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From Italy to America: Photographs of Anthony Riccio Didactic Panels

Bellarmino Museum of Art

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New Haven's "Little Italy"

New Haven, Connecticut was an important center for Italian-American culture throughout the first half of the 20th century. Italian immigrants began arriving in the city as early as 1890, settling mainly in the Oak Street, Hill, and Wooster Square neighborhoods. By the early 1920s, when immigration quotas were instituted, over 60,000 individuals of Italian origin were living in the city. They constituted a large portion of New Haven's blue-collar workforce. Although others rejected the kind of work they did in factories, shops, and schools as demeaning, Italian-Americans embraced the economic stability provided by a weekly paycheck, however meager. Such opportunities fostered in these new citizens a fierce loyalty to their adoptive country.

As the years passed and new immigrant groups displaced them, Italian-Americans left New Haven in increasingly large numbers, taking with them their rich sense of community. Statistics tell the story: while Italian-Americans once constituted 37 percent of New Haven's total population, today they represent only 10.5 percent. The Italian-American community suffered another blow in the 1950s when Mayor Richard Lee's support of the highway development program marginalized their community. In order to attract suburban shoppers brought in by the intersection of Interstates 91 and 95, Mayor Lee cut a wide swath through the heart of the city. The resulting urban interventions divided the Italian section of town, destroyed the heavily populated side streets off Wooster Street, demolished the commercial heart of Legion Avenue, and displaced many local businesses and farmers' markets in order to direct people to downtown shopping centers. Today, neighborhood-based retailers are far fewer and neighborhood ties much weaker, though African-American and Latin American business owners are trying to recapture or replicate the feeling of community that "modernization" quashed. Having grown up with many members of his extended family in the Annex (one of New Haven's oldest working class neighborhoods), Anthony Riccio can attest to these dramatic changes himself. Even now, he refuses to let go of the rich culture of his youth and insists on eating lunch at a local New Haven restaurant every day of the week.

-Kady Helme, Courtney Monaghan, and Vinny Romano with Drs. Mary Ann Carolan and Jill Deupi

To hear audio clips from the interviews Anthony Riccio conducted with many of the individuals featured in this exhibition go to www.fairfield.edu/italytoamerica on your smart phone. You can also access these files through the museum's website: www.fairfield.edu/museum.