



## No Wonder His Happy Heart Sings

Stephanie Longo (July 17, 2008)



Take love of community, ethnic pride, and add a dash of Dean Martin and you have Scranton's own Jack DeLeo.



West Scranton in the 1950s was, by all accounts, an Italian neighborhood. Tiny ma and pa stores run by Italian families lined either side of Main Avenue; neighborhood children would walk around listening to Elvis Presley on their transistor radios before having to go home for pranzo. This is the West Side Jack DeLeo grew up in.

“West Side was a little city within a city,” DeLeo said. “There was a hospital here; as well as a police station with its own precinct, shoe stores, doctor’s offices, pharmacies... there was even a Woolworth’s right in the heart of the neighborhood.”

But, of course, the world didn’t stop on Main Avenue.

“When you got away from your families and your little neighborhood and went out with your friends; you didn’t think about being Italian,” DeLeo said. “When we were out on the ball field with other kids of other ethnic backgrounds, we were all kids, all people, no ethnic divisions.”

Perhaps it was a combination of these early experiences that fostered in DeLeo not just his ethnic pride but also his community spirit; a spirit that has taken him to the presidency of the Scranton chapter of UNICO, the nation’s premier Italian-American service organization.

“Involvement is what UNICO is all about. The events and whatever we’re trying to do to raise money for all goes back to the charities UNICO is involved in,” DeLeo said. “So we’re continuing to raise money and benefit charities. Cancer is now one of my important charities; being a survivor, whenever I can do something for the cancer societies, I try to help out.”

One such way that DeLeo has tried to help the community at large is by participating in “Dancing With the Stars”, a fundraiser for the Scranton Cultural Center based on the popular ABC program.

“It’s important to keep the arts alive in this area. I want Scranton to someday be better than what it is, to be better than what it has been,” DeLeo said. “I am hoping that by the time my daughters get out of college we have a better area where they don’t have to go to Philadelphia or New York City to get a nice, decent-paying job.”



In one of his last acts as UNICO president, DeLeo put on his dancing shoes on June 20 at the Scranton Cultural Center where he performed a Fox Trot to Dean Martin's "Ain't That a Kick in the Head." DeLeo's year-long UNICO presidency ended on June 30.

"I always loved Dean Martin; I have been fascinated by him since I was a young kid," DeLeo said. "I just have so much respect for him so it was great to be able to dance to one of his songs."

DeLeo won the Fox Trot portion of the contest, beating out 92.1 FM's Kerry Kane in the total amount of votes he received. In August he will perform another dance in the fundraiser's finale. However, DeLeo is quick to point out that Kane was an integral part in the fundraiser's success.

"I probably should have and would have lost the competition because Kerry Kane was a better



dancer. I think I got the sympathy vote because of the people,” DeLeo said. “She was a marvelous girl, lovely, gracious, and a sport. Somehow if I can incorporate her in my August dance, I would like to do it. I think she was much a part of making that a success as I was. I won’t walk in there in August like Mr. Big because I’m not. If we can’t dance together, I would at least like to bring her out. We were a team.”

Besides his involvement with UNICO, DeLeo was also appointed by Scranton’s Mayor Chris Doherty to sit on the city’s Parks and Recreation Authority. He also sits on the board of directors of the Scranton Chapter of the American Red Cross and the advisory board of the Salvation Army and is past president of the Columbus Day Association of Lackawanna County. For DeLeo, his involvement is truly a labor of love.

“Being spread out allows me the opportunity to meet people from Carbondale to Old Forge. I like being around people. Whenever there’s something I can lend a hand to and help out, I am always there,” he said. “I’m not looking for recognition or payment; I just want to be a part of it. If I can enhance whatever we’re trying to do with what little expertise or talent I could offer, I’m there.”

But, at the end of the day, DeLeo comes home to West Side, where he lives with his wife, Patty, and their daughters, Brittany, 15, and Tia, 10.

“I want my children to know they’re Italian. You can talk to some families and ask them what nationality they are and they will probably tell you they’re Catholic or Protestant because they have no idea. Or they’ll tell you they think they’re a mixture of 100 different things. Maybe you are but wouldn’t you want to find out?”

“I wouldn’t want to be anything other than Italian. People love Italians, we’re happy people. We are fun, loving, happy people. Everybody loves Italian people.”

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