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Living His Dream

Dr. Norman D'Agostini overcame odds and obstacles to create a remarkable life story that includes a 50-year career as a dentist serving patients on the Main Line.

BY **MATT COSENTINO**
PHOTOS BY **JODY ROBINSON**

In his half a century as a practicing dentist on the Main Line and a respected member of the community, Norman D'Agostini, D.D.S., has often been asked to speak at various functions or to personally motivate individuals who happen to be down on their luck. He accommodates as many requests as he can, but he never prepares what he's going to say. Instead he prefers to talk from the heart and rely on his own story of overcoming long odds to become a personal and professional success.

His words—told in his gregarious style—always seem to pack quite a punch.

"I tell people, take a negative in your life and make it a positive," he says. "Some people say that's just a cliché, but if you believe it and feel it inside, you can make it work for you. If something doesn't work out, there is something to be learned.

"It's about having a fire and passion for who you are," he continues. "I love talking to someone who thinks things are totally hopeless—that's when I think I can reach that person. Most people just give up and become complacent. To me, as long as you are breathing, you can take charge and command of your life."

D'Agostini's history is all the proof one needs to believe in that credo.

Born into poverty in the mountains of Italy, his village had no running water or electricity. All residents, even the children, were expected to spend long days working the land. Becoming a dentist in the United States was quite possibly the furthest thing from his mind.

"We heard wonderful things about America, but where we came from was almost prehistoric," he says. "There was no heat, no beds, and we had to make our own clothes. Coming to America was like going to another planet."

Nevertheless, he made the transatlantic journey at the age of 10 along with his parents, his grandmother, and his two siblings. After



Dr. D'Agostini with his longtime assistant Suzanne Tinari

passing through Ellis Island and gazing upon the Statue of Liberty like so many immigrants before them, the family settled in Newark, New Jersey.

Placed into fourth grade at a local school, D'Agostini did not know a word of English and struggled to assimilate into his new surroundings. His home life wasn't much better due to his tyrannical father, but he found strength in his goals and aspirations. After setting his sights on dentistry, he slowly taught himself the language and became committed to academics.

Throughout his time in grade school and at St. Benedict's Preparatory School, he excelled in the classroom. From there he moved on to Villanova University, where he played football and became the first person in his family to graduate from college. He commenced to dental school at Temple University, where he joined several honor societies and became the president of his class.

Following his graduation day—still one of his proudest moments—D'Agostini embarked on a renowned career that reached the 50-year milestone this year.

"I'm very, very fortunate to be living this life," he says. "I've never considered dentistry a job. I never looked at it as a burden that I had to go to work. I go in on weekends. I go in early. I've never been bored with one pro-

cedure. I'm as alive now with my work than I've ever been before. I don't feel a sense that it's time to move on and I have no urgency to change what I'm doing, because it's just too enjoyable."

D'Agostini offers the full gamut of services in his Bryn Mawr office, which features Italian décor that harkens back to his roots. He embraces technology and other advancements that have been made in the field, and finds it fulfilling to transform people's lives through dental implants, laminates, and full-mouth restorations.

The personal relationships he's built are what stand out the most in his career, from high-profile patients in the world of Villanova athletics—Rollie Massimino and Brian Westbrook among them—to respected community leaders and entire families.

"Many dentists do the old 'drill, fill, and bill' routine, but I don't think that's me," he says. "I try to explain what's going on and give people options. I treat everyone like I would want myself to be treated. I'm still very lucky to have that kind of approach, because I see some colleagues who are burned out by the high volume. I'd rather do quality work and have more of a one-on-one relationship. People, young and old, tell me all the time, 'Please don't stop working.' As long as I'm hearing that kind of feedback,

I'm going to continue to do it."

D'Agostini is the last living member of his original family who made the trek from Italy to America. He remains close with his son and grandchildren, who are proud of their heritage and have studied the culture and language. His son even encouraged him to put his life story down on paper a few years ago, connecting him with an author who helped him publish a book about his life's journey.

That exercise, along with the 50th anniversary of the beginning of his dental career, have given him ample reason to reflect on his accomplishments.

"When I look at my past, I had every reason to not be where I am, to not be a success," he says. "But it gave me an opportunity to show what I'm made of. That was my attitude and it has never changed. I come from the philosophy that you just grind it out and make it happen. I believe in perseverance, single-mindedness, and being a good person along the way." ■

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