

Marc Rizzo, Anthony Rizzo, and Benjamin Rizzo
Current and Former Rizzo Avenue Residents
Route 9 Oral History Project

Interviewed by: Michael Emmons, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware

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Abstract

Cousins Marc Rizzo, Anthony (Tony) Rizzo, and Benjamin Rizzo all participate in this oral history interview. The interview was conducted at the office of Joseph Rizzo and Sons Construction, the Rizzo family's masonry business on Rizzo Avenue, a small subdivision along the Route 9 corridor built by the family's patriarch, Joseph Rizzo. Marc and Anthony Rizzo were present for the entirety of the oral history interview; Benjamin Rizzo participated for about 30 minutes of the interview. All three grew up on Rizzo Avenue, the family's subdivision. Marc Rizzo left in 1994 and then returned to live there in 2019. Anthony moved away in 1992 but returns to the subdivision each day for work. Benjamin Rizzo grew up in the subdivision and is the owner of Diamond State Masonry. They are the third generation of their family to live in the subdivision and were all born in the early 1960s. In this interview, the three men recall growing up on Rizzo Avenue and share stories and memories from their own as well as their parents' and grandparents' generations.

Marc and Tony recall that their grandfather, Joe Rizzo, Sr., who had immigrated from Italy earlier in the twentieth century, purchased a large parcel along Route 9 and moved from Poplar Street in Wilmington to the brick farmhouse there in 1930. He worked in construction and between 1942 and 1948 established his bricklaying and construction business. The family's matriarch and patriarch had eight children—four daughters and four sons. In 1949, they subdivided Rizzo Avenue into roughly equal parcels and then set about building housing for this second generation as they came of age. The cousins speculate that the bulk of the building was undertaken in the mid 1950s, and they list which family members lived in which houses. In time, the family built warehouses for the business and also a pool and recreation room, which became a focal point for socializing. A wine cellar built in the 1950s also became a social hub in the 1970s. In building the family subdivision, according to Marc and Tony, Joe Sr. hoped to recreate the family village he had left behind in Italy. All of the second generation worked in the family business, although some left to establish their own businesses.

They indicate that everyone got along and that their generation “all lived around each other, we grew up brothers, cousins, and best friends. It was fun for us.” The men remember that the construction yard was their playground and that they would rest and have snacks at each other's houses. Recreation outside the subdivision included trips to the Bowlerama and Holloway Terrace Park and activities at St. Anthony's church. The cousins remember invitations to Holloway Terrace picnics and events and indicate that they had friends in Collins Park. They also remember riding their bikes into Old New Castle and spending the day at Battery Park fishing.

The cousins recall that the second generation of Rizzos attended Rose Hill School and that most went to Brown Vocational for high school. The third generation went to Holy Spirit School and then to St. Mark's, De La Warr, Padua, and Ursuline for high school. They indicate that the family construction business specialized in the construction of high schools, building St. Mark's, William Penn, Newark, and Christiana high schools. They also worked on University of Delaware buildings, prisons, and the MBNA building downtown, among others.

Architecture in the subdivision, they note, is unique to the area. Their grandfather was well-connected in the construction industry, and the cousins speculate that he likely enlisted the help of architects he knew to design the houses. Marc notes that each of the houses is unique. All are of brick or stone masonry. Joe Sr. would often use stone left over from other construction jobs; Marc points out that their grandfather's house has four different colors of brick. The cousins agree that the most unique house on the block is a split-level ranch that Ben Sr. owned. All interior walls in the houses were plaster, and each was decorated to the taste of its occupant. Some in the second generation added onto their homes: Tony recalls his parents enclosing a sunroom to expand the size of the den. Marc and Tony note that the yard is composed of surplus or substandard concrete from the Delaware Memorial Bridge, acquired by Joe Sr.'s connections. As kids, they remember that, for years, the trucks would arrive at all times of day. Much of the landscaping is original to the area, although the cousins note that an older property-line wall was replaced in the 1950s to the 1980s with shadow block.

In reference to the racial composition of the area, Marc notes that the area was mostly white until the 1950s and 1960s, when developers built Dunleith, Rosegate, and Oakmont. When asked, they described the whole area as predominantly Black but remember Garfield Park as integrated and Collins Park, Castle Hills, and Minquadale as white. As kids, the Rizzos remember little animosity between their family and the Black residents of the area saying, "We never bother them, they never bother us." The cousins remember the Wilmington riots in 1968-1969 but said that, because they were still young, they did not understand it well. They recalled race-related fights spilling over from De La Warr High School to the grounds of Holy Spirit School. They also remember their grandfather employing several nearby Black residents. The cousins relate that, as an immigrant from Italy, their grandfather had been called many ethnic slurs following his arrival in the U.S.

While a limited number of non-family members resided in the subdivision in the earlier days, in more recent years, the old farmhouse and an uncle's house have been subdivided into five units each, and non-family members now reside in the subdivision. Marc attributes this to a lack of a succession plan from the second to the third generation.