

By Salmar Toche with Matthew Castronova

Russell Castronova is one of the most blest and lucky people on the face of the earth. Not only does he have a beautiful wife and four loving sons and, although he never hit the lottery or a big jackpot at a casino, he has amassed a fortune of another kind. Russell had the unique and wonderful experience of working alongside his father in their barbering business every single work day for over 50 years.

Russ's father, Tony, came to Buffalo on the ship Providence, arriving after a long 13 day ride in steerage class. Tony was seasick for 11 of those 13 days. He was 17 years old when he stepped off the Providence in 1929 at Ellis Island, alone and scared. He took a train to Buffalo where he met his father on a Thursday afternoon, still wobbly and nervous from his grueling trans-Atlantic travel. The two embraced and then Tony was told by his father that he would begin his United States working experience on Monday as a barber.

At Pete DiLiberto's shop on Jersey between 7th and Niagara Streets he began to practice barbering, the trade he had learned in his hometown of Bagheria, Sicily. He was known as a "fast scissor guy" who loved to recount his experiences with notable politicians and clergymen through the years. One of his favorite stories was when Jack Benny came into his shop at Main and Fillmore and his son Russell cut his hair. Despite Benny's image of being a cheapskate, he left a \$20.00 tip, big money in those days.

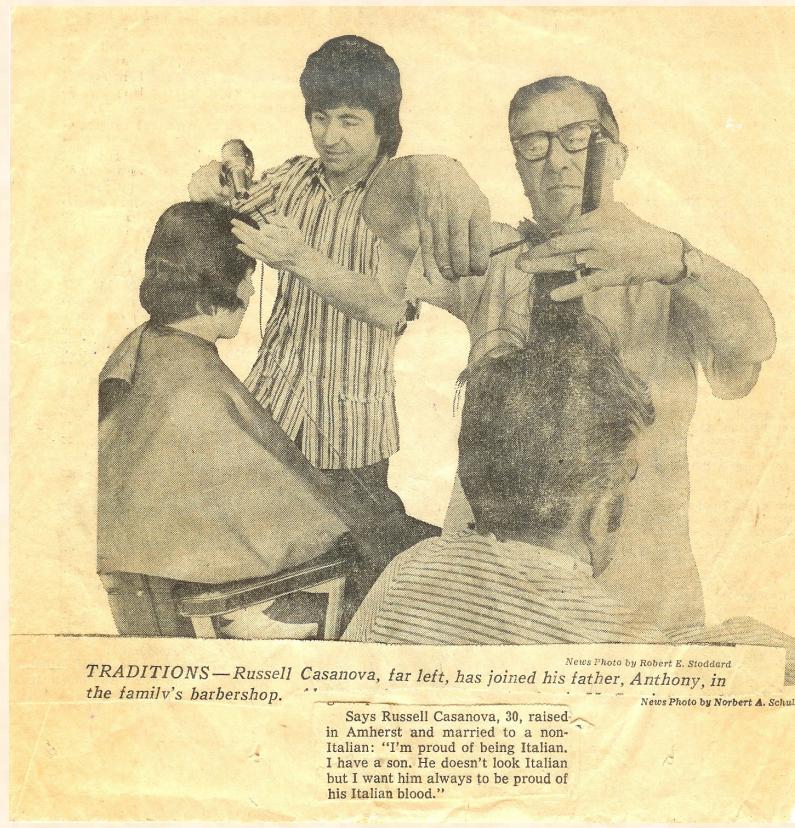
I remember a fellow with hair down to his waist and an unkempt beard who entered Tony's shop and told him to "cut it all off." He reminded me of Robert Redford's character, Jeremiah Johnson, in

the movie of the same name. Without blinking an eye, Tony took off the entire mane and beard and transformed this guy into a completely different person. I think the patrons applauded.

In 1987, the team of Tony and Russell moved from Main and Fillmore to Harlem Road near Main Street in Snyder, N.Y. At that time, Tony expressed a desire to soon retire. But he stayed and cut hair along side his son until he was 90 plus years old in 2002. Tony passed away at age 93, two and a half years after his retirement. It is ironic that he married Agnes D'Alba, who he met in the Hooks, a haven for Italian immigrants in Buffalo at the turn of the 20th century. A further irony: they were both born near each other in Bagheria, Sicily.

Russell says that in all the years he and his father were together neither ever left the shop mad at the other. He points to what a great role model Tony was for him, a hardworking family man who always stayed close to home. For most of the years they were together and for all of the years before that, Tony never took a vacation until Russell insisted that he stay away at least one week a year. Even then he would drive over to the shop every day to say hello and read the paper.

Once a very disheveled and slightly slow fellow who reminded Russ of Lennie, a character in *Of Mice and Men*, came into the shop at Main and Fillmore and asked Tony if he would lend him the bus fare to get back home in Lockport. Russell says his father was no soft touch but felt real compassion for this young man and gave him \$10.00. Russ was sure they would



Above picture, quote and misspelled last name appeared in the Buffalo News

never see him again and told his father so. Tony answered, "I don't know, he might, and if not, I know I did the right thing." About a week later the young man came back with his father who repaid Tony and gave him his heartfelt thanks for helping his son get back home.

Russell has two siblings: a sister Frances, and a brother, Jaccino (Jack), who was named after Tony's father and who was also a barber for many years. Russ fondly remembers the days when the extended family would gather early for Sunday dinner and Tony would cut hair on the back porch at 292 Jersey Street and never charging family members a penny. After he was finished and everybody left, Tony would take Russell by the hand and they would go under the Peace Bridge to Ted's Hot Dog Stand where Tony would buy his youngest child two hot dogs and a milk shake. This went on for a number of years.

The two became great Yankee fans, traveling to Cleveland and Toronto when the "Bronx Bombers" played there. Russell says his dad was always extraordinary. The shop was always immaculate. He says his father taught himself to read and write and was a big patriot who loved this country as much as anyone he ever knew. In fact, he would not go back to Italy to visit his hometown even once. He did not like to fly and he remembered with dread his time on the Providence. He would much rather talk politics and law with customers, some of whom were lawyers and judges. During World War II, Tony proudly supported the war effort by working nights after a long day of barbering.

Russell's wife, Kathleen, had both a grandfather, Peter Schmidt, and a great uncle, Ed Winter, who were also



**Agnes and Tony Castronova**

barbers. So it is not entirely a surprise that Russell's youngest son Bryan is apprenticing with his father and it looks like they'll have a chance to extend the family tradition, working alongside one another, although I doubt it will be for 50 years. If Russ had his way, his three older children, Anthony, Derrick and Matthew, might also be cutting hair.

These are some of the reasons I think that even the most objective observation will support the notion that Russell Castronova is one of the most blessed and luckiest people in the world. Don't you agree?

**Bryan and Russell Castronova, father and son at work cutting hair.**

