



## Turning the Tables: From Housewife to Inmate and Back Again

By Teresa Giudice, K.C. Baker

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Teresa Giudice, star of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, has seen it all, but nothing—not even *Real Housewives* scandals—could compare to the media firestorm that ensued after she was convicted on federal fraud charges.

The infamous, fun-loving Jersey mom of four was sentenced to fifteen months in the same prison where Piper Kerman—the real-life inspiration behind *Orange Is the New Black*—did her time. Her tiny prison cubicle in Connecticut felt so far removed from the glamorous world portrayed on *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*. What was a skinny Italian to do? Keep a diary, of course...

In her very first tell-all memoir, Teresa comes clean on all things Giudice: growing up as an Italian-American, meeting the love of her life and starting a family, dealing with chaos and catfights on national television, and eventually, coming to terms with the reality of life in prison. Featuring never-before-seen scans of her prison diary, *Turning the Tables* captures some of the most memorable moments of her prison stay, including the cringe-inducing fights she witnessed, the awkward conundrum of being trapped when a fellow inmate had a...guest...over, and the strength she found while confined between four concrete walls.

Even at her lowest of lows, Teresa was able to live *la bella vita* by staying positive and realizing her purpose. Friends, foes, and fans have speculated about Teresa’s prison experience, but nothing will prepare you for the revelations she makes in this entertaining and heartwarming memoir.

*“The world will see a new Teresa. A different Teresa. Well, actually, the Teresa I always was.”*

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Teresa Giudice stars on *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* and is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Turning the Tables*; *Skinny Italian*; *Fabulicious!*; *Fabulicious: Fast and Fit*; and *Fabulicious! On the Grill*. A Berkeley College graduate and a longtime supporter of NephCure Kidney International, she lives in New Jersey with her family.

K.C. Baker is a staff writer at *People* magazine, where she has worked for the past fifteen years. Before that she was a staff writer at the *New York Daily News*. *Turning the Tables* is K.C.'s third book.

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Turning the Tables

# 1

## GROWING UP GORGA

When I was little, I wanted to be a movie star or an entertainer. That's all I could think about. I wanted to be just like Cher.

Every week, my parents and I gathered in the living room of our five-room apartment to watch The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour. I could barely wait until it was on each week. My father, Giacinto Gorga, sat on our green couch with my mother, Antonia, while I lay on the floor, right in front of the only TV set we had in the house at the time. It had a twelve-inch screen and dials to turn up the volume. We didn't have remotes back then and we only had thirteen channels or something.

My brother, Giuseppe, who is two years younger than I am—I call him Joey and he calls me Tre—would only watch some of the programs with us, like Three's Company and Sanford and Son. He wasn't really into the ones where glamorous women in sequined gowns were singing and dancing onstage. He and I were best friends growing up. We rode bikes together, played board games and cards, and loved making forts in the living room with our blankets and pillows. He always had my back, and would kick me under the dinner table to warn me if I was pushing my dad to the limit while asking his permission for something. My parents and brother were my world growing up, and believe me, I could not have asked God for a better family.

Watching Cher onstage took me to a whole other world. She was so glamorous in her long, slinky gowns, with her glittery diamond earrings. I loved her gorgeous makeup, perma-tan, and those loooong eyelashes. (Which I started wearing All. The. Time. on the show . . .) I thought her huge fame, her undeniable glamour, and her devoted fans (I was, of course, one of them, though I never met her or anyone famous when I was little) were so amazing. As I lay there on the floor of my family's humble little apartment, fantasizing about what it would like to be Cher, I had no idea that one day I would be famous, too. But like Cher and every celebrity out there, I would come to see that fame comes with some of the best things in the world—and some things that threaten to break you.

I wanted to sing and dance like Cher. I thought I was pretty good at it. As a kid, I would put on little shows for my parents all the time in our living room, singing and dancing and pretending I was onstage. As I got older, I wished that my mom had sent me to dancing school or gymnastics class, but she didn't because she literally couldn't take me. She didn't start driving until I was in third grade, when she surprised all of us by getting her license! All on her own! We were all so proud of her. But up until then, when I was seven years old or so, she, Joey and I would walk everywhere, unless our dad drove us. They didn't trust anyone else to drive us anywhere because they were so protective.

The bigger issue was that as an Italian immigrant, my mom simply didn't know how to go about finding classes for me and signing me up, even when she did have her license. My mom has since said that she would have taken me to dance or gymnastics if she'd known I wanted to go. But I knew how hard it was for her to get around, even with a car, so I never asked her about it. I didn't want to burden her with that.

Back then, my parents really didn't see the point of after-school activities, either. They were like, "You have to be home for dinner at five-thirty. No out and about." So I would just take part in whatever activities were offered at school. I was a baton twirler in third grade, played softball in elementary school and in junior high, and played the saxophone in the seventh-grade and eighth-grade band. I gave up on my dream of becoming famous when I became a teenager because I thought it was just hopeless, to be honest. My parents had no Hollywood connections and no idea how to even begin to get me into showbiz. But still, I always wanted to become successful and make something of myself one day. I just didn't know what that would be.

While I love the life my parents gave me and Joey, they definitely didn't have it easy when they came to America. They had a good life in Italy. There, they were surrounded by family and friends everywhere they turned, because Sala Consilina, the town where they grew up, is so tiny. Everyone looked out for everyone else. They were happy there, for sure, but wanted more than what their little hamlet offered. They left the only place they knew because they thought their children would have a better life in America, where anything was possible. Sala Consilina was beautiful but limited in opportunity, and I could not be more grateful for the life and the love they have given me. I had an amazing childhood, thanks to my parents . . . but in order for me to have that incredible childhood, my parents sacrificed a lot.

My dad, Giacinto, came here first, in the late sixties. He moved in with his sister in Paterson, New Jersey, a small city with lots of tall buildings, row houses, and concrete. It was a far cry from Sala Consilina, a small, medieval-looking town nestled in the rolling green and brown hills of the province of Salerno, about two hours from Naples. When I was little, I could always point to where it was on a map because it's right at the beginning of the boot in the southwest of Italy.

My mom, Antonia, grew up as an only child and learned about heartbreak at an early age. She had a sister named Carmela, who passed away when she was fifteen days old. Her mother's (my grandmother's) name was Rosa, but everyone called her Teresa, which is pronounced Tare-ray-za. That's really how you say my name in Italian, although everyone here calls me Ter-ee-sah. I am named after my maternal grandmother. In Italian families, the tradition is to name your children after your husband's parents. But since my mom lost her mother, my dad broke with tradition. He said to my mom, "If we get married and have a daughter, I want to name her after your mother." It was so loving of my dad to say that. My dad's mom totally understood, which is another reason why my parents loved her so much.

Speaking of pronunciations of names, people always ask me why I say my last name different ways. Sometimes I pronounce it Joo-dee-chay or Joo-dih-chay, which is the Italian way to say my husband's last name, which ironically means "judge" in Italian. Other times I will say my last name is Joo-dice, which is the American way to say it. Most people have a hard time pronouncing it the Italian way, so I am sticking

with the American way from now on. My husband is fine with that. We had used the Italian pronunciation to make Joe's dad happy, God rest his soul.

While I can easily pronounce words in Italian, people would always laugh when I mixed up or mispronounced words on the show—like when I called a nor'easter a Norwegian, said the word ingredients (!), stamina instead of stamina, and semolina instead of salmonella. I've read stories that say I am known for my "mixed metaphors and malapropisms." Mala—what? Oh my God. I have no friggin' idea how the heck to even begin to pronounce that one! What can I say? (That's why I had someone help me write this book!) People can laugh all they want. I grew up in a house where my parents spoke Italian all the time, so I spoke two languages, which is why I mix things up sometimes. (I still speak Italian with my parents today . . .) I am blowing all of the haters a big kiss right now. I don't want to hate. I just want to love, love, love, love! But look—it is what it is. And now I definitely know the difference between a nor'easter and a Norwegian . . . well, sort of.

When my mom was a baby, my grandfather, whose name was Pietro, told my grandmother that he was going to leave Sala Consilina for Venezuela to work—and never returned. No one knew if he never returned by choice, or if he was forced to stay. They didn't even know if he was alive or dead. My mother doesn't remember meeting him because he left when she was so young. To this day, my family doesn't know what happened to him. As the years went on, my grandmother tried to find him. She tried to write to him, but wasn't even sure he got the letters. He never answered. That broke their hearts.

After her father (my grandfather) left, my mom and her mother (my grandmother) went to live with my grandmother's parents (my great-grandparents), Rosa and Vincenzo. But my grandmother led a very lonely life. She never left the house, for fear that people would shun her and talk about her because she had no husband. That's how it was back then. She came from a respectable family but felt ashamed that her husband had left, even though she didn't do anything wrong. So she never went out with friends, to the many feasts they held in town (it's the Italian way!), or even to church. She would just stay home and work the land with my great-grandfather and help my great-grandmother cook, sew, make sausages, jar vegetables, and take care of my mom, of course.

Things only got worse for my mom and grandmother as my mom got older. When my mom was nine, my grandmother got very sick. She started to lose a lot of weight and always seemed to have a cold and a cough, so her family took her to see a doctor in Naples. By then it was too late. They told her she was very sick, possibly with lung cancer. They sent her home and she died months later. My mom was an orphan at only ten years old. She was devastated. She and her mother did everything together and were incredibly close. She still had her grandparents, who loved her so much, but said she felt so alone in the world without her mother by her side. Every girl needs her mother, and my mom felt so lost without hers. I can't even imagine what she went through. That's what made it so hard for me to be away from my own girls when I went to prison. They needed their mother, too, even if I was only gone for eleven and a half months.

But that wasn't the end of my mother's pain. While she was still reeling from my grandmother's death, my great-grandfather died a month later because he was so heartbroken over losing his daughter. My mother loved my great-grandfather so much because he was the only father figure she ever had. All of this death and sorrow was a lot for a little girl to take. It was a very dark time for my mother. Again, I cannot even fathom what she went through.

But she went on to have a happy life, thank God. My great-grandmother continued to raise her. She had so much strength and was so good to my mother. Since it was just the two of them, my mom had to learn how to do everything around the house, from cooking and making sausages, to tending the garden and making

clothes, just like my grandmother did. That's how she learned to be such an amazing cook and to take care of Joey, my dad, and me so well. What I admire so much about my mom is that while her childhood was filled with such trauma and sadness, she was never bitter or angry over everything that had happened to her. Despite everything she went through, she is one of the kindest people I have ever met. She has a heart of gold (and not one bad bone in her body). She is sweet and loving—and laughs a lot. Even today. I love her so much and am so blessed to have her as my mom.

My dad grew up with his parents, Rosa (yes, another Rosa!) and Giuseppe (whom my brother is named after), two older brothers, Michael and Mario, and two older sisters, Antoinetta and Maria. My dad was the youngest in his family, like Audriana. There was also a brother named Nicola, which means Nicholas in English, who died at six.

They lived in a three-story house made of stone, in the oldest part of Sala Consilina near the main piazza. Underneath the house, which you got to by climbing up a huge flight of stone stairs, were stalls and troughs for the goats, sheep, and pigs they used to keep. They had a huge yard, filled with beautiful fig and cypress trees and an impressive garden, because almost everyone grew their own vegetables. Joe and I visited the house in the show's second season. That was my favorite episode of all time. I was so happy to go back to Sala Consilina to see the relatives that Joe and I have there, since his family is from the same town. It's so beautiful and peaceful there. Most of the people there may not have five-carat diamonds, Chanel bags, McMansions, Ferraris, or yachts, but they are happy. Very happy. Because family is really all you need in this life.

My dad met my mom when he was twenty and she was just thirteen, when she was on her way to a feast to celebrate the Blessed Virgin. My mother didn't give him a second thought, but my father couldn't get her out of his mind. He found out where she lived and began visiting her at her grandmother's house every week, as long as someone else was there, of course. (Italians were very strict back then and still were when I was growing up!) My dad wanted to propose right away, but his father told him he was too young and needed to have a good job and earn some money before he could get married and start a family. But her family wanted them to either get married or break up, because they didn't like the idea of a boy coming around if he wasn't planning to stay forever. So they broke up, but he never forgot about her. (This is my favorite part! It's so romantic!) Five years later, when he was working in America, he wrote to her, telling her that he still wanted to be with her and asked if she wanted to be with him. She replied, "If you are serious, then come back to Italy so we can discuss it." He came right back to Italy and married her eighty-seven days later, on December 27, 1969.

I love looking at their wedding album, which reminds me of scenes from *The Godfather*. After my parents exchanged vows in the church, they walked to the reception hall, with dozens of their friends and family following them in the streets—just like in the movie. They have been married for forty-six years now and are still so in love. They still flirt and make each other laugh every day. They both have a great sense of humor—which is where I get it from!

After my parents got married, they decided to come to America in 1971, with just two suitcases. My mom was pregnant with me when they moved to Paterson (but she didn't know it). Before my mom got here, she said she thought America was paradise. She had seen pictures and fell in love. She said she wanted to explore the world, since she had never set foot outside Sala Consilina in her life. But my dad kept saying to her, "I don't know if you'll really like it . . ."

He was right. Living in a new country was very hard for both of them. Neither spoke English. My mom told me she would cry herself to sleep at night, wondering why they had left Italy. She would say, "I don't have



nobody here . . . I don't understand what people are saying. This is terrible . . ." She didn't even know how the money worked, but she said nice people at stores would help her count out her change—and that no one ever stole from her. Yes, it was hard, but they had wanted to come to America—the land of opportunity.

My dad needed a job and began working as a dishwasher at an Italian restaurant, but he learned how to repair shoes at the same time. My father worked day and night and saved everything he could so that he could buy a shoe repair business in Butler, New Jersey. Joey and I would go to work with him on Saturdays when we were little. Most of the time, we just stayed in the back room watching cartoons or playing. Sometimes, though, we would help him sweep or clean or find shoes that customers came to pick up. I loved helping him and always felt so grown up working there.

Sometimes, though, he was too much of a perfectionist. Ten or eleven years ago, a thirty-something-year-old woman brought in a pair of hot Christian Louboutins to repair at the store he bought in Ramsey, New Jersey, after his first store burned down. Now, we all know that Louboutins are known for their signature red soles. They're a total status symbol. But my dad thought the soles looked badly scuffed, so he spray painted the bottoms of these very expensive shoes super-black and then applied a special polish to make them shine. He thought they looked great—just like new. When the woman came to get them, she was like, "These aren't my shoes! My shoes had red soles!" I had to set him straight and tell him, "You cannot spray paint the bottoms of Louboutins!" He didn't want her to be upset, so he spray painted the bottoms red again. She was happy when she saw the red soles again, but at first? Not so much. *Madonna mia!*

After all the years my dad worked at the repair shop, which he really loved, he had to sell his store in Ramsey eight years ago because of his health. He had to have two open-heart valve replacements. On top of that, he just couldn't bear to breathe in the fumes from the chemicals he used in the store. He would get pneumonia all the time. We were sad that he had to sell it, because we have so many happy memories there. The store is still there and I get a little teary-eyed whenever I see it. But, as we all know, with life comes change . . .

When I was growing up in my family, there was a lot of love. We lived a very simple but very happy life. I was raised in a strict Italian Catholic household that had strong values. Loyalty is everything to me. Family is everything to me. You never go against your family in my eyes. That's what I was taught.

My dad was home with us every night after work. We went to church every Sunday and sat in the same pew at Mass every week. On the weekends, we would sometimes go to my parents' friends' houses or they would come to ours. My dad would play cards with the men. My mom would sit and talk with the women, drinking coffee and having desserts while my brother and I hung out with all the kids.

Even though our apartment was modest, it was so warm and welcoming. I have such good memories from living there. When you walked in the door, the kitchen was right there. That's where we spent most of our time. To the right of the kitchen were three bedrooms right next to each other—my parents' bedroom and then mine and Joey's. Then there was a bathroom and the living room. That was it.

Even though we had no grass in our yard, just asphalt, we lived across the street from the Paterson Falls, which are spectacular. I loved being able to hear the rush of water when we had our windows open. We would always see people going there to take pictures because it's such a famous landmark in our area. They held a big carnival there every year. Joey and I loved going to that carnival. I remember how I couldn't wait to look out the window each year to watch this man walk across the falls on a metal wire. I loved seeing him walk the tightrope because you don't really see things like that a lot anymore. Especially out your window. I was always so worried that he was going to fall! (He never did, thank God . . .)

One thing I loved about living in that apartment house was a massive mulberry tree across the street. Its branches hung down low, so we would go and pick mulberries off the tree when they were ripe and eat them. When Joe and I were little and he would come over to the house with his mom, we would run across the street and pick as many as we could and sit on one of the big rocks under the tree and eat them. Our hands and faces were dark purple from the berries, but we didn't care. I loved the bond that Joe and I shared, even back then. We always felt so comfortable with each other. As kids we joked about how we wanted to marry each other one day, but back then I had no idea that I was sitting under that beautiful tree with my future husband!

My dad and I have always been close. He was—and still is—one of the most powerful forces in my life. Growing up, he was like a god to me. He was incredibly strong—emotionally and mentally, but also physically. What always struck me were his strong hands. They were enormous. He wore something like a size 16 ring.

When I was little though, boy, was I terrified of my dad. My father was king. The boss. We always said, “What he says, goes!” He never hit me. He didn't have to. If he was mad, he just shot you this look. Whenever he did that, I would be shaking in my shoes. I actually peed my pants when I was in first grade when he was yelling about something I did and gave me that chilling look. Grown men were wary of it! I got so scared that I couldn't help but wet my pants—or run.

As I got older, though, I started to push the limits with him. I wasn't fresh. I just wanted to have my say, like all teenagers do. Sometimes when he told me to do something, I would say, “But . . .” He did not like that. I think he thought I was being disrespectful, but I was just trying to get my point of view across—or get something I really wanted. I remember asking my dad if I could have a sleepover at my friend's house. He said no. “But her parents will be there,” I said. “Why can't I?” The answer was always no. He couldn't believe that I would dare to continue to ask him about it. Finally, he said, “You sleep home. I don't want to talk about it again.” That was that. No sleepovers.

I remember my mom or my brother shooting me looks to keep quiet when I said, “But . . .” (I laugh now when I think of all the crazy things my little spitfire, Milania, comes up with! Like when she said to Joe, “Gimme pizza, you old troll!” I cannot imagine what kind of look I would have gotten if I had said that to my dad!)

When my dad got really mad at me, he would slam his hands on the table, just like my brother did at his son's christening on the first episode of Season 3, after he called me “garbage,” which started a huge brawl. (I will never forget that horrible day . . . Oh, Madonna mia . . .)

Unlike me, my brother would never talk back to my father. He would always stay quiet. My mom was a saint. She would never talk back, either. Once in a while she would give him an eye roll, but that was it. As I got older, I always remember my mom saying to me, “If you were married to your father, you would have been divorced already . . .”

My mom and dad were always good at balancing each other out. My mom knew to keep quiet when my dad was fired up and how to speak to him when he calmed down. This really worked for them because they have been happily married for so long. I never heard my mother raise her voice to my dad, who treated my mom like a queen. He would always say to her, “This is how a man treats a woman . . .” I think one reason my brother treats his wife, Melissa, so well is because he learned that from my dad.

Even though my dad could be strict and scary when he shot me the look, the funny thing is that today I see

that my dad is really just a big teddy bear. My mom is now the boss, although I'm not sure he would admit that. My dad cooks and cleans a lot more now because it's hard for my mom with her rheumatoid arthritis. I think one of the reasons Joe and I have such a strong marriage is because I learned so much from my parents' relationship. He also learned from his parents, Frank and Filomena Giudice, who were happily married for decades, like mine. Joe and I rarely raise our voices to each other and work out our differences in a loving way. I can only hope that Joe and I are able to pass down what we learned from our parents to our daughters. I want them to have the kind of happy marriages we have all had in my family.

I'm grateful that my parents were so strict with me. I never did drugs growing up. I was too terrified of my dad. He would tell me, "If you do drugs and the drugs don't kill you, I will." I always thought of him before doing anything I knew I shouldn't do. Plus, I never wanted to do anything to disappoint my parents in any way. They were so supportive of us, and had given up so much for our happiness, that I never wanted to do anything that would make them think that I wasn't grateful. I was always afraid of what would happen if I ended up in the hospital from taking any drugs. My parents would have had to come and get me, and they would have been devastated. And they would definitely have killed me. Or at least made my life beyond miserable.

My mom is the best mom in the world. So caring and loving. She was always so attentive to my brother and me. We were her life. Her whole world. Growing up, my mom was always home with us. That is how my dad wanted it. We never had a babysitter. My mom would always invite my friends and my brother's friends to our house, so she could keep an eye on all of us and so that she knew where Joey and I were at all times. When I was little, my friends would come over and we would play Barbies for hours.

My dad didn't want my mom to work, although she would come to the shoe repair place every now and then and help him out. She would do any repairs that needed the sewing machine, so she would sew straps on handbags and sandals—that kind of thing.

Dinnertime at my house was sacred. It was family time. It's the same in my house now. My mom had dinner on the table at 5:30 p.m. on the dot every night. We all loved that she made us delicious, healthy home-cooked meals. After we finished dinner, we would have to stay seated at the table for dessert, which was always fruit. We couldn't get up from the table until everyone was done eating. My dad was very big on that. I still carry on that same tradition in my house, too.

My mom was always in the kitchen cooking and baking, like other Italian mamas everywhere. The house always smelled so good. Everything she and my dad made, since he liked to cook, too, was just so delicious. It was all about food in my house. We didn't grow up in a mansion, but our house was the best of the best when it came to food.

Every Sunday, I remember my mom making meatballs and braciole (pronounced brajole), thin slices of meat rolled with garlic and parsley and held together with a toothpick. So delicious . . . She would also make her own sauce and stir in homemade sausage, which made it taste even better. I still do that today with my sauce.

I would watch my mom all the time, asking questions about how she prepared things. I would help her cook, too. I think I started helping her when I was five. I would fry eggs in olive oil (like Milania would do with me, later on) and make espresso every night for my dad after dinner. As I got older, especially after I got married, I learned so much from her, which is why I am so good in the kitchen today—and was able to write three New York Times best-selling cookbooks!

Everything my mom made was mouthwateringly delicious and done to perfection. During the week she

would make us eggplant parmigiana, escarole and beans (which I love to make for my girls now), linguine in white clam sauce or red sauce with crabs, stuffed eggplant, and chicken parmigiana. I love my mom's lasagna, stuffed mushrooms, and homemade pasta. We couldn't get enough of her food. And the smell of her freshly baked bread in the house? Heavenly . . .

My father would always make dinner on Wednesday, his day off. He would roast pork chops or chicken in the oven with onions, potatoes, and vegetables. *Delizioso!*

I loved helping my mom make desserts, too, like *nocché*, which is Italian for bow tie cookies. We would make them for parties and holidays. They taste so good and look so beautiful on the table, but are a lot of work.

My mom went all out on Christmas Eve, which was huge for us. We always hung out with our neighbors, who were Sicilians. My mom would invite something like thirty-five people over every year. The kids all played and ran around while the adults laughed, drank homemade wine, and ate all the amazing food my mom spent hours making. (Italian families love to have everyone over all the time, especially for holidays!)

One longtime Italian, Roman Catholic tradition our family followed was the Feast of the Seven Fishes on Christmas Eve to celebrate Jesus's birth. Just like during Lent, when Catholics aren't allowed to eat meat, we are supposed to fast until Jesus is born and can only eat fish while observing the *Cena della Vigilia*—the Christmas Eve vigil dinner. So it was all about the fish that night.

We would have linguine in red sauce with seafood (one of my favorite pasta dishes), seafood salad with octopus, shrimp, and scungilli, another favorite of mine. We would eat a lot of *baccala*—salted cod, which is a southern Italian tradition. We would *mangia* on *baccala* salad, *baccala* in a red sauce, or fried *baccala*, clams casino, mussels in a hot, spicy red sauce baked in the oven, as well as fried shrimp and fried calamari. For dessert, I would help my mom make *struffoli*—fried balls of dough with honey and rainbow sprinkles, which look so beautiful when you serve them. I always loved eating all the fish on Christmas Eve, which is another tradition I uphold at my house now.

At Easter, my mom would make *pizza chiena* or *piena*, a traditional Napolitano recipe. *Piena* means “full”—so it's a thick pie with a crust on top stuffed with ricotta, prosciutto, eggs, and cheese. Absolutely amazing.

One of my favorite childhood memories was going down the Jersey shore with my parents and my brother. Sometimes we would go with Joe's family. We would go for the day every Wednesday and Sunday, since those were my dad's days off. My mom would pack the most delicious sandwiches: prosciutto, fresh mozzarella and eggplant or chicken cutlet. Instead of sprinkling salt and pepper on the sandwiches, she would put homemade jarred eggplant in olive oil or roasted red peppers on the sandwiches. So good! My mom would always pack a big container of iced tea to drink and fresh fruit, like juicy peaches or refreshing watermelon slices. For whatever reason, everything always tasted so good on the beach—and still does.

We would buy badges for the day at beaches like Sandy Hook or Long Branch, and I would spend the day swimming in the ocean, body surfing (hoping I wouldn't lose the top to my bathing suit when I was tossed around in the huge waves!), picking seashells off the beach, playing with sand crabs we dug up, and building sand castles with my dad and my brother. My dad loved to dig a deep hole in the sand, put me or my brother in it, and cover us up to our necks, which would make us laugh! (My mother was always like, “Be careful with them, *Giagee!*”)

My favorite bathing suit back then was a crocheted bikini in rainbow colors. I wish I had a photo of me in that suit, but I don't. My mom didn't take a lot of photos of me and Joey, but I wish she had. I want to be able to see what I looked like every year of my life and share those pictures with my children. That's why I'm now a fanatic when it comes to pictures. I am always taking photos of my daughters doing anything and everything, so they can remember where they come from. What I have learned in this life is that honoring our beginnings—whether they are humble or extravagant—is so important, and I want my girls to be able to look at those photos with my future grandkids!

Growing up with strict Italian, Catholic parents, all I heard my parents say was that they wanted to raise me to be a good girl. They wanted me to be a good wife and mother one day. That's what I wanted to be too. But sometimes it was hard, because the standards they had for my brother, even though he was younger than me, were very different from the standards they held me to because he was a boy, which is typical in Italian families. If my father was king of the house, my brother was the prince. Every night after dinner, I was the one who was expected to help clean up and do the dishes. He would just eat and then take off. I always cleaned my brother's room for him. I would put away my laundry and then his laundry. Every Saturday I would help my mom clean the house. I would dust, mop the floors, clean the bathroom, and vacuum the whole house. He didn't have to do any of this. I never questioned it or got angry about it. This was just the way it was. My brother did have his own responsibilities, too. He would help my dad out in the yard and would always take out the garbage.

While I was a daddy's girl, and still am, my brother was definitely the apple of my mother's eye. My mother was crazy about my brother. She loved him so much. She couldn't pronounce Joey right so she would call him Jovey mio—"my Jovey." We both got our love for our own families—and our strength—from our parents, especially my dad. He taught me to stand up for myself and face my challenges head-on, just like he did. I had no idea just how big those challenges would be for me later on in life.

When I was going into fourth grade, we moved from our apartment to a one-family house in a nice neighborhood. I lived in that house with my parents until I was twenty-seven, when I got married. I have a picture of me standing in front of that house on my wedding day. We all spent lots of time in our new yard. My dad would cut the grass, while my mom would be outside every night watering the flowers she loved to plant. My parents had a garden in the backyard, where they grew tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, and eggplant, just like their families did in Italy. They also installed a full kitchen in the basement, which is totally an Italian thing. They did that because they wanted to keep the kitchen upstairs spotless. The kitchen downstairs was the workhorse kitchen, where all the heavy lifting would take place when it came to cooking—especially for the holidays. Next to the kitchen downstairs, there was a big room with a living room and an area for the table where we ate dinner every night together.

If you thought my parents were strict when I was little, that was nothing compared to when I was a teenager. We would be sitting at the dinner table and my father would pick up a knife and say to me, "You need to walk a straight line on the knife. If you walk crooked on it, you will cut yourself. But if you walk straight, you will be good." He was basically telling me that I always needed to avoid sex and drugs, do right in life, and try not to make any stupid mistakes. He told me that all the time—right up until the day I got married.

For as much of a good girl as I prided myself in being, I did make some mistakes. In seventh grade, I cut school one day with my best friend, Maria. We went to her house because her mom worked and no one was home to catch us. I had my period and felt lousy, and just didn't feel like dragging through the school day. In my house, I had to be dying to stay home from school.

We hung out at Maria's house all day, talking, putting on makeup, and watching TV. I kept a close eye on

the clock. I had to get back to school before the last bell rang because my mother picked me up every day. I have to admit, I loved feeling so free!

When I got back to school, I tried to fly under the radar, but one of my teachers saw me and figured out that I had skipped school. The next day I was called into the principal's office. I was shaking like a leaf as I walked down the hall. I had never, ever been in trouble like this before in my whole life. I almost died when the principal told me I was suspended from school for two days, because I knew what my parents would say. That's what scared me the most.

I remember almost wanting to throw up when I told my mom what had happened, because my stomach was in knots. Just as I predicted, she didn't take it well. At all. After I managed to get the words out, she yelled at me and told me I had to go to school unless I was really sick. She said I needed to be a good example for my brother. I felt so bad for letting her down. I cried and went to my room and stayed there until dinner. Despite how upset she was with me, she didn't tell my father about it. I was beyond relieved. I was a teenager pushing the limits, but I felt so guilty about disappointing my mom that I never missed school again.

I am proud of the fact that I was a good girl growing up. I know I have made some missteps along the way. I've also had to deal with the many curveballs life has thrown me. Despite all of that, I have always put my family, my love for them, and my values first. I can only hope that my daughters will walk in the same footsteps that I have when it comes to these kinds of things. My strict upbringing also kept me out of a lot of trouble growing up, which is why I am so strict with my own daughters. I am raising them to be good girls, too.

As a teenager, I always wondered what it would be like to date Joe. After all, our families were so close, and even back then, I knew him like the back of my hand. Somehow, though, we knew we had to date others before finding the great love in each other.

In high school, I found myself hanging out with this guy who was the center of a lot of attention. There was another girl who liked him at the same time, and was not happy he liked me so much. She would give me nasty looks—the side eye and the up and down—and would constantly flirt with him. One day, we passed each other in the stairwell between classes and she bumped into me on purpose, making me drop my books. When I stood up, I told her to cut the shit. She started screaming and pushed me, so I pushed her back. I was protecting myself. I had never been in a scuffle like this before, but this girl started it and I reacted to what she did. What did she think I was going to do? Just stand there?

All these people came to watch because they heard we were fighting. When the school officials came, my heart sank. I knew I was going to get in trouble, and I did. Both of us got suspended. I was most terrified of my parents' reaction. While they weren't happy that I got suspended, my father told me he knew that I wouldn't have gotten into it with that girl unless I was defending myself, so he wasn't mad.

I was upset at the suspension but was proud of myself for standing my ground with her. I remember thinking back to this incident when I flipped that table on the first season of *Real Housewives*, when Danielle Staub pushed me to the limit. I am a pretty laid-back person until you push my buttons and keep going. That's when I usually lose it.

Things quieted down for a while after that with that girl in high school, but when another girl set her sights on that same guy, we had to go through the whole thing all over again. Just like the first girl, this new one was also jealous of our relationship. So one day, she and her friends waited for me and tried to jump me.

School had just ended for the day, and as I headed outside to the bus, I turned a corner and saw that girl and her friends waiting for me. No one else was around, so I was all alone. Just them and me. After they surrounded me, the girl started hurling a lot of ugly words at me, calling me a puta and telling me to stay away from him. I basically said that if he wanted to be with her, he would. Even though we were just yelling at each other at this point, I knew what was going to happen next: they were going to pull my hair, scratch me, push me—and punch me. They were trying to scare me because there were so many of them and only one of me. I wasn't afraid of them. I thought what they were doing was ridiculous. I held my own and stood strong. I didn't back down. I was one tough Italian cookie and they knew it.

Then, out of nowhere, a friend of mine happened to be passing by and saw that I was in trouble. She pulled out a knife and they scattered like mice. I was shocked. I didn't even know she carried a knife on her. Thank goodness she did.

Since I went to school with some tough kids, I learned to be tough and stand up for myself. You had to be strong there. If you showed anyone you were weak, you were done. The good thing about going to school there, though, was that I had friends from all walks of life—black, white, Latina—which taught me to be open-minded and nonjudgmental when it comes to other races and cultures. It's one of the things that helped me in prison, where I also met all kinds of people—and, just like in high school, had friends from all kinds of backgrounds.

In my heart, I think God sent my badass, knife-carrying friend my way that day for a reason. Otherwise, I would have had to defend myself against all of them. I know I could have handled myself and held my own, but still, there were a lot of girls there. Thank God nothing at all happened to me and that my friend was there to back me up. I didn't want another suspension, or for my parents to get upset again.

One thing I learned from that horrible day was that yes, those girls wanted to scare me, but that will never work with me. Doing something like that will just make me come back even stronger. I didn't tell my mom that I was almost attacked because I knew she would be worried about me. But I've never been afraid to stand up to anyone. I don't like fighting, but if I need to stand up for myself, I will. I may have a soft and kind heart, but that doesn't mean I don't have a backbone. Standing strong is just one trait many Italians share, and I'm proud to be able to do that for my family and myself.

People out in the world have said they think I am “pampered and spoiled.” That's not true at all. I have always been a hard worker. My parents instilled a strong work ethic in Joey and me from a young age. They always told us to work as hard as we could for our money—and to save, save, save, like they did. I have no problem working hard. I actually like to work. All my employers would always say that I hustled. Later on, at book signings for the four cookbooks I wrote, I would never take a break. I wouldn't stop until everyone waiting in line got an autograph and a picture. I was at one event at a Barnes & Noble until two in the morning, because there were so many people there waiting to meet me! I didn't mind. I wanted to make sure everyone left happy.

I started working at a young age. When I was ten or so, I got my own paper route after begging my father to let me do it. He finally gave in, thinking I would do it for a few weeks and get it out of my system. But I loved it. Unlike other kids, who delivered the newspapers on their bikes, my father would drive me from house to house because he wanted to make sure I was safe. I prided myself as the papergirl who put the newspaper in the mailbox because that was the right thing to do. I would think to myself, “If I throw the newspaper on the lawn or in the driveway and it rains, how will my customers read it?” I got tipped well for my extra efforts. People would tell me they never had someone put the paper in the mailbox before. I just wanted to do the best job possible, something I have tried to do my whole life.

When I was fourteen, my dad helped me get a job at Shoe Town, a shoe store in Ramsey, New Jersey. Since I only worked on Saturdays, I would drive in to work with my dad. He would drop me off at Shoe Town at 8 a.m. and pick me up at 5:15 p.m., when he was done with work. When I got my driver's license, I worked more, especially during vacations and when I was off from school. Eventually, I started working at the Shoe Town in the Preakness Shopping Center in Wayne, New Jersey. That Shoe Town closed awhile ago and is now a Trader Joe's. I smile whenever I drive past there because I loved working there and making my own money. But most of all, I was happy that my parents were so proud of me for being so responsible.

In high school, I started thinking about a future career, so I took the business program there and learned how to type on a typewriter—because we didn't have computers back then—and write shorthand. That kind of thing. I really loved it. After I graduated in 1990, I went to Berkeley College for fashion merchandising and management. I learned so much and graduated two years later with an associate's degree. In the fall we went on a fashion trip with the school to Paris and London . . . a dream trip! I fell in love with both of those cities—especially Paris. I had a hard time understanding what they were saying to me, even though I speak Italian. I would love to take my girls there one day.

All in all, I had a happy childhood. My parents taught me to love and respect them and my family, to love God, to always try to do the right thing, and to be a good wife and mother—all things I am passing down to my own daughters today.

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