

JAMES ERNIE PODESTA

James Ernest Podesta, or Ernie, as most people call him, is today in his eighties, the proud patriarch of an extended Italian-American family. He has traveled a long road from his adolescence, when he was not comfortable with this ethnicity, to his successes in business and in the broader community. His parents, Virginia and John, were immigrants from Northern Italy. They chose Northern California because its climate and terrain were similar to what they had known in Italy. They were part of the second wave of Italians to migrate to California and, like others who came with them, hailed from a rural background.

Ernie's father arrived in San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake; his first job was clearing away rubble in the devastated city. In 1913, John Podesta moved to San Jose, where he opened a grocery store, and with Virginia, began raising a family. Ernie, born in 1920, had three older sisters, Angelina, Rose and Mabel, who helped in the store and watched over their baby brother.

He grew up a talented youth, speaking both English and Italian fluently. However, his parents had warned him of the prejudices against Italians, and they created in him a reluctance to speak Italian in public. At times, he felt as if Italians were looked down upon by society. Yet, his parents stressed the value of Italian culture. Proud of their heritage, they taught their children that it was important not to lose their Italian traditions.

The Roman Catholic Church provided a link between the old country and the new for many Italian immigrants. It was a strong force in guiding Ernie while he was growing up, and it remains so today. It helped him deal with the embarrassment he felt as a young man because of his heritage and gave him a foundation for the pride in his ancestry he came to feel in later years.

Ernie attended school in San Jose and graduated from high school there. When Ernie was 12, his father opened a grocery in Linden, a rural community near Stockton. The eldest Podesta daughter came with her father to work in the store; Ernie remained in San Jose with his other sisters and his mother, minding the original store. As this new chapter in the life of the family opened, Ernie began to take his first steps toward adulthood. He learned to balance increasing family obligations, his work in the store, and his commitment to continuing his education. As Ernie continued to help in his family's business, he knew he wanted to have his own. This fit perfectly with his parents' wishes for him; they hoped he would someday assume direction of both family grocery stores.

During his high school days, he spent many hours in the store learning all facets of the operation. In the summer, he would work in Linden alongside his father and sister. When school started again, he was back in San Jose in his family's original store with his mother and other sisters. After high school, Ernie went to work for his father as the Linden store expanded to include a bakery. Ernie says this was when he began the transition from youth to adult.

His father had been constructing a new building for the business. Ernie went to work for a mason who was helping with the construction. Ernie didn't have a glorious or high paying position; he was a hod carrier, carting the mix, concrete, and brick back and forth at the construction site. Ernie worked full time, and it was not easy. Such backbreaking labor turned Ernie from a boy to a man.

Though there was no traditional ritual or event that marked this step forward, working as a hod carrier triggered Ernie's final steps toward adulthood. During the period, his parents began to treat Ernie differently. They recognized his maturity and how he handled his newfound responsibilities. Ernie had always helped around the market, but with a full time job, earning his own living, he had grown and his parents knew it.

The celebration of his twenty-first birthday, on December 7, 1941, was marred by the early morning Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In July 1942,

Ernie volunteered for the Navy Seabees and soon was off to fight World War II serving in North Africa and then in Okinawa. The war was a turning point for Ernie, as for so many in the local Italian community. When Ernie was serving in the Seabees, his experience in dealing with different people made the difficult times easier, and he was able to adapt. Though he witnessed racism, as an Italian he knew the burdens of being an outsider and could sympathize with others.

Ernie returned to a different Stockton after the war. Criticized by many as disloyal, local Italians demonstrated their American patriotism by becoming naturalized citizens in large numbers. For Ernie the post-war period opened new and different opportunities. He had planned to attend Santa Clara University, but decided to enroll at an agriculture school under the GI bill, the post-war program that enabled veterans to get a college degree. Subsequently, he pursued a career raising cherries and other crops in the Linden area.

Now that Ernie is older, he takes pride his Italian roots. He appreciates the long and creative history of the Italian community in the Central Valley, its successes in agriculture and business, and its creation of major community institutions such as the Italian Athletic Club and especially the Gardeners' Society, which has endured for over a hundred years.

Preserving the culture and dialect, both historical and contemporary, of the Ligurian people who migrated from Genoa has become particularly important for Ernie and his family. He is proud to serve as the President of the Ligurians of the World, Stockton Chapter. This nationwide association, established in 1983, has 400 members in Stockton alone.

Ernie achieved everything in his life by hard work and dedication. He knows for a fact—nothing in life is free. However, he also never traveled his road alone. When Ernie Podesta sits back to reflect on his youth he sees "family gatherings, neighborhood celebrations, singing, dancing, and of course, eating." He remembers living out the customs his parents brought from Italy. Like so many

Italian immigrants, their traditions are what keep their families together and strong.

Author: Brent Kaufman

Interviewer: Kimi Yamamoto

Ethnic Group: Italian American

Generation: Elder