

My Inspirations to Vote:

A Family of Immigrants, Two Courageous Leaders, and Paying It Forward

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A photo sits in my family album representing four generations of voters, including myself, the photographer. Holding my daughter is Nonna, my Italian-immigrant grandmother, standing next to my mother, near Geraldine Ferraro who is speaking in Spokane in 1984. This photo is one of four memories of the importance of voting to my family, especially for Nonna.

In my first memory, I was twelve and walked with Nonna to the nearby fire station, the local polling place, so she could teach me how to vote. My mother had always gone with Nonna, a naturalized citizen who never missed an election or opportunity to vote. Everyone at the station knew them and allowed the collaboration. This year, however, a new chief said voters had to enter the booth solo, unattended. I was heartbroken; my grandmother was livid, storming out, refusing to vote. On the walk home, we discussed the situation, rethought the vote, found a paper ballot, and walked back to the station. Nonna entered the booth; and, in my loudest voice possible, I read the steps and information from the paper ballot, just outside the booth. She wanted me to know how important it was to fight for one's right to vote and never to underestimate the importance of one vote. Each time I've voted since that experience, I've felt the presence of Nonna "in the booth" helping me mark my ballot.

In my second memory, I turned 18 the year Robert Kennedy decided to run for president. Knowing this would be my first presidential election and first opportunity to vote, I registered shortly after my birthday. On June 4, 1968, I signed up to campaign, bringing posters and literature home to my family. That evening, the late-movie was interrupted after midnight by news affiliates announcing Kennedy had been shot at the Ambassador Hotel, there to address his supporters after winning the California primary. I glued myself to the television for the next few days hoping Kennedy would live, remembering the tragedy of his brother's assassination five years earlier. The only way I could think of working out of my despondency was to write a letter of sympathy to his family. In my sadness, I decided not to help with the election, not to campaign for anyone, and, worst of all, I would never, ever vote. The country moved on, election time drew near, and Nonna wanted me to accompany her to the fire station. When I told her I wasn't going to vote, she was beside herself, scolding me in the harshest Italian she could think of. I re-evaluated, walked with Nonna, and voted that year. Eventually, I received a thank-you photo and form letter from Kennedy's family. I framed the photo, reminding me never to take voting or another election for granted, and always to vote.

The third memory, of Geraldine Ferraro, began when Mondale announced she was his pick for a vice-presidential running-mate. Not only was she a woman, but a second generation Italian-American, like me. Although we grew up almost a generation and two coasts apart, Ferraro's educational background was similar to mine; and, though she was the first woman in her family to earn a college degree, I was first in my family (female or male) to earn a college degree. I still have her campaign button which I wore for many years, long after the election was over and Mondale-Ferraro was the losing ticket. Ferraro, like Nonna, reminds me that voting will always be important, especially to generations we are raising.

My fourth memory begins late election night, 2016. My daughter phoned from Alaska and we deliberated election results ... each on the internet, while my husband watched on television. As we talked about the future, and the importance of every vote, I was reminded of Nonna and of Geraldine Ferraro who both helped me understand voting was about having my voice count. I was reminded of Robert Kennedy who gave his life running for office. I vote because my grandmother taught me; I vote because my mother and father voted and

encouraged me; I vote because my husband and I want our daughter and grandchildren to vote; and I vote because I can.