

**Maria Rosaria Graziosi nee Sasso**  
**(AKA: Rosina, Rosinella, Rosetta and Maria Rosa,**  
**but most importantly Mamma and Nonna)**

Born in 1938, in Frigento, Avellino

Only sister to six brothers: Angelo, Gaetano, Rocco, Giovanni, Carmine and Vito

Married to Filippo Graziosi March 1960, in Toronto

Widowed in 1974, at the age of 36

Mother to: Danny (1961), Joe (1962) and Rosanna (1968)

Grandmother to: Eric, Philip, Matthew, Adam and Marc

**Strong, courageous, witty, sharp and compassionate** are the words to best describe my mother Maria Rosaria Sasso better known as Rosina who, as an Italian immigrant, widowed at 36, truly fits the title of "Femmine Forti".

My mother only completed a Grade 3 education, but never lost her desire to learn. She was creative and paid great attention to detail when she listened to the talk shows on CHIN radio and watched the same on Mediaset or RAI. The "telegiornale" in the evening on our static filled radio in the kitchen, kept her abreast of the news in Italy and the music connected her to a happy time of conversation, gathering and family back home.

She was talented in rhyme and could retain the oral stories and songs from childhood and would often in her head prepare greetings, messages and toasts for the milestone events of family and friends. Her math skills were always sharp and before she would pay at the grocery store, her keen estimation skills prepared her to know if she could afford all the items the cashier was running through.

Her hands were so strong, strong to prepare homemade pastas and dinners with great love and pride. So strong to till the garden and harvest the tomatoes and other vegetables. But most importantly so strong to hold, honour and share her faith through the prayers of the rosary. She was a woman of service. Service to her family, friends and to her God.

Rosina's children and grandchildren are privileged to have witnessed all of these things in their grandmother. As they venture into their own adulthood, they all have loving memories of a grandmother whose greatest joy was her grandsons and grandsons that know that everything she did and continues to do including the meatballs, tomato sauce and french-fries are made and seasoned with her unconditional love and devotion to them.

Rosina was adored by her family. She was the only girl born to a family of six brothers in a small town in Frigento, Avellino. Her family were farmers and harvested olives and chestnuts. She was quick and talented, even as a child and at the age of 6, her father crafted her a special stool so to be able to make her own pasta and prepare lunch for her family when they returned home from their work in the fields.

Her mother would send her to prepare a simple meal and she would surprise them with a homemade treat!

Rosina was 20 when she met her future husband for the first time at the market and he soon approached her family with serious intentions about marrying Rosina as well as his plans to immigrate to Canada.

Rosina adored her mother and father and loved her homeland. It was the farthest thought for her to even imagine a life without them across the ocean.

As the only daughter of Maria and Antonio Sasso, she was encouraged to marry her suitor, as he, was immigrating to Canada and through her marriage, could make a better tomorrow for her and all six of her brothers.

Following a short courtship, Filippo left for Canada. Through letter correspondence, they got to know each other. She agreed to marry him and he sent money for the purchase of her engagement ring. Shortly after, plans were made to travel to Canada via the CONTE BIANCAMANO in mid-February 1960.

I will forever remember my mom telling me of the intense emotions she experienced when she left her hometown and her beloved parents. As I put in print the details of this milestone event in her life, it still puts a lump in my throat.

Her “baule” was filled with some handmade embroidered linens made by her, and her brother Giovanni accompanied her to the ship. It had snowed so badly in her hometown that they carried the trunk up high using planks to support it on their shoulders.

She travelled the ocean alone with little money in hand.

The trip was horrific for her, a broken heart, alone and seasick. Through the kindness of her roommate, she was able to make it to an upper deck occasionally when not ill. She travelled for 9 days before arriving in Halifax at Pier 21, only to travel three more days by train to Toronto. She married within 30 days of arriving in Toronto.

In the early days of her new life in Toronto was so foreign to her. She tried and embraced all her new experiences with a hopeful heart even though she missed her family horribly. These new immigrants wore a smile and despite the early hardships, they knew and believed to have a better life ahead, something their small towns in Italy could not offer them. Shortly after she was married, a family member found her a job at a cleaners folding clothes for a few months until she was pregnant with her first child. My father had learned the trade of stone mason and had a part-time job lifting the pins at a local bowling alley in the evenings to make enough money to purchase their own home.

She lived with her sister-in-law until they were able to purchase their first home in 1962.

As new homeowners, they had a family rent the upper level to get ahead and she soon sponsored her brothers in the late 60's to immigrate and had them as boarders in her home. She made extra money babysitting the tenant's daughter Lucy and her niece. She would wake up early before sunrise to do her chores so, she could carefully attend to the small children when they were awake. No fancy washers or gadgets, my mom washed all the diapers and dishes by hand every day.

Her husband fell ill in the early 70's and she tried working in sales. Her pleasant demeanor welcomed customers and she was loved by her employer. This was a short-lived experience for her as her husband required open heart surgery for a heart valve repair.

She had started some work as a family housekeeper while Filippo was recovering from surgery and with the kindness of the Darrigo family and their friends, this made her a very efficient, sought out and trustworthy housekeeper for many families over her working years.

Filippo died unexpectedly at the age of 41 leaving Rosina, 36, with three small children aged 13, 12 and 6.

Overnight her life and the life of her children was forever transformed. They had been in Canada 14 years and together with the sweat of their brow, hard work and desire to be successful, they had built and a home and had a new car.

My mother's strongest moment, considering the adversity she was presented, was the day she woke up and realized she was doing this alone. For a while, her brothers and brothers in law helped her but this was it. She told me many times that this one day she made the decision to face her life and do it all by herself!

Then came the first of many stories that illustrate for me and my brothers her strong courage and determination.

Before the demise of her husband, Rosina was trying to learn how to drive a car -it was an impossible task for her as she was too scared.

As a young girl, I remember going everywhere with my mother. My brothers were in their teens and had part-time jobs. I remember sitting in the back seat of the car while the instructor from Alberto's Driving School coached her to learn how to drive. It wasn't happening, her leg trembled and her hands shook, but she persisted.

I remember jumping for joy and hugging her so tightly when she finally took her driver's license. I was so proud of her! This was the first of her many accomplishments ALONE that afforded her the independence she needed to face the world in the mid 1970's!

My mother taught us our life lessons through her example of course as well as stories and proverbs taught to her...as her children, we discounted "I proverbi and I detti" but, as adults we just want to make sure we have in writing the wise words of this generation. The words and rules they lived by.

A few years back, I was introduced to the term "griot", a West African term, that, describes the storyteller who maintains the tradition of the oral history. My mother is that, the "griot" of our family and the connection to her small town of Frigento and the Italian culture.

Most recently, I have been documenting this oral history so, that her family can always have in print the priceless things she shared and continues to share with us.

Rosina's life was not easy, she faced many hardships and never wanted anything to come in between her immense love of her children. She was proud and never asked for the help of anyone. She made ends meet, could find ways to save on her income and made sure her children's needs were always met. If she had the money they would get it, if not, she would never create any debt to do something beyond

her means. Even in illness and with broken bones, my mom found a way to report to work and earn her weekly salary, even if it meant taking me with her to help clean houses.

As a single mother, she worked and cared for our home as two parents would have. We had a pristine home, a fresh home cooked meal every day, and a garden that grew bountiful and would yield for dozens of people.

She always did all these things with a smile on her face and a “barzeletta” ready to share.

Her sense of humor and her quick and clever responses, coupled with her tremendous faith beliefs and her devotion to Our Lady of Pompeii makes her the incredible woman she is.

Rosina told me that life had taught her to be a lawyer and a judge. A lawyer to defend and advocate for herself and her children during a time where women were not seen as strong or able, and a judge so that alone, she could assess if what she was doing was right and just.

A few years back on Canada Day I visited PIER 21 and was touched when I saw and read the amazing baggage tags hung that conveyed handwritten messages of gratitude and narrated stories of immigrants who had entered at that Pier. “Grazie Canada..., grazie Dio...” and I felt overwhelmed and so connected to the immigrant story, the story of my mother. The women who accepted life with all its unexpected curves and made for their families the best life they could offer them in a land across the ocean.

I am a proud Canadian today because I have a mother who **fearlessly** took on the journey and made this land her new home. She did this alone, as a young widow, with great hardship and great success. My mother is my **femmina forte** for life. Her examples are unique, her body and mind strong and her heart full of love.

At the age of 84, I hope she realizes that we are the ones so proud of her! She met every challenge, a new country, a foreign language, and a widowed life with unwavering strength and courage. As she ages and faces new challenges, we, her family are forever grateful, and, even if not conveyed enough to her as it should be, we hope she realizes that she **is** a tremendously special part of each member of her families’ lives forming who we are and what we treasure.

We, her family are forever grateful to her, and to my father for choosing her and wanting her here with him in Canada!