



# Historically Speaking

*With Town Historian Richard Forliano*

## Hard work, discipline, and reverence

*The qualities that make the community special*

In the course of my research and writing about the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of this community, an intriguing question has puzzled me: Why have so many of the children of the ethnic and racial groups that make up the population of Eastchester and Tuckahoe been so successful?

An epiphany came to me in answer to that question while watching a special on “60 Minutes” on the inordinate number of Samoan football players who went on to play Division I collegiate football and in the National Football League. In that special, the governor of American Samoa, Togiola Tulafono, was asked why on an impoverished small island in the South Pacific could so many young men achieve success in the most demanding and brutal of American sports. He attributed the athletic success of Samoan athletes to three qualities. Those three very simple qualities are hard work, discipline, and reverence.

These same qualities describe the young men and women who grew up in this community in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ironically, in most ways, American Samoa and this community are totally different cultures with one important exception. In both places, children were raised to work hard and to venerate the traditions that tie the community together. But in this town, those enduring qualities of hard work, discipline, and reverence led not only to success on athletic playing fields and arenas, but also in life in general.

The qualities of hard work, discipline, and reverence are qualities that emanate not from one ethnic and racial group, but from all the groups that have populated this community and made it unique. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, neither the Irish, Germans, Italians, African-Americans, nor the small Jewish population that had come to live in Tuckahoe and later in Eastchester had anything handed to them. They were successful because of a strong work ethic. The Irish came here at the time of the Irish potato famine and worked as unskilled quarrymen in the marble industry. Within the span of a few decades, Irish-Americans had established themselves as unworldly mobile leaders in the civic and political life of the Tuckahoe/Eastchester community.

In the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Italians became the largest ethnic group in the community. Like the Irish before them, the Italian immigrants had to overcome serious



**The inscription, still on the north wall of the Waverly School, guided young people to follow the values of hard work, discipline, and reverence. Up until 1929, the Waverly School was the high school for Eastchester and Tuckahoe. Contributed photo**

obstacles of discrimination, lack of education, poverty, and adjustment to a new and alien culture that did not welcome them. But the Italians had to overcome a problem that the Irish never faced: learning a new and very foreign language.

Italians had to use a very strong work ethic not simply to achieve success, but to survive. Many doors were closed to Italians because of the language barrier and outright discrimination. Many Italian men worked in construction. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the railroads and dams in Westchester were built by Italian laborers. The marble quarries were first worked by the Irish and later by the Italians. Italian contractors and masons built a great number of the homes in this community. All ethnic groups developed small businesses throughout the town.

To overcome poverty, discrimination, family separation, substandard and overcrowded families, and other problems unique to specific ethnic and racial groups, discipline was necessary. In the old days, parents, regardless of ethnicity, told their children that people in authority were always right. Children knew that if they ever got in trouble with a teacher, the parents would always back the teacher. Teachers and coaches, although not highly paid, were some of the most respected people in this community.

If a young person got in trouble with the police, the policeman would often bring a wayward child home, knowing that the parent would make sure that their child, in the future, acted properly. During the Great Depression, one out of three workers were out of work. Yet, there was very little crime and almost no juvenile delinquency. This eye-opening statistic can be attributed to many factors. But there is one factor that historians often overlook: reverence.

Reverence, in the dictionary, is defined as a state of worshipful respect or veneration. This feeling of veneration was ingrained in the houses of worship, the public and private schools, in the scouts, and throughout the community. The authority of the parent priest, rabbi, minister, teacher, coach, policeman, scout leader, government official, and the plethora of volunteers throughout the community was unquestioned. Right was right and wrong was wrong. There was little confusion. People knew how to behave.

It is no mistake that still on the walls of the Waverly School that, up to 1929 was the high school for Eastchester and Tuckahoe, reads, “We came to learn, we leave to serve.” When the call went out to serve in World War II, every able-bodied citizen make either volunteered or registered for the draft.

“We came to learn, we leave to serve.” When the call went out to serve in World War II, every able-bodied citizen make either volunteered or registered for the draft.

*This is the sixth in a series of articles on Italians in our community. In the next column, the series on Italians in our community will continue. At the present time, research is being done and people are being interviewed on the following topics: 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish American heritage, the story of African Americans, Germans, and Jewish immigrants who were part of the makeup of this community up to the year 1960.*