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Canepa Family: Steven J. Canepa (Middle)

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STOCKTONSpeaks!

STEVEN J. CANEPA

Many of the earliest Italians in California were entrepreneurs. Some of the greatest success stories of Italian immigrants have direct links to San Joaquin County. The man who built an empire out of chocolate, Domenico Ghirardelli, began his business in Stockton. Guiseppi Di Pietri, who anglicized his name to J.D. Peters, became one of the city's wealthiest citizens as a grant merchant, banker, steamboat company operator, and manufacturer of a unique insecticide. Most Italians worked in occupations related to farming or business. Steven Canepa's family was no exception.

Steven's grandfather was a partner in a thriving Italian grocery/delicatessen, and his father founded Canepa's Car Wash, now a multi-generational family business. "I started working at the family car wash when I was ten years old," he says. It was in this setting that, despite his youth, his family first recognized Steven's advancing maturity.

As the oldest child in a family of four boys and three girls, he soon came to shoulder other responsibilities. Steven reminisces how, at an early age, he had to take his grandfather, who had suffered a stroke, to medical appointments. Since his grandfather spoke only Italian and Steven spoke only English, he had to struggle to decode what his grandfather was trying to say. Steven and his siblings knew little Italian, but they all have fond memories of hearing the lilting sounds of their father and grandparents speaking the language at family gatherings.

Steven also recalls the stories of his parents' and grandparents' struggles. His parents had to walk to school, their work involved manual labor, and in their day, there was no television. These stories made him appreciate the privileges and conveniences of his young life—he had a bike to get around town, television for entertainment, and limited physical labor.

The centrality of family life, religion, and church was emphasized by his parents. The Catholic Church was at the heart of Steven's family celebrations and community gatherings. He also attended parochial school. The lessons he learned from the church reinforced the themes emphasized by his family. With the help of both, he learned the importance of good values and moral character.

The nuns taught him a respect for God as well as for others. Steven was an altar boy, assisting the parish priests during mass. Imagine how proud Steven and his family were when he was tapped for the prestigious honor of serving as an altar boy for the Bishop!

Working in the car wash through his teen years, Steven began to be treated more and more like an adult as he approached high school graduation. Although his father owned the car wash, work standards for Steve were no different from those for the other employees. He was expected to work hard and complete all his duties, just like any other worker.

Steven's graduation from St. Mary's High School was a major event and marked his coming of age. Growing up, Steve had learned from his parents to "work and study hard and get good grades." Having internalized the value of an education, Steve was now able to enroll at St. Mary's College. Going away to college, he had to be responsible for himself for the first time in his life. He considers college his most valuable achievement.

After college, like many in his generation, Steve Canepa had the choice either to set off on his own career or to join an established family business. He decided to return home and to join Canepa's Car Wash, so he could pursue a way of life he has come to value highly.

With six siblings and parents steeped in Italian tradition, family is very important to Steve Canepa. He looks back on his youth with humor, remembering quality time doing chores, working out in the garden pulling weeds, and other things that had to be done before leaving on trips. Working hard was an underlying ethic that prevailed and was understood by all in the

family. But they also took time to enjoy friends and extended family. Because the Canepa family participates in Italian functions and attends many community events, Steven and his siblings never feel isolated from their ethnic heritage.

Grateful for the lessons and experiences of his youth, Steve constantly tries to make good in whatever he does. He subscribes to the values taught him by his parents—the importance of maintaining family relationships, participating in cultural gatherings, and valuing education and work. Recalling the advice given him by his grandfather and the lessons of his parents, Steve successfully manages to balance what may seem to be contradictory advice: “Work hard; life is short, have a good time!” As far as balancing goes, it’s a pretty good act!

Author: Christopher Anderson

Interviewer: Claudia Pruett

Ethnic Group: Italian

Generation: Middle