

Dory DeAngelo

Family History

At the beginning of my father's funeral, in 1999, the priest from Holy Cross Church began the service by saying, "Thirty years ago when I started working at this parish, I was told that there was a family who had lived on Windsor for many decades, and the last name was DeAngelo."

To me, this is the most important way to preface an article about my aunt, Dory DeAngelo. I am thinking of her now, as she has dementia, and is in a nursing home. Historians try to create memories about the past; dementia deprives one of memories, and is an especially cruel illness for a noteworthy woman who was an historian, author, actress, stage director and she had many other careers and talents.

Both sets of my great grandparents on my father's side settled in old Northeast Kansas City in the 1870s and 1880s, and we have now had six generations of family living in that area.

Dory was born during the Great Depression to a working class family, and yes, she was born at 4427 Windsor Avenue, and was the youngest of 7 children. When I think of her, I think of the saying, "And the last shall be first." She is a woman who has amazing talents, and should not go unnoticed in our family, or to the history of Kansas City.

At this time in the 1990s, Dory would be on Channel 41 once per month, talking about when the circus would come to town, early residents, or that my grandfather performed vaudeville, or the fact that my grandmother's father was wealthy and respected and the first Italian consul to go to the Midwest. He worked for the Italian government, and moved here due to the Western expansion of the railroad. He coordinated immigration with the Italian government, made sure they got jobs, and would stamp "WOP" if they came without immigration papers.¹

To review what she accomplished: she studied acting in New York City. She was there for 2 years, and then was a stage director in Kansas City at the Missouri Repertory, the Lyric Opera, and the Starlight Theatre. She was the first female stage director at the Folly Theatre and Lyric Opera. She always said acting and the stage were her first love. She was in plays in the early 1950s on KMBC TV. Betty White, the actress, who has said she was one of the first women to appear on national TV in 1949, would surely agree that Dory had to be one of the first women to appear on TV in Kansas City, and thereby, was only a handful of women to appear on TV nationally in the early years of television. There used to be a play on TV every Friday. Dory would write, direct, and act in these plays. They would rehearse all week and the play would air on Fridays. Dory sang in plays, plus acted, danced,

wrote and directed for the stage starting in early 1950s through the early 1970s at the Lyric Opera and the Starlight Theatre.

Dory did not rest on her laurels with her success in local theatre. Besides acting and theatre, she was an historian and an author. She had a radio show briefly. In case you are not exhausted yet, I am just getting started. She worked in Public Relations at Crown Center and the American Nurses Association. She was an editor for the *Journal of the American Academy of Family Physicians*. She was the author of 5 books. When well-known people came to Kansas City, she served as an ambassador and would pick people up at the airport, talk about Kansas City, and take them where they needed to go. She was a script editor and consultant for numerous Hollywood TV programs. She did almost everything, short of shimmying up the Liberty Memorial. Always, I ask myself, where did this talent and this energy come from? My grandmother was the quintessential Italian grandmother who never left the kitchen. My father, uncles and other aunts all had conventional occupations.

Yet, in the late 1990s, Dory was voted one of the 50 most influential women in Kansas City. Her personal and research papers are held in permanent collection at the Kansas City Public Library.

She had self-confidence, talent, and great interpersonal skills that helped her move freely between the art world, the academic world, the theatre, and a love for Kansas City that is unprecedented. What is really amazing is that she took the interest and love for Kansas City that virtually everyone in the family has, and made it a part of her mission, her life's work, to make sure the people of Kansas City knew their past.

Likewise, within our family, Dory helped us (and potentially people all over the world, because of her books) know who we were and from whence we came. If ever there was a family who could engender a sense of love for Kansas City, it is our family. As always, Dory was ahead of the curve. Recent research shows that children who have the most resilience are people who know the most about their family background, because it gives them a sense that they are part of something much larger than themselves.

Personal Reflections

She would be at rehearsal or out with friends until the wee hours. Yet she was usually at the house on Windsor for family Sunday spaghetti dinners. She would sleep until noon or so, then wake up and run out the door, announcing she was going to rehearsal. When most people drove American cars, she drove MGs and a Karmann Ghia.

When I was about 11, I wanted to be a writer. Dory gave me the name of her friends in Hollywood who wrote for TV shows like the Carol Burnett Show. So, never mind that I was only 11, I called well-heeled writers asking them how to get started in the writing world. But really, aunt Dory gave me the best advice that was simple but

sage, and has held true over the years: Always tell the truth, and if you do, you will love what you write and so will other people.

My aunt, Frances DeAngelo, Dory's sister, who has a bench commemorating her life of service at Kessler Park, used to take us to see plays at the Starlight. We would watch the show, and wait until everyone would leave. It was eerie and surreal to wait until every person had left the big outdoor theatre. When I was about 7, I remember seeing Dory on stage, not as my aunt, but as the typical temperamental stage director. I have a good memory, and remember what she was saying to the actors one night. The actors were saying their lines, and Dory suddenly burst onto the stage, "You are supposed to have a candle in your hand! Where is the candle?!" The actors looked scared. They were lost for words. The actor who was supposed to have a candle put it in his hand and read his lines to the young lady. It sounded fine to me, but Dory yelled, "Not your left hand! Your right hand! How are you going to kiss her if you hold the candle in your left hand?"

Although I grew up in California, and have made Colorado my home, I, like most people in the family, have a love of Kansas City. The pride seems to have been infectious and we all walk around sounding like we work for the Chamber of Commerce. When I was a little girl, it seemed like a magical place. At least once a year, we would make a trek back to Kansas City, to visit the people who lived at 4427 Windsor Avenue, and the those who spawned from there. On what seemed like a long flight from Los Angeles to Kansas City, when I would notice the head of the plane start to tilt downward, and the captain said we were making our final descent into Kansas City, it seemed like the most exciting thing in the world. Even today, when I fly into Kansas City, that same sense of excitement and goose bumps overcomes me.

When Dory moved into a new house in Westport, she really did not show me her house. When I got there we walked around the neighborhood. She identified the trees, the people who lived in the community, and proudly pointed out the architecture and the businesses that were in the neighborhood.

In the early 1990s, when I was in my 20s, I moved back to Kansas City. As a young working adult, I was amazed at how many people knew Dory. When her picture was in the paper, people would comment that I looked like her. Many times, when people found out my last name, they would ask if I was related to Dory, and I would proudly say, "Yes, she is my Aunt." People either knew her because they went to school with her, saw her on TV, read her books, or worked with her in the theatre. She was known in Kansas City to people from all walks of life.

At about this same time, I was having coffee at a place on the Plaza. I started talking to a woman who told me she just finished her Master's degree in Urban Planning. When she found out my last name, she said that her thesis was based on Dory's historical research and preservation of old neighborhoods. People always praised her, adding that she provided a great service to the community.

Again, I ask, where did it come from? She did not even have a bachelor's degree, she went to college but studied theatre and acting, but she helped establish a scholarly method for urban renewal.

I am communicating about a lot of things other than who Dory is, and this is to elucidate that she embodied community, family and history.

The Future

Currently in the Northeast, there is a revitalization going on, with immigrants from the Middle East and African Americans moving in. I am told that there is racial tension again, as the demographics in the area change. When my great grandparents arrived two centuries ago, they experienced discrimination because their skin was too dark, and they ate strange food. But they prospered there, and found life along the banks of the Missouri River to be a good place to build a life. Likewise, I am certain that immigrants coming to the Northeast today can build a life there. To the people living in this area today, I say: May your descendants, 130 or so years from now, say that the Northeast was a good place to live harmoniously; my family was been able to prosper there for generations.

May the city of Kansas City, Missouri, embody what Dory gave to us. My aunt Frances, who also was active in civic events, has a park bench at Kessler Park. She has a great view overlooking the city she loved. I think Dory should join Frances with her own park bench overlooking the city. We do not acknowledge influential people enough. It seems we seldom create statues or busts of important people anymore to acknowledge those who made a difference. Even more seldom is to publically celebrate women who made a difference.

In addition to a park bench, I request that a part of Kessler Park be renamed DeAngelo Point, to commemorate the DeAngelo presence in the community, and to honor the early Italian immigrants who settled in that area.

My hope is that Kansas City will progress into the future with what I will call a "watchful DeAngelo eye" toward what is really important: community, history, and family. (If I were to add a fourth, it would have to be spaghetti).

I know this is a major request, but Dory took on daunting tasks all the time. She obviously never told herself something could not be done. She was a visionary optimist who knew effort could reap great rewards.

And, I have some of the DeAngelo chutzpah, so please help pay tribute to Dory for living an interesting and meaningful life, and empowering all of us to broaden our perspectives. She worked tirelessly and enthusiastically to entertain and educate.

LeAnna DeAngelo is a descendant of family from Old Northeast.

1. My great grandfather was Francesco Basile, the first Italian consul to go to the Midwest, owned one of the very first banks in Kansas City, in addition to a grocery store, a haberdashery, and a carpeting store. He owned many buildings, which have all been torn down. In the early 1990s, his home that he built himself on St. John Avenue was torn down, and this should not have happened. The family, especially Dory, lamented that his house was not preserved and turned into a museum. The house on Windsor is in great disrepair, and is directly behind grandfather Basile's home and we hope that the house on Windsor can be preserved, especially in light of the city's lack of appreciation for old buildings, and by therefore by conjecture, its people.