

Pioneering Italian American Women Pharmacists and Lambda Kappa Sigma

A Special Sorority of Sisters in Service and Leadership

By Sal Martoche

They sure didn't look like pioneers, this group of bright and eager Italian-American young women who were mostly the daughters of Sicilian immigrants and mostly West Side Buffalo residents. They shared one very important characteristic: they wanted to be successful in life to help make better lives for themselves and their families, as had been instilled in them by their parents. And they wanted to help make the world a better place, each in her own way.

There were Angie Bongiovanni (Coniglio); JoAnn Giambelluca (Skaros); the Crimaldi sisters, Rose Mary (Madejski) and Margaret (Quinn); Rose Marie Mastantonio (George); Jean Manta (Silliman); and many

others, I am sure. They didn't have an easy time of it. After all, it was a man's world.

The University of Buffalo Pharmacy School was just beginning to lead the way in treating women as equals. All of these women were proud members of Lambda Kappa Sigma, a pharmacy sorority, and to this day, they still get together regularly.

JoAnn Giambelluca was the daughter of a pharmacist. Lawrence Giambelluca owned Larry's Pharmacy in the Dick Urban Plaza in Depew. JoAnn got her start in the business in her father's pharmacy. Unfortunately, her father died when she was still a young pharmacist, and together with her mother she



Angela Bongiovanni Coniglio
Miller Drugs, on Grant Street, 1960s



Rose Mary Crimaldi Madejski
University of Buffalo, Pharmacy School, 1959

ran the business for many years, learning to be a successful businesswoman in the process.

She also met her future husband, Nikolas Skaros, who along with his brothers owned a Greek restaurant in that same plaza. This pioneering young woman went on to fulfill all the promise she showed as class valedictorian at School 18. In her later career, she worked with the Brothers of Mercy and, finally, at Wende Correctional Facility, helping those who needed help the most.

While in high school, Rose Mary Crimaldi Madejski started at Harvey and Carey Drug Store on West Ferry and Grant Streets. She also worked at the Victoria Theater, selling tickets and popcorn to help finance the cost of school. Even though both she and her sister, like so many of these women, received scholarships, the scholarships didn't cover the entire cost. While Rose Mary was a freshman at UB Pharmacy School in 1955, her family physician, Dr. Pisa, ordered her tested for tuberculosis. When she tested positive, she was forced to spend six months, from December 1955 until May 1956, at Mt. Morris Sanitarium. You might think this deterred her or at least slowed her down in pursuit of her degree. But it did not. Upon her release from the facility at her insistence, she was healthy again.

Luckily for her, she also is very intelligent and blessed with a photographic memory (as is her sister Marge.) So, when she returned to school and Dean Daniel Murray wanted her to repeat the year she'd missed a big part of, she protested profusely and convinced him that while in the sanitarium she had read all the books and completed all the assignments and studies, thanks to the excellent notes sent to her regularly by her friend and classmate, Angie Bongiovanni.

Rose Mary and Marge discovered that Dean Emeritus Bertram Lemon, who was in charge of dispensing scholarship funds at the school and had already become a great friend not only to the Crimaldis

but to many others as well, liked spaghetti, so their mother Rose provided him a spaghetti dinner to celebrate her daughters' successes.

The sisters remember when they were high school students working at Harvey and Carey, they discovered a young pharmacist named Marilyn "Fritz" Robinson was making \$100 a week while their parents, both of whom worked long and hard outside the home, together were not making anywhere close to that. Rose Mary, laughing, said, "Not only did this inspire me, because I could see that I could make a lot more money as a pharmacist than as a clerk, but I also realized I could meet young men with futures." And that she did.

Rose Mary recalls one professor who taught physics, but not very well. She, along with an engineering student who was also taking the class, complained to the dean. And she incurred that professor's wrath. He threatened to give her a failing grade and he harassed her for her manner of dress. She recalls him saying her skirts were too tight, but the ever-resourceful young woman stood up to him and refused to be bullied. She also began sitting in on the same class being taught in another section by a different professor who taught the subject matter much better. She passed the course!

One of her classmates was Jan Madejski, whom she married in 1959. Together, and with the help of their parents, they purchased a pharmacy from Herman Stall at the corner of Grant Street and Forest Avenue in Buffalo. They were pioneers in providing nursing homes with customized prescriptions for the residents. Rose Mary went on to consult with a number of nursing homes to help formulate and implement best practices for providing prescriptions.

Margaret Crimaldi (Quinn) was a pharmacist in Buffalo for over 10 years. Marge, as she is called, eventually migrated to California, where she met her attorney husband, Donald, and took a position as

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JoAnn Giambelluca Skaros
Larry's Pharmacy, Depew NY, 1960s

chief pharmacist for Kaiser Permanente, a large health-care provider.

Because of severe back problems exacerbated by standing 10 or 12 hours a day as a pharmacist, she began taking law classes at the University of the Pacific Law School. Her husband had noticed her natural talent for the law when they discussed cases, and he encouraged her to make the switch. Unfortunately, Donald was killed in a private plane crash. By this time, the couple had a young daughter, Marilyn, and Marge decided it was best to return to Buffalo. Once back, she enrolled in the UB School of Law and went on to enjoy an outstanding second career as an attorney and administrative law judge.

If any of you know Angie Bongiovanni Coniglio, you know she is a wisp of a woman — 4'10" and barely 100 pounds, yet she is a force of nature. When working at one pharmacy, she stood on an

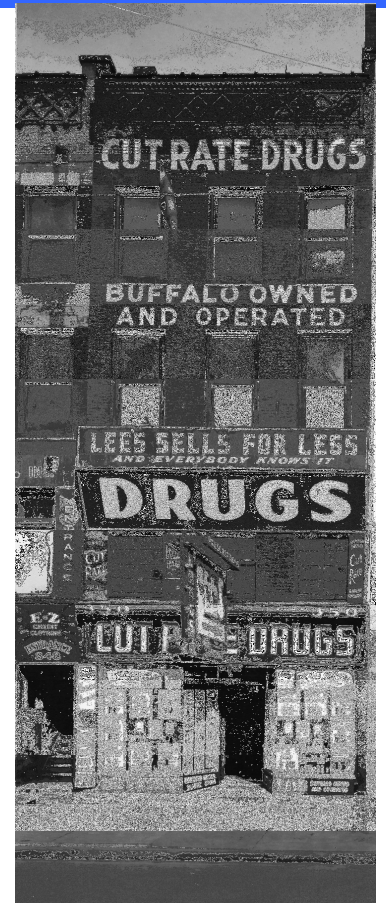
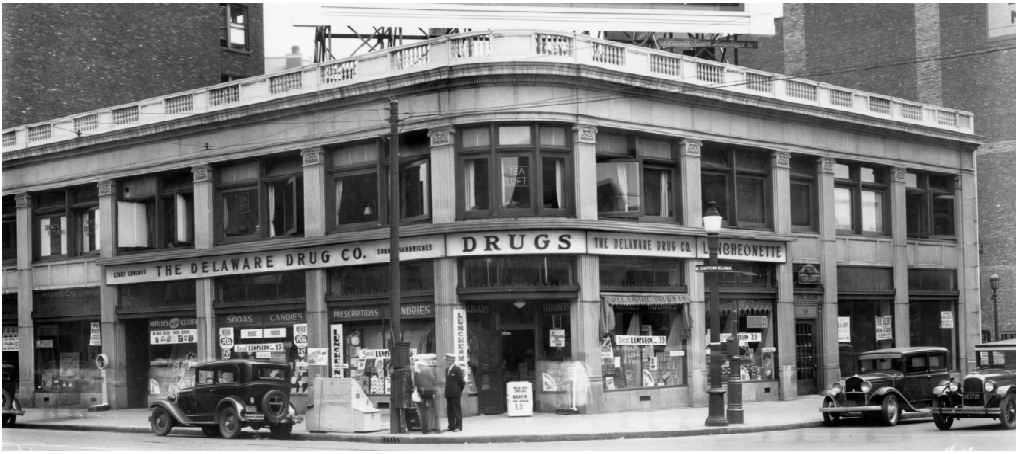
overturned wooden Coca Cola box to see over the counter. Her love of her work as a pharmacist is evident as she relates a lifetime of experience and accomplishment.

She loves telling the story about her earliest assignment at the Teck Pharmacy while still a student at Lafayette High School. The store had a busy lunch business because of the Trico and Courier Express employees in the neighborhood, and Angie was promoted to short-order cook where, because of her petite size, the Obletz family who owned the pharmacy lovingly teased her as being the "perfect" short-order cook. One regular customer was named Angelo Coniglio; she always gave him an extra scoop of ice cream and an extra dab of whipped cream, which he now claims helped win him over.

She tells a wonderful story about working at Miller Drugs on Grant Street shortly after obtaining her pharmacist license. Angie was dressed in her pharmacist's smock when a customer came in, greeted her and asked to speak to a pharmacist. She looked straight at him and responded, "What do you think I am? A barber?"

This wasn't the only time she encountered comical situations, many of which occurred when men came in for those "special" male products that were kept behind the counter. They often turned crimson, coughing and stumbling, or simply left the pharmacy counter, hoping to return when a male pharmacist was on duty. Though she is tiny, she has always demonstrated spunk and determination; as a young girl she was the vice president of her class at School 18. Yes, this was the same class of which JoAnn Giambelluca was the valedictorian. This determination has been a defining characteristic throughout her life.

Every single one of these women made a difference and are still making a difference today by their devotion to their communities, their professions and their families.



Pharmacies of the past.

Left:

Delaware Drugs, Delaware Avenue & West Chippewa Street.

Strozzi Pharmacy, Busti & Wilkeson Streets

Whelan Drug Co., Main & Genesee Streets.

Right: Lees's Cut Rate Drugs, 350 Main St.