Grand Crossing Park, conveniently located right across the street from the school and the Church. Ah, Wonderland! We played softball, or volleyball, or just played in the bushes, making up games like "fort" or "soldiers." Sure we made them up, but imagination was part of the fun of our childhood.

When the weather was warm, we could swim in the pool. And, all year long, there were activities and classes every afternoon and on weekends in the brick field house. I took tap dancing lessons, toe dancing lessons, acrobatics and ballet. Our grandmother lived in one of the frame houses bordering the park and we always knew she was watching our every move!

I can still remember the reverence I felt when entering St Francis Church. I realize now it was a small church, but then it seemed overpowering to me. The grand, silent, peaceful chamber that I remember is flooded with sunlight. It smells of incense and furniture oil. There are white flowers on the altar. Flames flicker within a thousand red glass chambers. Coming in the main entrance, passing the holy water font, I am facing the main altar, up there behind the communion rail.

There is a light there too. Off to the right, there is a chapel just off the side exit. In that chapel is a staircase leading down.

Once, my best friend and I were exploring the church as we often did on rainy days after school. We were about 10 years old. The church was always open then. It was so many things to the community: a place of worship, of sanctuary, of splendor, a place, also, of imagination and wonder. For a long time, we had been fascinated by that staircase in the chapel at the side of the church. On this rainy afternoon, we finally found the courage to descend it. In the dark cellar space beneath the chapel was a statuary storeroom. All the light in the small, crowded space came down the staircase with us. Towering over us, peering out of lifelike glass eyeballs, were several saints, the Blessed Virgin and, I swear, St Francis himself, praying with his eyes turned heavenward. We crept into the dark, dank space, looking up at the stone countenances above, fully expecting them to look down at us and begin to move.

We were almost beyond the pool of light from the stairwell when we heard a voice, “And what might ye be doing here?” We shrieked, grabbed one another and, trembling, turned to face the voice we were certain came from one of the statues. It was our Pastor, Father Trainor, coming to see who was in the basement. He patted us on the heads, led us back upstairs, spent a few moments admonishing us against venturing into private places, and sent us on our way home with a blessing.

When I go back to the old neighborhood now, as I do a couple times a year, just to look around, I am struck by how small our village was. Then, of course, it seemed huge and all encompassing. It was our universe. Those neighborhoods and the sort of extended family in which my brother and I were raised were changed by the prosperity that followed the Second World War. When the boys came home from the war, they married and started the migration to the suburbs in search of the American Dream: a little house on a sapling-lined street, with a carport (and a car!); a little lawn and, with the advent of television and air-conditioning, an insular life. A better life, they called it. I wonder.

Just recently, I brought my young niece back to 78<sup>th</sup> street to see the place where our apartment building once stood. It was demolished years ago. Now it’s a parking lot for the mail trucks for the post office across the street on Cottage Grove. Her favorite bedtime stories have always been the stories of the old days in Grand Crossing and she wanted to see where it had all happened. She made me stop the car so she could get out and stand on the sidewalk. “I want to stand on the same sidewalk where my family stood when they all lived here,” she said.

I wanted to walk with her on that sidewalk back to those old times.



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