GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

EAST VILLAGE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

ROBERT ZERILLI

By Liza Zapol

New York, NY

March 13, 2014

Oral History Interview with Robert Zerilli, March 13, 2014

Narrator	Robert Zerilli
Birthdate	11/30/62
Birthplace	New York, NY
Narrator Age	51
Interviewer	Liza Zapol
Place of Interview	Veniero's Bakery 342 E 11th St, New York, NY 10003
Date of Interview	03/13/2014
Duration of Interview	1 hour, 35 minutes
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y
Photograph	Y
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Order in Oral Histories	3 (East Village Project)

Background/ Notes:

(Any events that happened before/ during the interview, that affect the interview or interview sound)

Interview took place in Zerilli's office on the 3rd floor of the Veniero's building. There were many computers and monitors in the space, which create a background buzz. His sister and his bookkeeper passed through the office 3-4 times. Recording was not stopped.

Robert Zerilli at Veniero's, March 13, 2014. Photograph by Liza Zapol.

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Robert Zerilli

"So, imagine a young little kid who's hyper, and I'm on an espresso bean, nibbling, plus the sweets. I think I flew until I just burned out. Yeah, it was fun. Those are good memories. Just the guys, they'd say, "Frankie, that's your son? He's a good-looking boy!" And this and that. I'd hear them talking in Italian, English, Italian, English, Italian. There was a lot of Italian in the neighborhood when I was a kid, just coming in. I heard the sounds of them next door to Veniero's, [in] those rental store[s] where I'm in now. We still rent. Those were two butcher shops, and in the windows you'd see goat feet, the brains, the head of a goat, with the eyes and everything. It was really—the flies on top of it and everything—I used to look at it like, this is weird! I didn't know what to make of it. I was just like, that's a butcher shop. That's the butcher, the baker. I'd run up the stairs, there was a door, and I used to run to the roof, because in New Jersey, remember, little house, two story, that's it. When you're a kid, you want to see, so I'd go up to the top, fifth floor and the roof, go right to the edge, look down. I was a kid, six years or seven years old. My parents should know what I'm doing. Six, and I'm at the edge of the roof, looking at the neighborhood and hearing that sound, like, hey! This and this! And oh!

It wasn't like today. Everyone just walks, and they're doing it, but it was the sound of merchants, people. The city was just a little bit different, you know? But sirens, you can imagine, there was always something going on. And I loved it. I loved that feeling of looking over my little town.
(Zerilli p.17-18)

"People want to go to you and not the big corporate [businesses], and you just have to stay there.

So what do we look like one day? We're in the East Village. Thank god the preservation [and] everybody is part of this [to] keep things like the low buildings, because what it'll look like? God forbid, it'll be like uptown, where you see that one brick building and the big skyscrapers around it on both sides. Like, that's what would happen. But I like that. You see that. They don't. They hold out. They don't let go."
Zerilli p.32 [0:15:05.4]

Summary of Oral History Interview with Robert Zerilli

Veniero's family business

- History
    - Antonio Veniero (Robert's grandfather) arrived in NY in 1885
        - Seven children: three boys, four girls
    - 1894 Antonio bought the building & established business
    - Started Antonio Veniero Confectioner, Confections
        - Homemade candy
        - Business transitioned from candy to a bakery
    - Renamed business to Veniero's Pasticceri
    - Founding family lived at 340 E. 11th St.
        - Antonio's son Peter born at 340 E. 11th St.
    - Store interior
        - Big copper kettles with candy at the front of store
        - No refrigeration, used ice
    - Coffee
        - Special coffee recipe
        - Roasted six different beans in the backyard
    - Deliveries
        - Pull wagon for customer deliveries
        - Incoming store deliveries
            - Marble slab in basement / work more physical
    - Neighborhood
        - Italian / Sicilian neighborhood
            - Italian pushcart ladies
        - Mafia
            - Black Hand / protection [00:15:00]
        - Neighbors brought in their beer cans to Veniero's to fill up with milk
        - Antonio - pool hall (social club) & saloon adjacent to Veniero's store
            - Five cent beer for a free lunch
        - On the block: butcher shop, Salvation Army, pharmacy, P.S. 19 (school)
        - 1970s, punk rock scene
        - 1970s - 1980s, beatniks & artists, neighborhood starts to change
    - Antonio died in 1931
        - Peter Veniero takes over business
            - Gets ConEd to convert buildings from DC power to AC power
        - Mike Veniero & wife Matea (Honey) take over business
        - Frank Zerilli (Robert's dad) takes over the business in 1970
            - Good deal on buying business & building [00:50:00]
                - Veniero's was going bankrupt at time of purchase
            - Wholesale dealer
    - 1950s - 1960s business declines, except on holidays
        - Stella Dora wanted to buy their recipe
        - NBC, National Biscuit Company, wanted to buy anise toast in large quantities
    - 1980s

        - Cash business
        - Wedding cake business
    - 1990 start credit card service for customers
    - 1994, 100th anniversary
        - Renovations - new cafe in the back of store
    - 2001
        - Liquor license approval
        - Bakeshop
    - Bakers & workers
        - Originally Italian bakers & workers
            - Henry Campaneri, baker, (1920s/30s), won awards for Veniero's
                - Gold medal from Rome
                - New York World's Fair [0:25:33.1]
        - 1980s North African workers
        - Early 1990s Latin American workers
            - Generational, children of these workers now working at store
        - Still some Italian workers today
- Notable locations
    - De Robertis [Pasticceria & Caffe] was a wholesale customer turned rival
    - Ferrara [Bakery & Cafe], est. 1892
    - [Resto] Leon
- Notable clients
    - Joey Ramone walked out with his own cake
    - Hillary Clinton's 50th birthday cake
    - Mario Cuomo
- Current day
    - Corporation name is A. Veniero, Inc.
    - Open 365 days a year
    - Building
        - Store at 342 E. 11th St.
        - Family owns business and building
        - Tenants
    - Rent basement next door for business
        - $5,000/month current rent vs. $68/month in past years
        - Coal furnace replaced
    - Neighborhood
        - College campuses - NYU, Cooper Union, The New School
        - Hospitals, businesses/corporations
        - East Village preservation
        - Large corporations buying buildings
    - Mayors & neighborhood change
    - Pastries
    - Media
        - TV show baking appearances
        - Media influences in family
            - Grandfather & great-grandfather in advertising

Robert Zerilli

- Early Years
    - Born Saint Clare's Hospital in West Side, N.J.
    - 3 older sisters
    - Father - Frank Zerilli
        - Born in 1918
        - Master Sergeant in W.W. II
        - Stays in NYC & marries in late 40s after the war
        - Work ethic
        - Move to New Jersey in 1960 with family
    - 18 years old, Robert moves to NYC
        - Works at Veniero's & lives in apt. above store
    - Artists in family
        - Bruce Springsteen
    - Veniero's family history / ancestry
        - Vinier (family name of French origin), family migrated to Venice
    - Family life
        - Marries Jamie Lederer, Veniero's customer, at the age of 22 years old
            - From an East Village "hippie" family
                - Daughter went to school in neighborhood at Third Street Music School [Settlement]
        - Family leaves the Village
            - Bayside, Queens
            - Flushing
            - Rockland County, current home for last seventeen years
    - Robert's mother [00:01:35]
        - Former president of Veniero's company
        - Passed away in 2009, 87 years old
            - Company then divided equally amongst Robert and three sisters
- Current Day
    - Robert Zerilli is 51 years old
    - 30 years of work at Veniero's

General Interview Notes:

This is a transcription of an oral history that was conducted by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

GVSHP began the Greenwich Village Oral History Project in 2013. The GVSHP Greenwich Village Oral History Project includes a collection of interviews with individuals involved in local businesses, culture, and preservation, to gather stories, observations, and insights concerning the changing Village. These interviews elucidate the personal resonances of the neighborhood within the biographies of key individuals, and illustrate the evolving neighborhood.

Oral history is a method of collecting memories and histories through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of adding to the historical record.

The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. Oral history is not intended to present the absolute or complete narrative of events. Oral history is a spoken account by the interviewee in response to questioning. Whenever possible, we encourage readers to listen to the audio recordings to get a greater sense of this meaningful exchange.

The views expressed by the contributor(s) are solely those of the contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or endorsement of our organization.

Zapol: This is the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation East Village Project. It's March 13, 2014. I'm Liza Zapol, and I'm here at Veniero's at 342 East 11th Street, and can I ask you to introduce yourself, please?

Zerilli: Sure, hi, I'm Robert Zerilli, and I've been working here at the bakery, my family business, for the last thirty-three years. Basically, I'm fifty-one years old, and I enjoy what I do. I love it.

Zapol: Can you describe Veniero's for me? And then we'll, we'll get into some of the history of Veniero's itself.

Zerilli: Sure. We have a sign outside that says, 'Veniero's Pasticceria,' which is meaning 'cake shop' in Italian, or 'bakery,' pastries. Really, it wasn't called that. When Antonio [Veniero] came here in 1885, he started out working in a candy factory downtown. After three years, I think he became manager, and he must have saved up his money, but by 1894 he bought this building. He originally was making homemade candy, so it was called Antonio Veniero Confections. It was not Antonio Pasticceria. In fact, our corporation name is A. Veniero, Inc. That was the name—confections. I don't know how many years it took, but he used to get the word out and bring bakers from Italy. They already had their cred, they knew what they were doing, and whenever they said, "You go to New York, you go to Veniero's—Antonio Veniero. Go see Antonio Veniero. You'll get a job."

It slowly grew, and eventually, instead of making candies, it was more like cakes and pastries. It was a big bakery, so he built it into that really high quality stuff. It wasn't cheap. Let's say almonds. He says, "You have to get the Valencia almonds, not the California, because the Valencia are the sweet ones.' And he knew. California ones are bitter, and the Valencia are thinner, not as round or something. There was a whole process of buying. He said he bought his supplies on Sixth Avenue and 18th Street. There was a wholesale supplier to get more string and twine, [and] boxes from over there. And I remember the place because my dad—it was still a box place that was right in that location, in fact, as I'm talking to you now. But it's out of business now, as you can imagine. That area, Sixth Avenue, they sold out. But it was boxes on the sidewalk, and my dad did it. I guess he just did because his family just kept going there. That was only up until my dad died in [19]94.

So imagine that. He used to go there, let's say in the Eighties, and I remember that. It's like the box place, Yavakoswky [phonetic] [00:03:05], next to Katz's Deli. [There was a] box place right there, and then the big buildings went up. Gone. They went to Brooklyn, or wherever. It's kind of cool how I saw that, like the Flower District on the streets, the Garment District. People were out there in the day, doing their peddling, and then it just vanished. It's sad.

Zapol: Right. There are some things that change, and as we said before, some things stay the same.

Zerilli: But the market still goes on. There are always the markets, like the market downtown, or fruit market. Now, it's moved. It just moves, I guess, and it changes.

Zapol: So you were saying that the bakers would come from Italy. Where in Italy was Antonio from? What's the family lineage, even, going further back?

Zerilli: Okay, further back—Vinier. It was V-I-N-I-E-R, it was French. So the real name is from France, and they migrated to Venice in the 1300s or 1400s. There were two doges that ruled, and it was Antonio Venier and Francesco Veniero. They were the two rulers. The doge, you had to be rough, man. They were tough. There were battles going on. They ruled. And if you go in a doge palace, there are two busts, and they're there. I haven't been there yet, but know they're there. And they ruled back then.

There is other history I have, but they're not the Venieros—but Venieros and Zerillis are intertwined. They went down to Naples area, and in the period from 1440s, maybe the 1700s, was it—I'm sorry, go ahead.

Zapol: No, just tell me the relationship between your family name and— **[00:05:02]**

Zerilli: I know Antonio's wife, Pasqualina, had a sister, Anna Merola [phonetic] [00:05:10]. So Pasqualina Merola [phonetic] [00:05:11] before she got married to Veniero. That was her maiden name, Merola. That was my grandmother, Anna Merola. So they were sisters. And that's the connection there.

Now, going back and back, there's just so many. I don't even know the names of them all, but there was somewhere back in the history, a poet. There were bankers. There were a lot of artists. It was very artsy.

You want to hear a funny story, bringing it to Antonio Veniero and the neighborhood? My dad was born on Thompson Street. So at 218 or 220 Thompson Street, Antonio Veniero, as a wedding present, gave my grandmother, Andrea [phonetic] [00:06:01], Anna, a store as a wedding present. He made an annex. He had a building, so he made a storefront. And he called it an annex, and that's where they wanted to sell pastries, extra pastries. That was right by Washington Square Park. It must have been the spot. A lot of Italians on that block and between Bleecker and 3rd [Street].

Remember, my dad was born 1918, so I'm presuming this had to have been in that period. And he was a really good violinist. He was classically trained. He was trained by teachers in Italy, and he loved the music, violin. This guy could have been a conductor, my mother said. Really talented. He wasn't a businessman, but he just figured, let me give them this opportunity, because the family, that's what they did. They helped cousins. You had to get in this country. You had to know people.

So they had the pastries. They must have heard the music playing, and people'd come in. And he'd tell the customers, "Stop! Wait! Not until I finish the song!" and he kept playing. He wouldn't finish, because he loved it so much, and nobody bought any pastries. Eventually, they had to close up. [laughs] He went back, and he wound up going to Mamaroneck [New York]. [laughs] That's all I was told. I don't know anything more after that.

Then his mother died, my grandmother. My dad was just seventeen. He was young, and then his father says, "What do you want to do?" I think he enlisted in the Army in World War II, my dad. His name was Frank Zerilli [phonetic] [00:07:38]. Then he had a choice when he got out of the Army. Do you want to go back to Italy, with his father, or you want to make a career in the Army, or you want to work with your cousin, Mike Veniero [phonetic] [00:07:54]? So he decided to work and stay in New York. I'm sure New York was a great place after the war, you know.

So my mother, they didn't meet until after the war, I guess. They got married, 1947 or [19]48.[1] By then, new life. It was different.

That was my lineage, and the Venieros—let me get this straight now. There were seven children from Antonio, three boys, four girls. If I had to rap their names off—it's not as important, but I could tell you that there was Peter [phonetic] [00:08:28], Alfredo, who they

[1] RZ notes on 5/6/15 that his parents were married in 1947.

called Fredo [phonetic] [00:08:30]—sounds like *The Godfather*—and there was Michael [phonetic] [00:08:34]. They were all working in the business, I was told by Peter Veniero. I have two hours of tape of him talking. Actually I heard this from one of the daughters. Her name was Julia, 'Juju' [phonetic] [00:08:51]. My dad used to call her 'Juju.' She lived in Brooklyn.

Anyway, everyone had to do the schoolroom. After homework, the boys used to come in the store and help out. They had to do their homework first, their studies. I guess Antonio died by 1931, so Peter took the business over. But he didn't want to be in the business, so Mike really took over after that. Mike was older. Mike was born in 1901, Peter in 1905, Alfredo maybe in between there. Fredo, I think he died of syphilis. He was a playboy, and just wanted to play around, and didn't want to work the business, either. And [wipes hands, whistles] gone. Died. So that's part of some history of the family.

There's other members, too. There were cousins. Frank Catanella [phonetic] [00:09:47], who was my dad's cousin, worked in the business as a manager. My dad wound up being a manager. Mike Veniero, he married this woman named Matea, We nicknamed her Honey, and Honey's still alive. She's down in Hollywood, Florida. She's about eighty-two and loves Veniero's, loves anything about the history. But, remember now, Mike was born 1901. He would have been 113 years old. Honey's eighty-two. It was a little bit of an age difference. **[00:10:20]**

Zapol: With all those seven children, or those—

Zerilli: No. Matea is the second, that's the daughter of Antonio.[2]

Zapol: I see.

Zerilli: Pasqualina was the one with seven children, and then Mike Veniero, no children, at all, and that's what creates this little bit of a thing here. Nobody had kids. Peter had a son, but he never got in the business. He got in trouble. I think he's somewhere out there. Probably sixty-nine years old. We don't see him—Bruce [phonetic] [00:10:42]. And then Fredo, no kids. There are no kids. So my dad [had] three sisters and myself. He bought this business off of the Venieros in 1970. He had to get two partners, two head bakers and make them partners. Mike was out of the picture by then.

[2] RZ notes on 5/6/15 that Matea was Mike Veniero's wife, not the daughter of Antonio.

He had hotels in South Beach in Florida. He made his money. Big hotels, and you can imagine, and so they're living big, and he dies of cancer in 1977. So he's only seventy-six years old. Of all things, he used to smoke a cigar. Mouth cancer, throat cancer, so that did him. My dad got the business, and then he really put it on the map, because he got to see the real changes. The Seventies, cappuccino, cha-cha, café au lait—

Zapol: So your dad had this choice—

Zerilli: Italy, go make a career in the Army, or Veniero's. And he stayed and worked it out. He actually had other jobs, though. He was working as a cab driver. He worked making candy. He wanted to do, almost like favors. He was going to go partners with someone else, not in Veniero's. Outside—try another business. Because it wasn't like Veniero's was doing big business. Remember, the Fifties, Sixties, business started to go down. It was like this neighborhood went from—and don't get me wrong, Veniero's always did, the holidays, big business.

I asked Peter. I had an interview, and I said, "Peter, what business did you take? How much money did you take in a year?" "Well, we took in"—he's talking about the Twenties, Thirties—"$100,000 a year." That's huge money back then! And then he'd say, "Christmas, you know, an average week, we'd do $1,000, $2,000 a week or something." That's big money! Not like today numbers, but remember, everything was nickels and dimes. That's volume. He says, "We used to sell biscuits, 2,000—" 1,000, 2,000 pounds a week, they'd make, and sell. That's a lot of biscuits! And they'd ship all over the country, he said everywhere. Stella D'oro wanted our recipe. They came to us. What happened was Nabisco Company came to us—NBC, National Biscuit Company. That's Nabisco. He goes to his father, Antonio, and he said, "Can you sell us 1,000 pounds of anise toast a week?" Or I think it was a day. He says, "I can't do that." He says, "You'll put me out of business!" Meaning it was just too much for the handmade product and stuff. It's great stories.

Zapol: What other stories did he tell you from, about the Twenties and Thirties?

Zerilli: Oh, this is good. I'll tell you the good ones. The best one was about the electric, the AC [alternating current], you know. One time we only had DC [direct current] in the building, and he actually went to ConEd [ConEdison of New York], Peter Veniero, and he says, "We want to get

some DC. I need to get some steam, we need steam," meaning to [unclear] [00:13:40] get machines, probably to get your business or whatever you want to do. So he goes to ConEd, and they go, "No, no, not unless you get a signature petition by twenty shopkeepers are we going to come in." Because it was all gas in these buildings. And so he went to them, and Antonio got all the signatures. They came in, and they brought the electric, from 14th Street to Houston [Street], down from Second Avenue. He was a very instrumental player in the neighborhood.

Another story was how the Black Hand [Mano Nera Gang]—that was the best one. The Black Hand, you know, they used to firebomb and do weird things. What was his name, Strun—No, I have his name somewhere in the back of my head, but he had a limp, he had one leg shorter than the other, and he walked with one of those canes, you know, the stick.[3] Probably was just like you see curved under the arm, but a stick. He was the guy everyone feared, too, but Antonio was friendly with this guy. He made *paisan.* Basically, Antonio Veniero was a middleman between the Mafia bad guys and this other guy, who was in between. So, as long as Antonio was with this guy, he was safe. And nobody firebombed. We were safe. **[00:15:08]**

And back then, people stole from you. Even the waiters. One story was, he actually goes to this guy and he goes, "Let me tell you something: when I'm not here, can I make you manager when I'm gone?" And he did it, and after that, nobody stole, because everybody feared this guy. I heard stories, like they planned on where they were going to firebomb, who was going to get this, you're getting it, and they would extort $500—

Zapol: The Mafia, the Black—

Zerilli: Yeah, the Black Hand—$5[00] from these people. That's a lot of money. Again, it's like $10,000 today, or something. So that's what was going on, I guess, and that was another good story. Somehow he circumnavigated with these crazy, you know–

There was other stories about how the milk people would bring their beer cans, and we'd fill the milk for them for like 5¢. He actually was doing business with the neighborhood, too. Quart of milk, was 5—I forget which one the price was. Maybe, no, a penny for the fill—a few pennies just to get your beer thing, and 5¢ for a quart.

Another great story: across the street, there was a Salvation Army. I think that's where the mosque is now, on First [Avenue] and 11th [Street]. He said it was next to the pharmacy.

[3] RZ notes on 5/6/15 that his name was "Shanks".

There was an old pharmacy, Pelecrano, Pelegrino [phonetic] [00:16:29]? I forget the guy's name, but I remember the pharmacy. It could have been a different pharmacy, but so Antonio had the pool hall, right next to the main store. It was this pool hall when he first started. Across the street he had a saloon, and they had beer. If you bought a beer—a nickel beer, 5¢—you got a free lunch. And the one who made the lunch was Peter, who was the son of Antonio. He remembered. His aunt was the cook.[4] Eventually, that went out of business. I don't know what did its demise, but something happened.

But it was great, great stories, because I just think to myself, my god, this is all old history of this neighborhood. De Robertis [Patisseria] across the street, he got in a fight with us. He was buying wholesale from us, and he got in a fight with Antonio. He took off, he went and had his own baker. He started out with one baker, and then maybe two during the holiday. He's still a smaller bakery than us, but it's not doing the volume of Veniero's. But there is a story there, again—neighborhood squabbling, fighting, people with pushcarts. We used to deliver. We didn't have a pushcart, we used to have a wagon. We would deliver in the neighborhood like that, and stuff, to get supplies, or whatever. The wagon was used to bring it to that annex—the pastries, for instance, to go back and forth. There were no cars back then. You can only imagine the smell in the air, all the horses. They used to deliver down in with a big thing down in the basement. They used to have a truck. We have a marble slab in the basement. It must weigh a half a ton, and he remembers that when they would deliver down there, the truck was almost on its side. It was heavier than the truck, holding it as an anchor. They had to have pulleys to get the thing down.

But there was so much physical work back then. The ingredients weren't brought in by suppliers. If you had to make chocolate drops, or you had to make icing, the fondant, which is icing, you had to get all the ingredients from scratch. You had to make it. You just didn't get it in a pail, like we have today. Very convenient, chocolate drops, they're made. You had to do it from scratch. The outside of the rind of the fruit, they used that to candy it, and they put it on top of a cake. So Antonio used to the watermelon rind. He used to get the rind. He wanted the rind of the outside of the watermelon, but he used to give away the inside for free to the people in the street. Great, right?

[4] RZ notes on 5/6/15 that "Peter's aunt made the lunch."

Zapol: [laughs] Make some friends that way.

Zerilli: Make a lot of friends, right? He was a good businessman.

Zapol: Who were the people on the street, then? Who were the people in the neighborhood?

Zerilli: Well, it was all Italian in the neighborhood, obviously. A lot of Sicilians. It was a lot of Sicilians in this neighborhood. Even though he was Naples. Oh, there was another great story, of the parrot. I have it cut out somewhere.

This woman, who had a parrot, it flew out, and she never knew what happened. So a peddler was selling a parrot on the street, and Antonio bought this parrot. I think it was $500 he paid? I don't know how old he was now, a little older. So, apparently the woman was walking, and she hears the bird, and she's like, "That's my bird!' And she goes to Antonio, and they're like, "Pucele," [phonetic] [00:20:07]—I think that was the name of the bird, or something—"that's my bird." And he goes, "You can't prove, that's not yours, how do you know?" "He only knows because he sips coffee out of my cup." **[00:20:17]**

So they had to go to Essex Market down here, Essex Street, to court, and the judge had to rule on this. Apparently, it made the newspapers. It's actually in there in the archives, "Woman Claims Parrot." They never quite decided. I don't know how it went, so it had to go to a different court. Apparently, they had to just do something else. But Antonio Veniero got sucked into something. [laughs] He wanted to get this parrot, and this woman got involved. Like my brother-in-law said: "Can you picture this Irish sweaty-faced judge listening to these two Italian people screaming, yelling back and forth?" [laughs] It just must have been a scene, with the parrot. I just love it.

Zapol: Of course, he gave up. You know, what do you say?

Zerilli: Yeah, [laughs] what do you say? Just great neighborhood squabbling.

Zapol: What other stories do you have about the founding family? Where did they live? Did they live on Thompson Street?

Zerilli: Oh, sure. No, actually Peter was born next door, so they must have been living right next door at 340 East 11th [Street]; we're 342. Then they moved around the corner, to, I forget the address, 168 or something? It was right above the supermarket on First Avenue. I think I see,

Michael Veniero, on his passport or something, he lived on St. Mark's Place, also. He also lived down by Fifth Avenue when he got really older, at the end, near Fifth Avenue, 8th Street. And other places, maybe on the corner of Second Avenue and 11th Street. There's a big building there by the opposite end, so those are different locals that were close besides the Hollywood, Florida. And the Catskills, they might've had a home upstate, because at the end, I saw a picture we have of him on a porch in the Catskills as his last days—Antonio. It might have been a summer cottage home up there.

I don't think about a home in Italy, but he did go back. But once they were here, they were here. They always brought everybody. The trick was to get everybody over, but I don't know.

Zapol: Do you know what inspired him to come here?

Zerilli: I don't know.

Zapol: To America in the first place?

Zerilli: No idea. I could only speculate. Money. Big dreams, and again, remember, the candy. Where the sweetness, did it start in Italy and then come here? I don't know too much about it. Well, yeah, the restaurant. Remember, Zerilli's, but that's Zerilli. Not Veniero. We're the cousins. I don't know the Venieros. Remember the ship? There is a submarine that sunk off the coast, called the *Sebastiano Veniero*, and they named these ships after Veniero. Remember, the doges of Venice. Whenever a ship sank, they had to replace it with another Veniero ship. They were naval, too. There was something to do with Veniero's, very powerful. The coffee roaster, remember, I mentioned about the coffee— Oh, that was the other thing I was going to say.

My grandfather was an artist. My great-grandfather was an artist. He was a sketch artist. I hold this here, but he was one of the artists commissioned to do Nipper the dog, like RCA [Radio Corporation of America]? He sketched those, that RCA with the old phonograph, so he was a really good artist. He also did the valve, motorcars—I forget the name, but they didn't have pictures back then, photographs, so a lot of artists were commissioned to just do sketching, and so he was a great sketch artist. And sculptor, too, something about sculpting, and so—

Zapol: This is your great-grandfather on the Zerilli side, I see.

Zerilli: And so he even, the Medaglia d'Oro—the only place I could see collaboration is Antonio Veniero roasted that coffee, and eventually Medaglia d'Oro, which is a coffee company, still out there, I think. There's Folger's, there's Café Bustelo. I was told that the Medaglia d'Oro, that was Antonio's recipe. The same coffee that we did, they used that recipe. And the gold medals on the can, you'll see a dye of artists. That was my grandfather who sketched the gold medal. Do we get royalty on it, or nothing? No, nothing. But apparently, back then, they must have been like, 'we need art, use it.'

Zapol: So it was the combination of the two [crosstalk]—

Zerilli: Combination, must have said, 'yeah, bring some of that together,' and I could see where you get a job, or working. **[00:24:52]**

Then there was a story, back to the baker. There was a guy named Henry Campaneri [phonetic] [00:24:59] who was in the Twenties, or Thirties, by the Thirties, he started working here in the Thirties, right after Antonio died. He's the one that really put us on the map. He won the awards. We got an award from Rome. In fact, Peter went to Italy, to Rome, to get this gold medal. We had a gold medal. I have a big picture of it, and the gold medal's right there. It's like a diploma from Rome. We got Bologna, a medal. It's a nice pewter. It's some sort of plaque. We got Rome, Bologna, and New York World's Fair.

Zapol: In tasting?

Zerilli: Yeah, it was like judging, contest. So they did it at the hotel here, and in fact, we won three years in a row. They took us out, because we beat the French, three years in a row, and they said, "That's it, we have to give it to someone else." That's what I was told by Honey Veniero. And she's so proud of that one, that story. She was a kid probably, and, "Wow, look at that." Veniero's was on top of the game.

And then about Henry Campaneri, he used to work with gum paste, like a sculptor. He was a sculptor, but trained on his own, no formal training. He did a lot of stuff for us and just created these masterpieces until he committed suicide. Apparently, he was always thinking people were looking at him, and he just had problems. If somebody told him it wasn't right, he'd smash it to the floor and do it all over again after three weeks, maybe months, and say, "There,

perfect." Like, you happy now? His demise—but great artists, you have to have that passion. Like really to the edge.

That's what I think this family was about to survive. Remember, you're dealing with Mafia people, you're dealing with just heavy people like that that made big deals. They did some big stuff. My dad even knew big people. He had a deal with these guys, still, to the day. Frank Sinatra he knew, and they all connected, big celebrities or not. They were there. I think everyone wants a piece of something. Veniero's is great, so we've done Hillary Clinton's fiftieth birthday cake. I did it. I remember it, and she's been here. Bill Clinton I did. Politicians love Veniero's. Mario Cuomo, and—who else? A lot of other celebrities, too.

Zapol: I want to get into your stories, but before we do that, I think we're still talking about some of the earlier days of the business. So the artist that committed suicide, around when would that have been? I'm just trying to locate where he was—

Zerilli: I think the late Thirties, it would be.

Zapol: Okay.

Zerilli: Yeah.

Zapol: All right. So then—

Zerilli: And there were dozens of bakers, even back then, thirteen. I think I asked Peter the question once, I said, "How many bakers back in the day?" and he said, "I think they had thirteen." Oh, that was a great story, too! I say, "What do they get? Christmas bonus, what's up?" And he says, "Well, they used to make their own cake, and we'd give them a bottle of rum, or a bottle of whiskey," he said. They'd get a bottle of whiskey, and—

Zapol: Their own cake.

Zerilli: "But," he said, "of course they made the biggest cake they could make." That's what he said. I said, "But no cash? No money?" And he says, "I think they got $10, $20 extra." Something like that. "But we were good to the bakers." Obviously, they're making a big profit. Imagine $100,000, big money, and that's what they got.

Zapol: So you're talking about the Thirties. Any stories about the Depression, and how they survived during that time?

Zerilli: Well, the only answer to that—it's comfort food, like the movies. When it was bad, people still went to the movies, so because it's comfort food, they managed to scrap up enough money to get that. And of course when it's really good, it's like a drug. It's addicting. Sugar's a drug, or it can be.

Zapol: What were some of the things—what was sold, what were some of the pastries that you might still have now that were sold then?

Zerilli: Sfogliatelle, cannoli, pasticciotti, pastacroce, pignolata—that's holiday stuffoli. Saint Joseph pastry, sfigne zeppole, the biscottis, regina, anis, umberto, papatelle, ricotta cheesecake. That's Italian cheesecake, Sicilian cheesecake, we make. We used to make a sanguinac, blood pudding, but they don't make that anymore. It's like a chocolate pudding with blood, you can imagine. Pig's blood. That's stopped. I remember tasting it as a kid, too. But we make gelato, ice cream, make our own. Coffee, obviously. We're still doing coffee, but we don't roast it anymore. **[00:30:01]**

Zapol: You used to roast the coffee. Can you tell that story, because that wasn't on the record?

Zerilli: Yes. The roasting was amazing. Six different beans, he put together. This is way back. The roasting was done in the backyard of the building, and it used to sell, apparently, all over the world, this coffee. It was that amazing. And again, maybe that's where, lead to mocha, Medaglia d'Oro, or whatever. He was that good, I guess. His coffee blend was that strong. They wanted strong coffee. We even have a can. I have it right in our office now. We have our name on it. In the Sixties, they tried canning the coffee, but it never took off, Veniero's name on it. Didn't take off. With the coffee, I don't know too much more about Antonio, but he sold it for like 10¢—no, $1 a pound? It was cheap. It wasn't that expensive.

Zapol: You took me around the space, but for us to have it also on the recording, what did the space originally look like?

Zerilli: When you come in the main entrance of the store, first of all, there's one door, not two. You have a double door entrance. In the front window, I was told there used to be big copper

kettles that were used to dip for the Jordan almonds, and you see the candy dripping on it, and it was like a machine. I don't know how they did it, it was being done. You see different colors, a blue, red and stuff. That's what I was told. That's gone, long gone. There used to be, to the right, sliding glass case doors, and a display case. Now they're just mirrors, but they were actually displayed, and you'd put your candy—box of chocolates, anything—in there. We used to have our showcase, but back then, there was no refrigeration. Remember, everything was just ice. But they had their displays, and whatever they displayed were on glass dishes. You know, very formal, nice. That's all gone. And we still have some of the wooden shelves back there, from the Twenties, Thirties. That's it. There's shelving. The flooring, a lot of it was modernized. Everything else, our showcases, the front sign, was put up in the Thirties, early Forties, probably.

Zapol: The neon sign?

Zerilli: The neon sign. We had books written about that, you know. We've been mentioned. It's original. But then you go into the store, and in the back, there used to be an espresso bar, straight in the back and to the left of that bar. To the left, there's a dumb waiter. It's still there. It used to probably use pulleys before they had motors. But then a motor, up and down, just basement to the store. The pool hall was on the other side of the store. There was a pool hall, then it went to businesses, like a pork store, provision.

Zapol: Who would be at the pool hall?

Zerilli: I don't know. Back then it was a social club. A lot of people, like Ferrara's—and that was a good story. That leads me to Ferrara's. I asked Peter, Antonio, Peter, and I said, "What's up with Ferrara's? They're 1892, and we're 1894, and they were down in Little Italy. We're here." And he said that they used to be into bootlegging or cocaine, or something, but they were a hangout. It was a social club. And a lot of places were social clubs. They did have their coffee, [but] they hung out. It was just a place. Pool hall, if you will, a saloon across the street to get your food or hang out.

So Ferrara's didn't really start baking, didn't get any bakers, or talk about really baking as a business until three or four years later. Antonio, remember, came in Antonio Veniero Confection. He started right then. So technically, he's older than Ferrara's, the oldest bakery

running. But they claim it, because they incorporated the hangout 1892. We're 1894, so, technically—but you know the real truth now. [laughs]

Zapol: And we've got it.

Zerilli: We've got it, yeah. It's true. Everything he said is true. Back to the layout. So downstairs is always the original bake shop. We could have bought buildings next door. In fact, the building was originally going for $10,000. Now it went up to $1 million. My dad didn't buy it. He could've bought it for $75,000, but then that passed. Then, if you really want to buy [it for] $1 million, it's still a bargain today. I think it was three buildings. It's a bargain, but he never grabbed it. But for Peter to tell me, $10,000, that would have been a lot of millions. That's just crazy money. Remember, he's looking at it from his point, so it's all relative where you're at, how old you are. **[00:35:06]**

Zapol: Right, right, because now you are using that space, the basement next door.

Zerilli: Yeah, now we have to rent it, $5,000 a month, where the basement used to be $68 a month. I remember that, too. It was just in the Seventies, but there it goes.

Zapol: It's not fixed, yeah.

Zapol: When you took me on the tour, there was also the coal oven, down in the back.

Zerilli: Yeah, we used to have the coal oven. Peter Veniero, before he died in 2001, he knew about the oven. Did he know it was going to be removed? He knows when it went from coal to gas. We converted it before it got completely removed, but he was very upset. He said, "That's it! Once you take a coal oven out, you can't put it back, because the city won't let you." Environmentalists—coal is coal. They want you to do wood. You could do it to wood, or, we did it to gas, but you can't go back to coal. We should have never, ever given that up. Can you imagine being coal, still having a coal oven pastry shop, you know? There's only one in the country. That would have been it.

Zapol: Wow.

Zerilli: My father renovated. He had to do it, because the floor would have collapsed in the back café. We have a back room. So that back room is where the offices were, bathrooms. There was a

stock room until up into 1984, [19]85. Then it went into this bakeshop, way in the back, and now it's a café. After the 100th anniversary, we made it a café. But it's good marketing. I mean you got thirty more seats. We have 100 seats, not including the outside, so I contributed to adding to new stuff.

Zapol: You can get the volume, for new people.

Zerilli: I got the liquor license in 2001. I got the website going, I got the new café—keep it going, I should say. I got better gelato cases. I have been trying to keep up. We put new cases in the store after my dad died. We did a lot.

And then the bakeshop. Since the cafe, it was a bakeshop. We had to move the bakeshop. See, the bake shops used to be in the rental stores, to the right of us, 338, 340 buildings? Those are different stores now, but we still kept the basement of 340, and one store. We have to pay the rent there, but those bake shops at 338, we now put it in our building, right above the main store. So we gutted out two apartments, apartment one and two, and made it into a bakeshop.

Zapol: In this building.

Zerilli: In this building, so we don't have to worry about the rent.

Zapol: Right, right, right.

Zerilli: And that's how you can survive in New York. If you have to keep paying rent, you're done. If you're just paying rent, you'll never last.

Zapol: If you own the building, or you own the space.

Zerilli: You have to own the buildings to last.

Zapol: So tell me about your father. You were talking about how he had many different jobs.

Zerilli: Yeah, taxi driving, working the manager, candy factory. He was trying to do something with it. But that's all I know. It could have been something else, I don't know any of it. Remember, he was forty-four when he had me. My sisters are older than me. They were born in [19]48, [19]49, [19]52, and I was born [19]62, so there's a big difference. I just didn't understand it, living in New Jersey. I was born in St. Clare's Hospital on the west side. That's

where it ended—just right back to Jersey. We moved in [19]60, and I grew up until I was eighteen. I moved out, and I moved back to New York and worked in the business.

Zapol: Why did your family move to Jersey? Do you know?

Zerilli: Because the area was getting bad. If you want to know the truth, my parents actually did move. They lived in the building up here, but also, I think, down by Avenue D, between 12th, 13th, somewhere down there. And in the Sixties, it was just getting really bad.

Zapol: What kind of stories did you hear about the neighborhood then?

Zerilli: Well, people were getting knifed, mugged. It was crazy. It was not one of those very safe neighborhoods [after] dark. You don't go past Avenue A. You just didn't. And then gentrification just slowly made its way.

Zapol: It has since, yes.

Zerilli: Yeah, the Sixties. Well, the Sixties was beatniks. They did take over, and did do their arts, and art scene. Then slowly the Seventies, Eighties, picked up.

Zapol: So did your sisters live in this—

Zerilli: They did grow up. They went to Mary Help of Christians. They went to the neighborhood schools and all that. The youngest of my three sisters that are older than me, Claudia, she would have been just seven years old. They moved to New Jersey. But New Jersey, it was a nice, clean, real nice town. Two golf courses, WASP-y [White Anglo Saxon Protestant] neighborhood.

Zapol: It was the suburbs, essentially?

Zerilli: Suburbs, yeah. Twenty-two miles from here. Very close. Northern Bergen County.

Zapol: And then your father commuted into the city.

Zerilli: Did it for twenty-five years. But it's not a bad commute. It wasn't crazy.

Zapol: What memories do you have of coming into the store? **[00:39:59]**

Zerilli; Yeah, I remember sitting on his lap, maybe sitting and driving in the driving seat. [He] made me go there. I was terrified going down the FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt East River Drive] in this old car. Then getting to the store, and I remember, I'd either come by his car or I'd come by bus, take the subway down. You'd get it at 178th Street, the bus went over, and take the subway all the way down. And I always had to be in the front car, because I used to get nauseous, sick. But I'd also like it. I was a little kid in the suburbs, seeing the city, with all the sounds and the smells. Like you smell that subway, you'll never forget that smell. Then going from the L train to transfer, we'd have to wait. There were tan seats, and the ceiling fans and the old train. I think they call them the Bluebirds, the Redbirds [subway compartment cars], or something. And it went from, you know, 14th and Eighth Avenue, all the way down to First and 11th.

We'd walk to Veniero's, my mother holding my hand, just seeing the city. Grab a pretzel. The smells of a city for a kid—and remember, coming from the suburbs, it even was more. It hit you, the senses, and it was scary, because everything's going fast. But I as a kid I loved it. I had this, not ADD [attention deficit disorder], but I had adrenaline. Something going in me, a lot of energy. So of course, more sugar. I get to the bakeshop, and I had a routine. They'd give me a rainbow cookie, and we all love it—all the grandkids in the family today. There's eight grandkids. Most all of us love the rainbows, because it's a marzipan-laced sponge with the raspberry jam. I think they put apricot when I was a kid, but it was a good cookie, with the chocolate around it. Soft, and just almond, like sweet as hell.

And then I remember the espresso bags, the burlap bags, seeing the beans. I used to love to nibble on an espresso bean as a kid. And I didn't like coffee. I never drank coffee. I liked tea until I was like, I don't know, I must have been twenty-one years old. I was tea, tea. Even my sisters—still tea, not coffee, some of them. Never liked coffee. So weird. [laughs] Two of them, still, out of three.

So, imagine a young little kid who's hyper, and I'm on an espresso bean, nibbling, plus the sweets. I think I flew until I just burned out. Yeah, it was fun. Those are good memories. Just the guys, they'd say, "Frankie, that's your son? He's a good-looking boy!" And this and that. I'd hear them talking in Italian, English, Italian, English, Italian. There was a lot of Italian in the neighborhood when I was a kid, just coming in. I heard the sounds of them next door to Veniero's, [in] those rental store[s] where I'm in now. We still rent. Those were two butcher

shops, and in the windows you'd see goat feet, the brains, the head of a goat, with the eyes and everything. It was really—the flies on top of it and everything—I used to look at it like, this is weird! I didn't know what to make of it. I was just like, that's a butcher shop. That's the butcher, the baker. I'd run up the stairs, there was a door, and I used to run to the roof, because in New Jersey, remember, little house, two story, that's it. When you're a kid, you want to see, so I'd go up to the top, fifth floor and the roof, go right to the edge, look down. I was a kid, six years or seven years old. My parents should know what I'm doing. Six, and I'm at the edge of the roof, looking at the neighborhood and hearing that sound, like, hey! This and this! And oh!

It wasn't like today. Everyone just walks, and they're doing it, but it was the sound of merchants, people. The city was just a little bit different, you know? But sirens, you can imagine, there was always something going on. And I loved it. I loved that feeling of looking over my little town. And I'd always drop something off. [laughs] I had to pick up a little stone, just drop it, just to see how it goes down, because I was a curious little kid. But it was fun. That's all I can remember, and then I'd go in the basement. The baker would be like, "Hey, come here," and they'd make me roll something like a cannoli, and they'd say, "Hey, look, he's making it!" like the little kid, doing this thing. And I really tried to learn it. But it was only for an hour, a few minutes, and I'm outta there. "Goodbye! We have to go home now!"

Then, when you get a teenager, and my dad takes me more seriously, he says, "Come in." He'd pay me $20, $50 for a day. Or on a week's salary, I used to make $200 a week in the early Eighties. That's a lotta money, cash. And I eventually had an apartment, and that was rent-free, so I was like, living it good in the early Eighties.

Zapol: In this, in the—

Zerilli: In this building. It was weird. One of the bakers, he died. John, he vacated. I got his apartment, which is now the bakeshop. He was very religious. It was weird, because he left this statue of a mother Mary. He had it in his closet. We kept it in the closet, but it was the weirdest thing. It was like if [laughs] you take a girl on a date, and you see this, you're like, this is kind of weird. I'd be like, this was this baker that was here. [**00:45:09]**

Zapol: It's not mine.

Zerilli: So weird! It was just strange. He used to have these beads, and it used to be the Seventies. He wanted to be cool, and it was like when you have the beads, and you walk through the kitchen. I remember it was real gaudy, gaudy furniture. That's the gaudy look. I had to change that look, but at least I had an apartment right above the store. It was cool.

Zapol: Yeah, so sounds like you enjoyed being here, like that you would continue—

Zerilli: New York City, yeah, I had to keep pushing through. I was scared, nervous, but somehow, the people who worked here took me in, like, "You're Frankie's son. It's the owner's son." Now my son likes that attention. You get the attention, versus just doing it on your own. It is easier, but it's harder. Someone once told me, they said, "It's not easy, working for a father, like a family member. It's actually harder than a stranger." I don't know how to describe it, but it can be harder. Not that it always is, but it's rough, because you've got to take so much more than regular work. Regular work just walks away. It just never ends. Continues, continues, continues, so it's like getting a beating, but it never—

My dad, psychologically, it was hard, because he was an only child. I didn't mention that, but he was an only child. He was a master sergeant World War II, so he had 200 men under him in a signal corps in World War II, in North Africa.

So when he came out, he used to always use references to me, "Oh, you should have went in the Army! They would have made a man outta you! Then you'd know what it's like to work!" And he used to drill me. "Have to work hard," and "Nothing for nothing. You don't get nothing for free." And he wanted to do it, but he spoiled me by giving me a lot, because I was his only son. But again, I guess what he instilled in me, because when I saw him work—my sister and me, some of my sisters, we have this nervous energy. It's kind of like I'll do with my foot, the tapping, nervous, fast energy. But that might be the fuel. That's the secret. You need to have that, because it's like the fire. And that was another reference. He always said, "Now you're cooking with gas!" my dad would say, meaning you're moving. He always wanted somebody never to be idle. He couldn't stand anybody sitting back, idle. You had to work, work, work. And that was the whole work ethic, I guess.

Veniero's was like that. They were a little different. I remember Peter Veniero explained it, how my grandfather—he was the musician—he called him. He said, "Your grandfather, I remember him, he was a lazy man!" Remember, he lost the business. He played the violin, went

to Mamaroneck, tried to open a business, never—I guess you've got to be so dedicated to your job, not just your art. If you're in the arts—and I'll bring full reference now. We found out late in life, but it's always been that Bruce Springsteen's our second cousin. His mother, Adele, there was Dora, and Ada, his aunts, were Zerillis. And they lived in Brooklyn. Eventually, she married Douglas Springsteen, went to New Jersey because his grandfather had a house in New Jersey. He was a lawyer, Bruce's grandfather, Antonio Zerilli.

That was another story with them. He went to Sing-Sing Prison, Bruce's grandfather. He didn't pay his taxes. They all evaded. They did whatever they did. But getting back to Bruce. If you look at his commitment, of his music, it's like the violinist, like Antonio. Very committed, totally. That's all he knows. But if you're going to do it, you go all the way in. That's the way I look at it. So if you're going to do the business of any business, like this business—and they always say that. I've heard successful people say, "If you're going to do it, you have to do it a hundred ten percent." You have to put it all in. And it's hard. It's hard work. This business is 365 days a year. They opened back in the day, Peter said five [o'clock] in the morning. That's early. It's early stuff. It's hard work.

That's why he says he couldn't do it. Peter says, "I had to get out." His wife went into show business. They went to Hollywood, California. That's when Mike took over, and Mike had Honey there. Again, Mike was a businessman. He ran it. He wasn't a baker; he was a businessman. He knew business. He bought hotels. He knew how to make money. My dad was more of a blue collar—I don't want to say that, because he did graduate. He got his degree. I don't know if you call it an associate's degree. Just two years. He tried to learn just a little business, just to get the books, but he was more of a hands-on worker. But he also liked to make some deals wholesale. **[00:49:50]**

So the way he put Veniero's on the map, it was going out of business. It was going bankrupt in the Fifties when he got it. That's how he got it for a very good price, the building and the business together. Balducci's, you know, on the west side, Sixth Avenue, 10th Street? It was a little grocery store on an angle, right on that corner, and then he moved across the street. It was the big Balducci's gourmet shop, the first Italian, big gourmet. Now there's Dean & Deluca, all these. So my dad started selling them, wholesale, big trays for pastries, full-size baking trays. They were selling out like hot cakes, [laughs] no pun intended. And he just kept selling them wholesale. He gave them like thirty, forty percent. He gave them a good price. But he figured,

I'm going to get those people. He used to deliver in a station wagon, my dad. Then he got a truck, and little by little we started delivering to other cafes—Café Sha Sha, Café Lalo, uptown—which is still in business—Peppermint Park on First Avenue, all the way uptown, near 59th Street Bridge.

Then people's like, "Where'd you get these pastries?" and eventually, East Village, slowly building up and getting more business. He had tables. He put tables in the store. There used to be just round, marble tables. They looked like lounge chair tables from the Sixties, Fifties, whatever. Eventually, he put some nicer tables with fake marble on top. Maybe it was real marble, I forgot, but they were like the chrome metal chairs, thirty seats. You'd come in the store, there were pastry cases on the left, five, like we have now, but tables on the right. So there was a very narrow corridor, and everybody had to crowd in. But at night at that time, he might have done $1,200 in the café, added to his sales. That was good money.

Zapol: And by now, this is around when?

Zerilli: In the mid-Seventies, late Seventies.

Zapol: And so that's because the name started to get out there, you think? Or the neighborhood started to change?

Zerilli: No, because of Balducci's. The West Village, people with money, they come back and it's like, "Wow, I'm going to check out the East Village more. Where's that bakery?" Plus the regulars that we always had, [we] just kept getting busier! Raise your prices a little more, kept doing big business and deliveries. Wedding cakes were cheaper, but more wedding cakes, and then the Eighties, the big stock market, the money! It was cash business, all cash, until I think one of the guys that came from Balducci's—he was a manager—and he was like, "Frank, you have to get credit cards in here."

Zapol: In the Eighties.

Zerilli: In the Eighties, late Eighties. So by [19]89 we got credit. We finally started taking credit cards, 1990. Took that long. No liquor yet, too, remember. The reason being we had no liquor license, because there's a school across the street, P.S. [Public School] 19. And at that time the law said 500 feet, you couldn't have liquor from door to door, entrance to the school to us. Then

the law changed, and my dad didn't know it. So I found out, because I saw a place on 12th Street, across from us, Leon, a French place—this is after my dad died. I want to say 2001? I saw, anyway, that there was liquor, and I was like, "How did he get liquor?"

They relaxed the law to 200 feet, and we're like 230, so I got the liquor license. Now I can put Sambuca in the coffee. Legally, not illegally. They used to call it 'holy water,' [laughs] just get yourself free. You had to make a business, so it was a smart move. That was good.

And the website was a good move too, I think. It's still good, but it's not the best website. We're revamping that now. You have to keep changing. Don't rest on your laurels, there's always somebody on your heels. That's what I'm told, and it's true. You have to modernize, too. It's an old building. It's still old—probably, what, built in the 1860s? I don't know, 1870s? It's old.

Zapol: So back in the Eighties, when you started, you were getting into the business. You started to take on more responsibility. Was there a choice? Did you think about doing something else, and what about your sisters?

Zerilli: That's a good question.

Zapol: Were they brought into the business?

Zerilli: Yeah, that's a great question.

Zerilli: With my sisters, they all got college degrees. One's a teacher, the oldest. The next one married out to the island [Long Island]. Got married in 1970. Family. That would be Linda, who wound up on the island. Then Peggy had a business degree, got out of college, but then married right away, moved to Ohio or somewhere, making your money, but have a kid. And then Claudia, youngest of my older three sisters, she's got a nursing degree and got through it right here at NYU [New York University], and then had her family. But never worked in the business. None of them ever came around. My dad, I want to say it was like he wanted them to come, but then he fought. They knew it would never work. It was like oil, vinegar, the fighting. They just knew. Not going to be around. That's his thing.

But then me, dropping out of PACE University, I just wasn't college material. I just couldn't do it. I had to just work hard. Again, I want to have fun, but I also wanted to—I almost said, "I can't take it over. It's his reins. There's no way you're going to take over with a

headstrong guy that's like, 'This is how you do it. This is how you do it!'" He'd yell and scream, and it created a complex. I had a really bad complex. I had to go to therapy. It was crazy, but I got married young. My wife, we were just dating. I met her in Veniero's, of all places. She wanted to buy a cake. **[00:55:36]**

Zapol: How did you meet?

Zerilli: She wanted to order a cake from us for her friend's birthday in Queens, and I never went to Queens before. I didn't know where that was, and so I was there behind the espresso bar. My dad used to have me work hard on the weekend, just to make some money. She lived in the neighborhood, 151 Second Avenue, and I was living at 151 Schraalenbursh Road—it's funny—in New Jersey, two different places. But it's fate, it has to be. She insisted, "Come on, come to the party." I was so shy. I was painfully shy. So I went to the party. It was like a date, and before you know it, it got heavy. I mean, it got really—

I moved ahead, and it was like, yes, okay. Two weeks later, she just never answered my calls. It was done. I was baffled. I was like, what happened? I don't know what happened, I just figured, I'd call, call, and you're blown off. You're just done. She's a year and three months older than me, my wife. So I was young. This was 1982. I was just nineteen, not even twenty yet. So she's already twenty, going to be twenty-one. I think she was a little older. She knew I wasn't ready. Something wasn't right. So all right. I dated after that a few people, just doing it. Wasn't happy with what was going on, but then two years later to the day, she came back into my life. I was happy to get back with her. But she was from the neighborhood. Her father cut hair on St. Mark's Place. He was from the bohemian—remember, he was the hippie guy, neighborhood.

Zapol: What was her family background?

Zerilli: Lederer, actually. Her father's name is Alex Lederer [phonetic] [00:57:06], so Hungarian Jew. You can't get more or less far away from Italy. That's the other thing. My two sisters married two WASPs—German Irish, and the other one's half Irish, half Italian. Everyone wanted to get away. I always say you're running away from your roots. Just didn't want to associate, maybe left a bad taste—just something weird. A lot of our generation did that—didn't want to learn the language, nothing.

So getting back to Jamie, she had a sister, Kelly [phonetic] [00:57:36]. They're very tight. They're only eleven months apart, Irish twins. They lived above, bohemian style, in this funky apartment. I found it very fun and cool. Let's party, let's do it. They smoked. Anything, it went. It was just the early Eighties. My father's freaking out, thinking—not freaking out. But my mother doesn't know nothing. She's out there, and she just wants to be happy. I'm like, "Yes, my new girlfriend, whatever." A little suspicious, too.

The funny thing is six degrees of separation. Everyone knows everyone. Peter Veniero—back to the old son. His wife Terry [phonetic] [00:58:19] had a sister named Lee. She lived at the same building, 151 Second Avenue, on the same floor, opposite of Alex. My father already knew, like the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], exactly what this family was about. It was a wild family, right? It wasn't wild. It was just normal. That's normal in my wife's family. It's nothing bad. "Oh no," he said, "There must be parties." My father was nervous, like, "Why would he marry? He's too young!" That's the other thing: we weren't getting married. She got pregnant. It was a failed IUD [intrauterine device]. Didn't work out, just happened. Accidents happen. And my wife decided, "I'm keeping this baby, I'm going to have this." And it really pushed me. I want to be with her. I guess we'll make this work. It has to work.

So you get married real young. Twenty-two, but I made it work. We're twenty-nine years married together. My daughter's twenty-eight. Now she has a baby. It's amazing, but it did change the neighborhood. Wow, from then it was old tenements, people living in there, surviving, just paying their $2,000. Anyone could get the low rents, and there are still people paying low rents. Our building just raised the rents, but it's going to be $400 a month.

Zapol: You have tenants in this building.

Zerilli: Five bedrooms, five-room apartments. $400 a month. That's the way the city works. People always do that, "How do these people live in New York?" Share that rent, even if it's $3,000 a month. Big apartments, some of them. They share it. Now it's only $700 or $800 a month, or $900. You can live in New York. That's the secret. Or you have to make a ton of money and pay $3,000 for the closet. You know, one or the other. Take your pick. **[01:00:03]**

Zapol: Right.

Zerilli: And some people, the models, whatever, they're making money, they don't care. Give me a hole in the wall, I felt. I came from a good family, but I wanted to be part of this. I was like a kid when you go in a tent in your bedroom, and you put the tent, or box tent, and you have the little light inside. [laughs] Everyone wants to have that little feeling, like 'I want my space.' They don't want big space is what I'm saying. Some people like small.

Zapol: And being in the city, it's all the more exciting.

Zerilli: Right.

Zapol: So where did you and Jamie live when you were—

Zerilli: In the building. Yeah, we'd take over the apartment. She jumped in, moved in with me quickly. Went up to the top floor, I still sublet that apartment, but now baby's gotten a little bigger, going up to school. My daughter went to Third Street Music School. It's great, 1894, right down the block, music. They love the music. My daughter has a good ear, but she wound up being a designer, so into arts.

Getting back, we moved to Bayside, Queens, because my wife remembered Bayside. We had friends that were out there. She lived there once. She went to Cardozo [Benjamin N. Cardozo High School]. She graduated from out there, [from] Cardozo. But it was perfect! Rent a nice place for $1,000 a month or something. It was great. Nice apartment, bright and sunny. It was like a different living, like, wow.

Then I saw the difference. I got to drive work, I had a commute, but I loved it. I loved that I could separate that tension. My dad—I had to get away. I would have went nuts, crazy, living above the smells of the building. You never get away from it. And I knew that that was a good change, but it was tough. It was a lot of strain. You're young. You didn't know anything. We were touch-and-go, my wife. It was always that. But you have to make it work. You just made it work. You have to go through the dark, deepest valleys to get back up.

And then, from Bayside we went to Flushing, rented a whole house for a couple years. Then my dad died. I made him renovate a kitchen. It wasn't even ours. Renovate a nice little kitchen. We wanted to make it like it was our house. And then from there, I got some money that my grandparents left me.

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE; BEGINNING OF SECOND]

Zerilli: —thank god, was left some stock. Thank god, those penny stocks, AT&T. It was like $30,000, I got to get myself a house, a real nice house in Rockland County, where I'm at now. Seventeen years there, and it's a brand new house. It's on an acre in a very—you take the slow progression, if you do it right. We like to spend our money. So there's two types: you're savers or you're spenders. My wife and I, we're more spenders, but who doesn't? If you can have it, life's short. Now, you have to just kind of think of it like, enjoy it. What are you going to save for? I mean, I always heard you have to save for your kids, but I read somewhere that it's up to your kids, eventually, to make their money. You can leave the money, but they have to make their money. It's not on you. Parents always think, oh, I'm going to leave it all to my kid. No, it's their point to leave. There is a certain point.

Zapol: So as you're making these changes in your life, how is your responsibility changing in the business itself?

Zerilli: That's a good question, too, because I have three sisters now. They got in the business. My mom got the business after dad died in [19]94. She lived until four years ago. She passed away, 2009. So she was almost eighty-eight. She was pres[ident]. She had the whole stock. And now it's just my three sisters and me, so it's equal. Twenty-five percent, everyone, and it'd all be ceded down. This building should go. Everything's going to be passed to the kids, of course, the grandchildren. Now after that, we just have to keep running it, and if anyone in the [unclear] [00:01:37] we can keep it going, great, but otherwise, someone else can keep this business going. Give us a good payout, and I'll be very happy. I'm not saying that, but something has to change. We don't know. That's a big question mark. Remember, anything can change. It's just, like a pinball, it just bounces around, and where the ball lands, you'll never know.

Zapol: When did you formally become an owner? What was that process?

Zerilli: Yeah, lawyers, they just draw up papers—

Zapol: That was when your mother—

Zerilli: When my mom passed away. When mom was here, my sisters, we'd help out. With dad gone, we'd have meetings once a week, and try to really keep this business going, because he left us in a huge debt. He was like, 'I'm taking it with me.' Again, he really did. And we had to pay

that debt back, which we did, very quickly. Then we realized the hardship. This is what it takes to run a business. I mean, there's a lot. I didn't even know it.

Zapol: You didn't have insight to that before.

Zerilli: I have a bookkeeper. I have a guy here that's been here many years. The bakers have been here thirty-five years, some of these, so everyone has their positions. But we oversee it. It's a lot. Remember, holidays 365 days a year. Eight [o'clock] A.M., we're open until midnight. Friday and Saturday, open until one A.M. You could do the math. It just never stops. It's just always open. And on holidays we close at four o'clock. Only Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, four o'clock. Big deal. You get your night off. It never ends. It's just part of your life.

I fantasize about one day getting out, but then I think to myself, you could take the kid out of New York, but you can't take New York out of the kid. It's going to be a problem. Some of them, they do go to Florida. You don't look back, you go somewhere, and I see that. I do like it, but then I know it's like the guy in the movies, and, what am I going to do now? The guy that's in witness protection. Like, what do they do? You sign, you're in the middle of the desert. And it's true, it's a vacation. Great, but living there? I realize I've traveled this country, and there's nothing. There's no good food, unless you cook yourself. There's scenery. It's beautiful, but that gets dull, you know, seeing that same mountain. Even if you travel. I know people [who] rented an RV [recreational vehicle] once. You could travel and travel, then it's like, I've been there. How many times you going to go to the southeastern-most part, like in the [Florida] Keys? You just been there, so you're running from yourself, I guess. And I'm one of those people, I have a motorcycle, so I ride. I'm a rider, man. I have a Harley. I like to ride, and I put on miles.

Zapol: And that's how you let off the steam?

Zerilli: Well, that's how I clear my head, right, because it really works. You're a smart person, you really are. You are good!

Zapol: [laughs] Thank you.

Zerilli: You're really good, Liza. So, it is what it is. Everyone has a crutch. You have to find it, or your something, or you'll go crazy. I mean, my bakers, I'm sure they have it. Everyone has their hobbies, and a lot of them from Latin America, they might salsa, they might have their

parties, or whatever they do. You have to have a crutch. You have to do something, or you'll go crazy. In New York, it's a small, tight city. You have to get out. Whatever your hobby is, I'm saying if you don't have a hobby, get one, because it can't just be work, work. And yet I feel for these workers. They work very hard. I sometimes say to myself—well, they work days. I work two weeks the day shift; I work two weeks nights. So I see both.

Zapol: So what is that schedule like for you? **[00:04:56]**

Zerilli; Yeah, it's eight [o'clock] A.M.—well, I get in at six A.M., but six-thirty to beat traffic—to three P.M. for two weeks, and then three P.M., when I'm nights, until one A.M. So I see both. There's a night shift crew. There's a day shift crew. You have to have one or the other. If you can't do both, if you're your own business, some people do all day! And that's suicide. You have no life, if you work all day. You have to have a life. So you sleep. You get up. You have your breakfast an hour late. You have to get ready for work. Or you go the other shift. You just get up real early. You go home. You have your dinner. You watch TV. You do this, and you go to bed, get up early, and you go that way. I've been doing this now for sixteen years or seventeen. I used to just be nights, or days. We had a manager at night, but that manager, you can't put all the trust in one. You can't give him all the keys. You can't—you'll get burned.

Zapol: You need the Black Hand.

Zerilli: Right. [laughs] Yeah, you need a new Black Hand, whatever it's called today, maybe—

Zapol: So what happened, what are some of those stories, about some of the difficult times?

Zerilli: There were difficult times. I had to go to grand jury once—I don't want to bring that up.

Zapol: Okay.

Zerilli: It's just, that, we'll leave that out—it was just one of those things where you had to protect yourself. You had good lawyers, and you're clean. We were clean. We run a good business, but you had to protect yourself. It cost big money. It's always money. Lawsuits you'll get sometimes, but you have to have good lawyers.

Lawyers or insurance: one or the other. I'm finding all that out. When you're in this business, you have to just roll with it, but you have to be fair. You have to be really upfront. If

you want to play the game stupid, you'll be done. They'll find you. People will find you. They'll sniff you out. They'll bind you. You'll be done.

Zapol: What are some of the ways in which the people who work here have changed? What was the ethnicity of the people when you were younger?

Zerilli; Yeah, it was all Italians, Italian bakers, were the workers, and then it got slowly Americanized, different people. I say, 'Americanized,' not so much. Then my dad brought in—I call it the 'Egyptian wave'—but there was a lot of Egyptians in the early Eighties. I remember working with a driver, his name was Muhammad [phonetic] [00:06:53. Another guy, and then—

Zapol: And he knew North Africans from his work [military service].

Zerilli: Yeah, and I think that had a lot to do with it. Moroccan, African—he felt comfortable. He tried. He liked these people. Remember, he died in ninety-four, so dad wasn't around after 9/11, but we hired a mixture of everybody. Then you have Latin American. We got the Mexicans in twenty years ago. We know a lot of New York is a lot of Latin Americans, Central [Americans]. So they're still here. Their generation, they have kids now, and their kids are working with me now. So [laughs] it takes another life there.

Zapol: Really? So it's passed down in the families as—

Zerilli: Yeah. And remember, as I said in the beginning, how Antonio says, "Go to New York and ask for Antonio Veniero the Italian." They're doing the same today. Every country's just like, 'My cousin works at the bakery, go—' And that's what they'll do. And we'll hire, but I don't like to hire too much, because then it's going to be a clique of one type.

I remember my dad back then. They were very prejudiced, people were saying, "What are you hiring all these Egypt—it's Italian bakery, what are you doing? What is this, the Middle East?" They were prejudiced. There was a lot of prejudice back in the day. There's always prejudice, even today. But I'm saying, back then, I remember hearing that. It was almost like that could rock the business to the core. Don't lose your customers. They were almost like, god forbid you hired an African American! They were like, "What are you hiring this mulignan—?" They were angry. And today, I've been doing what I do. That's just the way it is, but it still goes on today. You'll hear it. Some businesses, it might be an Irish bar. Think about it. Ever seen an

African American behind an Irish [bar]? It just isn't that life. I mean, it is what it is, they keep their tradition, I guess. But this is a traditional bakery, but it's so international now. We get everybody, from all over the world. Like an Irish bar can get a lot of Irish people, mostly. But that's why it doesn't change. This has just got to change.

And there still might be them thinking in their heads, some of these Italians, like, 'Eh, I don't go there no more, because of this. I'll go to one in the Bronx. There's more Italians.' They want to go somewhere just Italians. People are strange. That's not life. You have to roll with the punches. That's just the way it is.

Zapol: And still you have some—you introduced me to some of the head bakers, or the pastry, or people who've been here for a long time.

Zerilli: Yeah. One of them left. He came back. He had his own business, and he says, "I don't want to be my own business. It's too much work." He's like, "I'd rather work a good—" It's hard work here, as I said, but he'd rather do it and shut the lights and get to go home with his family, get a good salary, you know. That's what he did. But thirty-five years, working in the business. It's hard work because it's physical. It's not just with your brain. You have to physically work it, and it's just not easy. So I'm admiring, I'm very happy, I'm blessed, that we have people that have been here twenty, thirty years. Not just a few years. **[00:10:00]**

Because it's hard to train a baker, getting someone new in. We do it now, but it's on a certain level. I've seen it more, but it's actually almost like my dad, too. He changed. There were people. One, you work for this one bakery, and he was here forty-six years. We had to retire him. Now, he retired. And another one was here thirty-six years, and he had to get laid off, not retired. We had guys under them, and they changed a lot, especially the one that we fired, because he was hard to work with. So more people changed under him. And the other one, they stayed, but then they changed, too. They just change. People move on, they just—but if they were late, that's one. I just see that you're late— You have to be here six in the morning. You come in six thirty, if you're late five, twenty minutes, over time, you're outta here. You're gone. We'll get you replaced. That's the attitude still.

Zapol: You must have learned that lesson at a certain point.

Zerilli: Yes, my dad was very instilling, and I still do. And my wife will be like, "Why are you rushing to get, you don't have to—" but now she gets it. You do have to, because you're showing other people. You have to be there. Who's going to be there? So you just do the schedule. And then the work, it was hell when I went from days to night and day. When I did that switch, my body clock went nuts for two years, a year and a half. And then we all get used to it, I think.

In fact, getting up this morning, because I got home at three in the morning, two in the morning, got up at five, and you just get back. But I wasn't tired. I just did it. Used to be, I was like, wow, this is crazy. And I'm on top of a cold. Most people would just be like, you know, white-collar job, 'I'm not in today. I have little cold, I won't be in.' And I'm just like, no, you just come in. And I want my workers to come in, too. I know I shouldn't say this. Today, it's like, oh, god forbid you're sick, you really could get everyone sick. And I'll tell them now, I have enough help they can do it, but they have to work too. Some of them, they have to work, so turn my head away. If you're feeling right, I don't know you're sick. You're fine. What did they do years ago? That's what people did! And they just came in, do their job. If everyone decided with a sniffle, not coming in, everything grinds to a halt.

Zapol: Right.

Zerilli; I don't know. It's crazy, so you just keep working. Remember, seven-day-a-week business. That's not our luxury. We have to pay that, too. Overtime, time and a half, we have to pay everything. My dad did things different years ago. It was a cash business. It was different. And it wasn't the same hours. It wasn't the same volume. The yuppies—I call them 'yuppies,' I'm showing my age—hipsters.

Zapol: So tell me about the changes in the neighborhood.

Zerilli: Hipsters. Old pushcart ladies, Italians, they die out. Now their kids [say], "Let's sell the building." Now, someone else comes in. Big corporations are buying them. The new neighborhood, there was the punk rockers, in the Seventies. I remember seeing them. I saw Joey Ramone carry his own cake right out of Veniero's. And then there's changes to NYU. I mean, NYU is a big, big—we're on a college campus in a disguise of a city. It's a city, but it's a college

campus. Not just NYU, excuse me. You got Cooper Union. You got all the colleges. New School, you have everything—the hospitals, businesses. Everybody, just like community.

So that changes it, and then these new corporations—I saw the change. Once Dunkin' Donuts, or every big name, McDonald's, that came in the city, that was it. Corporate, it got bigger. Look at the mayors. You got [Edward] Koch who used to come in here. He was a customer. Didn't see it that way. He liked old-school city, just did it. And then [Rudolph "Rudy"] Giuliani slowly saw something that was like, let's clean it up. And once he laid the groundwork, cleaned it up, the next mayor, [David] Dinkins, whoever it is, just couldn't do it. And then comes Bloomberg, man. It's just like, business. Pop! I'm not afraid of New York. We're going in. And it just filled all the spot. So is that good for me? Bad? As far as I can see, it's good. Maybe it's good, because it really puts the microscope on us to even look better. It shines better. People want to go to you and not the big corporate [businesses], and you just have to stay there.

So what do we look like one day? We're in the East Village. Thank god the preservation [and] everybody is part of this [to] keep things like the low buildings, because what it'll look like? God forbid, it'll be like uptown, where you see that one brick building and the big skyscrapers around it on both sides. Like, that's what would happen. But I like that. You see that. They don't. They hold out. They don't let go. **[00:15:05]**

Zapol: Yes, in the family businesses, yeah.

Zerilli: Yeah, the family businesses, I love to see that. You know, you're uptown on 56th Street, and they're just high rises, and there's that big brick building. But that won't change. It can't happen down here, because they're going to keep these buildings. But it can. Money will talk. If someone says, "I don't care, I'm building it," and the city says, "What? You're going to give us $200 million? Tax break? Build it! I don't care about you. They got the money." And that's what's going to happen. So maybe it will one day, way in the future, be a building in the middle if you can hold out. Our grandkids, can they hold out? Big question mark.

Zapol: As you've seen all those shifts in the neighborhood, has that also affected the business itself? Has the business become more successful?

Zerilli: You mean, like the neighborhood chefs?

Zapol: No, not chefs—as you've seen the differences in terms of who lives in the neighborhood, have you seen the business change?

Zerilli: Oh! Yeah, of course. The loyalty of our neighbors is just amazing. Then there's the tourists. I mean, I'll say they're a big part, too. We used to be just on a guidebook. There was no Internet. And you'd sometimes be like, 'Look at that. We're in the guidebook. That's pretty cool.' Just a guidebook, or maybe it was just Zagat. And little by little, now the Internet's the guidebook. Everything's there. So now, once that happened, the Internet—I didn't see that coming that quick.

But your view, you're on this, maybe I did a little show. I was on TV shows. I did stuff, but you think that makes a difference. That's a drop in the bucket. It's just nothing, compared to Asian people. If you come on a Saturday night, sixty percent of our clientele is Asian. Sixty! In the café, I'm talking about. They love our product. Different culture. I'm talking about a lot of them. They're American Asians, mostly, but where did they start? They're just a generation or two. And some are coming right from the plane—they're from Asia—because I'm in their guidebooks. I'm in it. They come to me like they love their food. They're foodies. They love sweets.

Zapol: Has your product changed? To cater to—

Zerilli; No, I won't cater. [laughs] Yes it has, actually. My sisters, they came in—red velvet cupcakes. They wanted more American stuff. They said, "You have to try to cater." And they were right, but as long as it's done well— I mean, I'm not going to have a customer tell me, "You should make it more like this, make it more like that." We make it. That's it. Put it out there. But I know what you were saying. You have to change for the people. You can't just have the old school.

That baker we laid off, if we had left it, he had the worst tarts. He was making them. We thought they were good. It tasted good. And still people would have been like, "That's the bakery. It's amazing." But not like Angelo, the second baker you met. He's just creative. He's younger. He wanted to make more stuff. It's up to the baker to make that call. And that's another thing: never get in the way of the baker. Let him be creative. That might have been the secret of Veniero's, too. Remember, he brought in these bakers. They came from Italy. Let them go with it. Take the ball and run, because if you start telling them as an owner, "Do this," it's like a chef,

and they're going to be like, "Hey, I don't need you telling me what to do." You have to let them be creative and do it, but then manage what you want to do, how much, where you should sell it. I've seen a lot of different products come and go here over the years.

Zapol: I bet.

Zerilli; And it's still going to keep changing. Or you have to change how it's displayed. That's another problem. We're having a problem. Our showcases, they call them 'high-volume showcases.' They hold a big pan, a baker's pan, which is eighteen by twenty-four inches. We sell so much, so we need these big pans, which go on a rack, a baker's rack. Fits nice. What do you do now? I mean, most showcases, if you go to European little cases, as you go to other places, they're all glass, and they're not going to hold a big tray. They're not making these cases as much anymore. So I'm in a little bit of a bind, what do I here.

Zapol: You have to have—

Zerilli: Custom? They make real custom—money talks. Someone will build you something. Just because you have to fit. You can't go the other way around, and say, "Oh, I'm going to make half trays, or little trays, and we'll fill them all up more often." That's crazy. You can't put them on racks. You'd have to put the trays on a rack. It's more work. It would never work. So I'm facing that already.

Another problem we just hit is our gelato case. I just bought it three and a half years ago. $20,000. And it's made in Italy—of all things, Italy. But the problem is, Italy and the United States don't match the parts. If you don't have a part that you can get here, it's like the old cars back in the day—what do you do? And they say, "Oh, we have to wait for the parts. It takes six, three months." That's where I'm at now. So two, three months, an empty gelato case, the lights are just dead. Paid $20,000. Three and a half years old. So we're in a situation, losing money every day we speak, but we're slowly getting the parts in, I think, and we'll see. It's scary. Every time there's something thrown at you—this breaks, that breaks, plumbing. You can imagine, an old building like this, we spend thousands on plumbing. I think our electric stays a little better than plumbing, but it's tough. It's tough. I'm just getting a headache—give me the Advil. [laughs] Here's the Advil. **[00:20:34]**

Zapol: There it is. Look at it, it's a big box back there!

Zerilli: You see it? It's a big box there. We have two of them.

Zapol: Actually, yes.

Zerilli: You see, there's two of them. You see the liquid gel, and the regular one? That's for the workers, and that one's for me. It's amazing. In fact, where's my water? I need a water.

Zapol: There you go.

Zerilli: Would you like a water? Yeah, a lot of talking here. There you go.

Zapol: I'm aware that your time is valuable and that you are—

Zerilli: Yeah, we were going at it.

Zapol: We're going at it, so I want to just ask you a couple more questions. How do you see the future of Veniero's? You mentioned a little bit, maybe it will be children, grandchildren—what do you think, what do you hope?

Zerilli: That's a tough one. I don't know, because my sisters are older than me. You know, somebody wants to retire. Think about it. They work other jobs. They didn't work in the business, but at the same time, they want the business to go, as I do. I'm almost at the other end. I have been working, working, and if it was gone—and it's still going. Don't get me wrong, I love to see the business going. Mister Moneybags came in, knows the business, maybe that's fine. But then the sad part is it's not family. That's the heart. That's the stake in the heart that kills. Maybe it can be family. In fact, if it was a baker, I wish it could have been, because again, they know this business. That to me is family. That's fine. But just have to keep it right, do it right. Because I would be ready to go, and I think everyone would be, because they're older, my sisters. They just physically don't want to work here forever. So I don't know. But, then, I would do it. Pay me more. I'll just use that.

Zapol: And what about of the neighborhood itself, what are your hopes for the future of this town?

Zerilli: I don't know. I'm not too optimistic, because I just mentioned that scenario of uptown? And who's uptown? Every class of people, like mostly tourists. And maybe it'll turn into that

down here. Then there's no more feel of it left, so it's a cold, empty—right now, there's a neighborhood. You know what I mean? There's the village vet next to me. He moved in, nice guy, but I see the people with their dogs. They're neighbors, they're people who live in these tenements. and that'll go for a while, but I think it's going to slowly—

New York City's going to erode into this trading post, like out west, when they used to go out and they stop and they keep going. Chance is it's going to be a trading post town, like just commerce. That's it. I don't know. That's my philosophy. In the future, another fifty years, it's not always going to be as cold and kind. They always say that right? If a guy came into town, futuristic, and he came in today, like in the movies, you always see that. It'll be like, 'Everybody's so cold,' and they're so this. That's just human nature. People don't know it, but they're getting—they have to be what they have to be, I guess. And maybe we thought they were barbaric thirty, fifty years ago. But they still had a heart. Everyone always has that. They have to do whatever they have to do to survive, I guess.

Zapol: When you say it's still a neighborhood now, the vet, what other aspects—

Zerilli: Oh, the neighborhood, there's still little businesses. Like on 9th Street, those little stores. Somebody has that store, and they live in their apartments. They have a nice apartment. Not corporate, not the big box company. They didn't buy out four or five buildings and make a big box, you know. But look what happened on Avenue A and 11th Street: they put a 7-11. I mean, that's like, "Oh, really?" 7-11. I can see the little Dunkin' they put in the store, Dunkin' Donuts, But that was the bigger corner. It's a big corner. But there's more. There's other stores that they knock down. They just build like by Katz's Deli. Houston Street is turning out to be the next 14th Street. A big row of buildings—they want to do that. You could see it coming. Each one is going to go down. Yonah's Knishes or something, gone. Big retailer, big building goes up. And it's because the zoning, it's higher. Different block, different area. It's up to the preservationists to figure out how to—not an easy thing to do.

But Veniero's, I love it. I won't say it can't. It could be here for the next 100 years. It could, you never know. I don't know. We've been shot down a few times. They try. They try to get me. I think that's my sister.

Zapol: Okay. **[00:24:56]**

[interruption]

Zapol: I think we're in a good place. Is there anything that you wanted to share about the business or about your story that I haven't asked you about?

Zerilli: Look for us. Look for us. Just look for us in the future. We're always popping up. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, we had a little role on that. Season Eight.

Zapol: Did you! Yes!

Zerilli: Yeah, they did the store. They came in, they filmed here, and they did a whole thing on us with the bread. Remember, it was like he hit that guy with the bread. Veniero's—he came out of the bakery. I like when life imitates art. I want to be a part of the arts. I do like it. You ask me what I could have been. My daughter's an artist. There's a little bit of that side, with Springsteen, the music. I have a good voice. I wish I could have done something. But I'm doing it—see what's funny is that I did it in a backend way. So I'll keep doing it. I was on Steve Harvey last year. That was kind of funky. I never did it. A live audience? 200 people, with five cameras, tape. I pulled it off, and I did. I was a nervous wreck, and I won. We won the cheesecake-off. See it up there? Golden Spatula.

Zapol: Yes, right!

Zerilli: Like, it's too funny. I always think to myself, if somebody would have said that to me. One guy said that to my father, a judge, or some guy goes to my father—he was fighting, yelling—he goes, "Frank, what are you fighting, yelling for? You can't fight success!" That's what he said. I thought that was a great way to end it: you can't fight success, or you're trying to be someone you wanted to be—but if you're doing it, if it makes you happy. You're doing it, doing that. You can't rewrite life, do it over again. You're not going to do it. You're doing it.

The next thing says, oh, maybe Veniero's can go the next level. Rao's, the sauce—you go to the supermarket, there's Rao's. What's that called, where Frank Sinatra went? Anyway, there's a restaurant. He has a sauce. They're on a Food Network show. They put their name out. "Could Veniero's do it?" Should we do it? I don't know, because you're not going to grow bigger. We get it, the street can't be like Ferrara's, half the block, but you can make a product and maybe put it out there and sell your name. You are selling your name, and it lives.

Remember the coffee, Medaglia d'Oro. They tried, like Veniero's, but they did it all wrong. Maybe it's just not meant to be. I call it the 'pastry curse.' There's no businesses that can successfully—I'm talking about dessert, Ferrara's. They have their website. They do great. But not many people feel comfortable—they're starting to now, at the supermarket. You can get a frozen cheesecake. You can get it. But with our name, it would be great. People would be like, "It's a 120-year-old company, it's got to be good, honey, let's get this." And the ones that will say, "I remember this name," and still buy, and we make a fortune.

But I don't know how to do it. You need backers, you need $2 million starting, and then you're selling the name. It's a gamble. We gambled enough. We need the $2 million for our own business still. To take that shot, you really have to know people, backers. You're going to take a partner. You're going to have it, and they'll be like, "I'll pay you back." You could do it that way, but do we want to do it this stage of the game? I don't know. Three partners is a lot of partners, and they're very conservative, as I am.

I'm a little conservative. I'm not too crazy, but I also want to make money. I like to live a good life, and then there's a saying. I've read it, it's true: after $75,000, you don't need any more money, if you can make $75,000 a year. Let's not use $100,000. You don't need any more. If you have that much more, it's not going to do any more, [or] add to you. So I like that. You know, it's true. But, you know, you have to work for it. You still have to work, have to work, have to work. It's not an easy thing.

Zapol: No. Thank you for that.

Zerilli: You're welcome.

Zapol: And one thing, you mentioned when I first came was just, you remember the first time you gave an interview, and your father was in the background? You want to tell me that story?

Zerilli: That was *PM Magazine*. Matt Lauer and Jill Rappaport, sitting in the café, and they were mentioning how Veniero's was doing a renovation. That was the new café that's there—1984, [19]85. I remember the years. They were just like, "So tell us, Rob. By the way, let me introduce, this is Robert Veniero, he's the generation—" I sold them the coffee. And I just stood there. There was the camera. It was the first time on the camera, and it was amazing. I still have the tape. It's a grainy tape, but that, to me, was the future. I knew that that had to be. Media's a big

thing. I like media. And that was another one. There was a grandfather was in advertising, I remember, my great-grandfather was advertising, if you will. So I think that if I was the brains—but I didn't go to college—I would like advertising. That's the only thing**— [00:30:38]**

Zapol: But it sounds like you're using that.

Zerilli: But I'm using it.

Zapol: You're sort of being the spokesperson for the business.

Zerilli: Right, I am.

Zapol: In a way, that also helps.

Zerilli: Mr. Saturday Night, that's what my brother-in-law likes to call me. But truthfully, I'm not afraid of the camera. I used to be at first. My wife says, "I don't know how you do it." I could go on, talk to a president. I could talk to anybody. I did it once, last minute. On a Monday night, my day off, they call in the morning. It was Neil Cavuto, Fox Business. I have no business degree. I really have a good sense, no business degree. We're talking Fox Business. They wanted to show a cake. Something to do with Obama. It's a very conservative channel, but I know it was something to do with a full cake and a half a cake, the economy. "Can we get a baker in?" I said, "I'll do it." I came in, by four o'clock I'm on the air—live, not taped. Live. And they just get you the green room, make-up, and I did it. And I did it! And I [laughs] bullshit my way through—excuse me—but yes, you just do it.

In the end, everyone's like, "You did all right. You did pretty good!" The people are going on next, you could tell, with their suits. They're like, "Yeah, you did good!" watching me out in the monitor. And I'm like, well Jesus, if I could pull that off, you could really—I don't want to say you have to b.s. [bullshit], but I do think life is all about you do have to. All of them on the TVs, all the celebrities, they're all giving their story. They have to sell it. And they are b.s.-ing, doing anything they can do. Sometimes it looks like they're pleading. The latest I think was Justin Bieber just did something. It looked so contrite. It was so set up. "Oh, Selena," it's this, let's make a story out— All these people in the back room were like, "We're going to make a story out of this!" They're just doing it. It's their media mogul. Again, it's so fake, and that

leads me back to the business. That's why if you have a true product, you could sell it. I won that award because they tasted it. It was a taste-testing contest!

Zapol: Yeah, the Steve Harvey.

Zerilli: And I won it. It was because of that. I didn't do it because of me. If it was about who spoke better, she did a great job. Eileen's Cheesecake, she was phenomenal! And I even gave her the credit afterwards, I was like, "You have to go to Eileen's." And even Steve Harvey says, "That was a great thing you did," he says. "No one ever did that on the show" about the food thing. And I say, "What did I care?" I'm like, "We got a bigger business than hers. I'm the 800-pound gorilla." I got it. I get it. My point is it was good because it was good. We got called, first of all. I picked to choose. I had to take a leap of faith—was it going to pick Veniero? Meaning, they don't tell you who you're going against. So I had to say, "I'll do it. Who am I going against?" And then they tell you. Then going out there, flying to Chicago, bringing the product—I brought the best I could. I had to do it all. You're saying spokesperson, but you have to figure out, it's almost like you have to just do it as you go along. You really do.

Zapol: It's beyond spokesperson; it's also your love.

Zerilli: Yeah, it's a love. [laughs] Good?

Zapol: Yeah. We're great.

Zerilli: All right.

Zapol: All right. Thanks for your time.

Zerilli: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]