

Founding Families

Two women who lived in the town of Eastchester for most of their adult lives would make incredibly generous gifts that have greatly enhanced the quality of life in our community. These very different individuals who came from dissimilar backgrounds unknowingly shared a common bond. Their names are Carmela Vaccaro and Frieda Riggs. Here are their stories.

Carmela Vaccaro

Carmela who spent most of her adult life in the north end of Eastchester was the matriarch of one of the oldest and biggest families in the town of Eastchester. She had six children, forty-three grandchildren, and more than seventy-five grandchildren, many of whom still live in the town. But that is but a small part of what made this very special person so unique. Carmela was born in a mountain village in Italy, two hours east of Rome. The oldest of six children, Carmela carried much of the responsibility in the family.

Carmela and Donato Vaccaro like their parents before them had 6 children. Sadly, Donato died of peptic ulcer in 1947 and Carmela had the responsibility of caring for the family. Fortunately, her sons Luke and Leslie took over the successful shoe store business that their father had started in the village of Scarsdale. Scarsdale's Vaccaro Shoe Repair was founded in 1928 and remained a family run business and fixture in the community for eighty-three years, closing in 2011.

Her home and garden, family, faith, and love of community were her four great passions. She attended mass every day at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church. She participated in bible class and prayer groups and avidly took part in the social ministry of the church. Day and night, her home was always open to her children and numerous grandchildren. Her son, Les, remembers riding a horse on the property and playing with the chickens, goats, and rabbits along eating with the wonderful fruits and vegetables from her garden. She always wanted all the people in her neighborhood, especially the children, to be healthy and happy.

Frieda Riggs

Frieda Riggs was deeply committed to the cultural life of the Bronxville community, maintaining the high quality of the Bronxville school system, and the preservation of Bronxville's architectural and historic heritage. Frieda Wildy Riggs was born in Nebraska in 1907, the third of four daughters. Her father, Calvin Wildy, started out as a homesteader, then turned banker. When her father realized he was losing his sight, he moved his family to Colorado so that his four daughters would attend the University of Colorado at Boulder. Upon graduation, Frieda came east and received a Master's in Social Work from Byrn Mawr College. For Frieda and her family, a quality education was always a priority.

Frieda, before obtaining her degree and beginning her career in social work in Westchester County, spent a summer working at Yellowstone National Park where she met a young man named Arad Riggs. In 1932, they would be married. After marriage, they moved into the Fleetwood section of Mount Vernon. Arad, a promising attorney, took the train to Manhattan and Frieda took a bus up Route 22 to White Plains where she had a job with the Westchester County Department of Social Services. But Frieda, as she rode the bus, took special notice of the Abijah Morgan house, the oldest home in Bronxville at the corner of northeast corner of White Plains and Pondfield Road. In 1937 the asking price of the home from the bank was \$12,000 and with help from her family, Frieda and Arad were able to purchase the house. She lived in the house continuously for 53 years until her passing in 2000.

Upon moving into Bronxville, Frieda immediately became involved in community activities even though she continued to work for the County Department of Social Services until the end of World War Two. In the 1950's she served on the Bronxville Board of Education. She also was a member of the board of the Bronxville Library and emphasized the importance of collecting and preserving important works of art. She also was an active member of the Reform Church of Bronxville. Frieda Riggs was deeply committed to quality education, the cultural life of the Bronxville community, and the preservation of Bronxville's architectural and historic heritage.

The Magnificent Gifts

The year was 1950 and Carmela Vaccaro had been a widow for three years. The town offered Carmela \$68,000 for a portion of her property adjacent to her home on 68 Bell Road. Realtors today believe that that property would be worth close to two million dollars. Instead, Carmela decided to donate the land to the school district, accepting only \$7,000. The town agreed and the land became Cooper Field, a playground at the former Cooper School. In the late 1970's, the closure of Cooper School left the field in danger of being developed. But in 1980, town officials negotiated an agreement to rent the property from the school district for one dollar. In 2002, Carmela passed away at the age of 99. Three years later, the Eastchester Board of Education voted to erect a sign renaming Cooper Field/Vaccaro Park. Carmela's wish in 1950 to have a place where "children make happy sounds" had come true.

Frieda Riggs also had a dream come true. Her life had been dedicated to doing whatever she could to preserve the cultural and historical heritage of the village where she had lived for most of her adult life. In 2000, Frieda made a testamentary gift of the oldest house in Bronxville, the Abijah Morgan House, to the Bronxville Historical Conservancy. The house was subsequently sold subject to a restrictive easement that preserves the historic aspects of the building, and the proceeds of the sale and income thereon are continuously applied to the Conservancy's mission. The mission of the Conservancy is to further the understanding and appreciation of the history and current life of Bronxville. Today the programs, publications, lectures, and special events of the Conservancy foster an awareness of the Village's architectural and cultural heritage.

Sadly, these two wonderful women who lived well into their nineties are no longer with us. But the bond that they share, making the community that they love a better place, lives on.

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