



All for the Family

BY CHRIS LINDEN, EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Even on his days off, he was working. Such was his passion and zest for life. Such was his joy in achieving the American Dream.

When the namesake of Franchesco's Ristorante, in Rockford, died this January at 94, he left behind a lifetime of hard work, love and dedication to making a better life for his family. The man many came to know as "Nonno Francesco" – Frank, to everyone else – still walks the halls and dining rooms, if only in spirit and memory.

"Every morning he would walk through that door, and people would just get up and give him a big hug," recalls his son, Benny Salamone, owner of Franchesco's Ristorante. "Everyone here had so much respect for the man and the way he showed up every day."

And always with a smile on his face, even on the hardest days.

"He was full of so much life and joy," recalls Michelle LaMay, Benny's daughter and the general manager at Franchesco's. "The first thing he would say every morning was, 'Buongiorno,' and everyone else would say, 'Buongiorno, Frank.' And he would say it with such a smile."

One of his favorite sayings was "la famiglia e tutto," which in Italian means "family is everything." His family was large – nine siblings, three children, 11 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren – but he shared the same love with everyone. Cooks, servers, diners, anyone who walked in the door at Franchesco's came to know his love and warmth.

"He never measured wealth by how much money he had in a bank account," says Charlie Salamone, Frank's younger son. "His wealth was family and friends. That's who he loved. And people just loved him. He always had time for everybody. He was always there for everybody. That was just his nature."

This was Francesco Salamone's American dream, and he lived it with gusto.

"He was so proud," says Benny. "He always told us he never dreamt that someone would call him Mr. Francesco. He would say, 'Bravo, bravo, bravo,' applauding himself because he'd reached a point where people could call him that. It was a sign of respect. He was very proud, but he wasn't one to boast about it."

Dreams of a Better Life

Oct. 10, 1986. The date remains crystal clear in Benny Salamone's mind. That was the day he, his father and his brother opened Franchesco's Ristorante on Rockford's South Perryville Road. They were so busy serving pizza and pasta it took a week to realize the date marked an even bigger milestone.

"We were sitting in the office and there was a calendar on the wall. I was looking at it, and I said, 'Look, that was our 20-year anniversary in this country,'" recalls Benny. "We didn't plan it that way at all because we were too involved in opening the restaurant."

For Frank, who was 57 at the time, it marked one more reminder of what hard work can achieve.

Francesco Salamone was born in the village of Aragona, Sicily, in 1929, the first of 10 children. When his mother died in childbirth, Frank became a protector to his sister and three brothers, and to the additional four brothers and sister his father had with his second wife. Francesco served in the Italian Army for a time, but work was scarce back home, so he left for England and became a coal miner.

One day, he received a letter from his sister back home. It included a photo of the beautiful Anna Russo Introito.

"He said, I like her and I want to meet her," recalls Benny. "So, he came back from England, courted her, and months later they were married."



More remarkable was the story Frank learned later. A devout Catholic, Anna planned to become a nun before she met him.

“He asked her, why did you choose me? Why did you agree to marry me?” recalls Michelle. “And she said, ‘An angel came to me in my dreams and told me to marry you.’ ... She just knew he was the one. To hear him talk about her, she was everything.”

The pair were inseparable. She made it her job to care for him. He made it his job to support the family.

“Even though she died so many years ago, he talked about her all the time,” says Michelle. “She was never not a part of his life. You can’t talk about my nonno and not talk about my nonna.”

Benny came along in 1957; Charlie followed two years later. Both were born in England, where Frank returned to the coal mine with a dream in his heart: to make a better life in America, where his father, stepmother and five youngest siblings had emigrated in 1955.

“It was probably one of the worst jobs he ever had,” says Charlie. “He said it was scary going to work every day, because you never knew when you went down that mine shaft if you were ever coming back up. At the time, there was no other work and he had two children to support. That’s what he had to do. He sacrificed a lot for his family.”

Benny recalls spending much of his first eight years living with his mother and her parents back in Sicily, his father working the mines in England. Only occasionally would they meet up in Italy or England.

Benny holds fond memories of those quaint days in the Sicilian countryside, where his maternal grandfather, a farmer, captured rainwater in an ancient irrigation reservoir.

“We lived in what I call a Fred Flintstone house,” Benny says. “It was a stone house, no electricity, no running water, holes



Frank Salamone imparted wisdom to his boys, Charlie (left) and Benny (right) as they worked together in the restaurant business.

in the walls for windows. We had beads on the doors to keep the flies out. We had these clay jugs and we would walk a couple of blocks to a fresh spring for our drinking water, our cooking water, our bath water.”

There wasn’t much, but they had what mattered.

“Even though we didn’t have all the stuff we have here in America, we never felt like we needed anything,” Benny says. “We always had food, and we always had love. We never needed. We didn’t go hungry by any means. It was just different.”

New York City, by contrast, felt like a culture shock when the Salamone family arrived in 1966 upon the Michelangelo ocean liner.

Benny remembers being 9 years old, watching in amazement as giant automobiles whizzed past and televisions played in living rooms. “Back in Sicily, all we had was donkeys, and horses and those three-wheeled scooters.”



Frank was introduced to Anna Russo Introito (left) when he was working in England (right) as a coal miner. He moved back to Sicily, courted her and married her.



Frank opened the original Franchesco's, on Perryville Road, with sons Charlie and Benny in 1986, on the same day they marked their 20th anniversary of living in the United States.

While a year of boarding school had prepared the boys for English conversation and American customs, Rockford felt a little like home. On the city's southwest side, the Salamones found comfort in an enclave of Italians, including much of Frank's extended family – aunts and uncles the boys had never met.

"It felt no different from living in Sicily, other than the amenities," says Benny. "But the people were the same. You could walk down the street and you knew everybody. They would take care of one another. Everybody made their own wine, their own sauce."

Benny recalls his father working nonstop in those early years, balancing three jobs – at Suntec, Rockford Bolt & Steel, and Cacciatore Meats – just to feed his family. Anna worked, for a time, at Nelson Knitting Co., alongside many fellow Sicilians. After three years in the factory, Frank left to open Zammuto's, the Italian deli on Kent Street.

"He worked there for three years – seven days a week and never took a day off," says Benny. "Seemed like he never got sick. My brother and I would get out of school and work there, and I remember one day he was behind the meat counter with his head down, just to take a nap. He got tired."

Frank went back to the factory for a few more years, but he longed for the freedom of other pursuits.

"My father instilled in us this lesson: make sure you succeed at whatever you do because you'll never be able to go out and work for somebody else," Benny recalls. "He really believed that. And he always knew that we would succeed, but he wanted us to understand you've got to give it your all."

Frank opened a new deli in 1975 with his brother Carl, and eventually he teamed up with Charlie, who'd been running John's Pizza down on 11th Street. Together, they opened Charlie's Pizza in the former Porkchop Alley, across from the MetroCentre. They recruited Benny to help open Franchesco's in 1986.

"I was in Whitewater, Wis., at the time. I had opened my first restaurant with my Uncle Ross. We called it Salamone's

Pizza," says Benny. "Charlie came across the old Barnaby's building, and the three of us decided this was a great place for a restaurant. I sold my store to my uncle and we came down here to open the original Franchesco's."

A legend was born.

Tribute to Family

For 22 years, the Salamone family thrived on Perryville Road. What started as a pizza and pasta house matured into a casual fine dining experience. Benny worked the bar and front of house while Frank managed the pizza and Charlie ran the kitchen. Frank's daughter, Toni, managed the dining room floor. She was born in 1968 and named after Frank's mother.

The next generation, which included Michelle and her three sisters – Stephanie, Andrea and Brittany – grew up at the old place. At 11 years old they were shuffling carry-out orders and helping where needed.



Frank was a constant presence at Franchesco's Ristorante, even into his later years, when he greeted diners and cooked in the kitchen.

The years passed and life went on. Anna died in 1998. Frank slowed down. The girls went to college. Charlie got into a side hustle.

“He’d be cooking steaks and selling cars on the phone at the same time,” says Benny.

Then Walgreens came calling in 2008, asking if they’d sell the property to build a drug store. The family reached a crossroads. What would come next?

“My father was a little older, and he really didn’t want to get fully involved in a new project, and Charlie wanted to focus on his car business,” recalls Benny. But Frank wasn’t the type to retire, either. So, Benny found a partner and established a new tribute to his family.

Fittingly, in building a new Franchesco’s on Spring Creek Road, he turned again to family and hired the construction company where Michelle was working as an accountant.

He invited her to become Franchesco’s new general manager, and the rest of the family took on new roles, including Frank, who became the public ambassador. Diners recognized him there every evening, always dressed to the nines – his way of celebrating how far he’d come in life.

“Honestly, I think one of the reasons we had to build this place was to keep my dad going,” says Benny. “He had to have a purpose and a reason to get out of bed every morning, I truly believe that. Every morning, he would be the first to show up at the restaurant and get the coffee going. The beauty of this family is that, in a pinch, whether we are short-staffed or just incredibly busy, any and all family members are ready to jump in and lend a helping hand, at a moment’s notice.”



Frank always made time for his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, who practically grew up around Franchesco’s Ristorante. Here, Frank and Benny pause with Will Goellner, Milania Myers and Ben LaMay.

Carrying on the Legacy

Benny still feels his father’s presence around the restaurant. There are still times when it feels like Frank is coming around the corner, hands tucked behind his back like always.

Michelle feels it, too. Memories abound, not just by the hallway filled with family photos or the framed photograph at the host’s desk. It’s in little ways, too.

“My kids were pretty much raised here,” she says. “When my youngest, Dominic, started walking he’d walk with his hands behind his back around the restaurant. It was so cute. My nonno had such an influence on all of us. I think we didn’t realize how much he was impacting our lives just by being present with us every single day.”

It wasn’t only at the restaurant. Frank joyfully picked up her three boys from school, and he never missed a chance to check in on his descendants.

“He always made sure every person felt the same amount of love,” says Michelle. “I don’t know how one person could have that much love inside to share.”

Frank has left some big shoes to fill. For the time, father and daughter are filling them together. Benny credits his daughter with being “an incredible right hand.” Michelle thanks her dad for the chance to keep family close. And as for the staff, who in many ways are an extension of family, they’re carrying Frank’s gusto into their own work.

Because family is everything.

“Everything he did was for his family,” says Benny. “He wanted to make sure we could all live better than him.” ■



Frank and Anna’s family has grown to include two sons and a daughter, their spouses, 11 grandchildren and their spouses, and 12 great-grandchildren.