Mariella Esposito
Interview Date: ?
Location of interview: ?
Interview conducted by Michelle Ortiz

Mariella Esposito: My name is Mariella Esposito.

Interviewer: And the business that you’re in right now is called Fante’s. Can you tell us a little bit about his place, and I know that you said that there was a family previous to you, and tell us a little bit about that history and how you are connected now to the history of this place.

Mariella Esposito: Fante’s was opened in 1906, and the original family was a father and a son. The father was a stone mason, and the son was a cabinet maker. The cabinet maker opened up the first floor to have a small business to support the family, but the father went off to Center City to work on the new buildings going up there.

Interviewer: Wow.

Mariella Esposito: The cabinet maker did well for himself, so he expanded the business a little bit. He died young. When he died, the older son took over the business. His name was Dominic Fante, which is the man that most people remember and connect with Fante’s. Dominic at 18 didn’t really know how to make furniture, but he had a good sense of business, so he started buying furniture to sell. He also made connections in Europe to bring in some things, some giftware and just unusual items to sell on the market. The business grew quite a bit. He expanded it until the mid to late ‘30s when you couldn’t get things from Europe anymore because of the war that was going there.

And that’s when he actually started looking around to sell American things, and he decided on cookware because his mom who was a great cook could never find the cookware she wanted. So in the late ‘30s is when actually cookware became part of the next in the store, and it stayed on obviously. After the First World War, he went back to bringing stuff in from Europe, but at this point, one of the sisters-in-law got involved in the business. She loved to travel, and she brought back a number of other things besides crystal and china. She learned how to decorate cakes in Europe and then again in France and Australia and brought back
tools to do the decorating of cakes. And so the business began to take a different look.

And it continued to grow. When they finally decided to retire, my brothers and I had been working her part time, and we decided at that point to get rid of crystal and china and to just stay with the practical cookware and baking. And we expanded in other venues also.

Interviewer: So what year was it that you said that you – so you worked here at Fante’s part time. That’s how you were connected to the family. And what year was that?

Mariella Esposito: I came to work here in 1970. I am an immigrant and they were looking. I was in high school, I just started high school. And they were looking –

Interviewer: One second, I’m sorry. Is that okay with the mic, Tony, she just moved it. Is that all right?

Mariella Esposito: In Italy, can you tell me where, it’s important, okay?

Interviewer: I was born in Italy in the area called Friuli, which is northeast of Venice. Exactly an hour northeast of Venice is where I grew up in a very tiny town. Like most places in the ‘50s, these tiny towns suffered greatly from loss of jobs during the Second World War. There was a lot of bombarding in the area. So there wasn’t a whole lot going on there, and my father was a tailor, he couldn’t get a lot of work. I remember he would make a suit, and then send either me or my sister to bring the suit back because he knew that people didn’t have money, and he felt funny asking for it, even though we needed the money ourselves. And we used to get paid with a chicken or butter.

And I remember coming back on a bike with a live chicken strapped to the handle, this squawking chicken. So these are the things, you know, I was a kid. So he had applied to come to the US, my father, actually right after the Second World War before he even got married. And the visa didn’t come through until 1963 for him to be able to go. There was a quota system, and only so many people were allowed in the country at one time. And you had to have a job waiting for you here, so that’s when everything came through for him. His oldest sister was living here, my Aunt Vera,
who died in ’92, some years ago. And so she applied for him to come.

So in ’63, he decided okay, let’s move the family to the US. So all of us came in ’64. And when we came here, we settled in South Philly, which is where my aunt lived, and which is where most Italians lived at the time. It was just like where we all – okay, I want to say. Whenever immigrants come to this country, they have a tendency to go and stay near other immigrants, people that are similar to them. And that’s the reason why South Philly was basically Italian because most of the people that were coming in this area were Italian. There was a pocket of Jewish people. There were pockets of difference nationalities, but the overwhelming majority were Italians, at least at that time. We felt comfortable. I mean, your neighbors spoke Italian.

You didn’t have to worry about finding out what to do or where to go. As a teenager, I started high school, and I started looking for something to do after school, and I found out that they were looking for work here. They were looking for somebody who spoke Italian. Of course, I spoke no English, but eventually, I learned enough English anyway. I started working here part time, and my two brothers also. My younger brothers worked here part time, and we just stayed on. I went through high school, I went to college, and just continued here. I became a teacher, and I still worked part time because I always loved it here. I think my very first impression of the Italian market was oh my God, I hate this place.

My mom used to drag me on Saturday mornings when I was a kid with the little cart, and it was kind of embarrassing because your friends would see you with the cart. But everybody else was with a cart, so we all came down on Saturday morning to shop the market, but in those days, the market – this was Philadelphia supermarket, so it was wall to wall people. Saturday morning, you couldn’t move, so I was one of hundreds. But I didn’t feel comfortable doing it. But I learned to love the market a little bit at a time and learned the value of it. And the market was very vibrant in the ’60s and the early ’70s, and that’s when, unfortunately, supermarkets started opening up and the deterioration of the market began.

But my recollection of it is at first, not liking it, disdain of having to get up here Saturday morning to come down here with all the smells. But also, a familiarity with it because in Europe, these
markets were a weekly occurrence. We went to the markets every week. It was mornings only once a week, and all the vendors would set up shop. Not like this, but they would just kind of set up shop in the piazza, in the square, and you went to shop. So I was familiar with that, and this was very similar. And I think all the immigrants that have come to this city, they were drawn to this because this is something that’s part of their history.

Not so much now because the markets – that has changed considerably overseas. But in the past, there was a familiarity with having an open air market. It’s what we – that’s where we shopped growing up. Did I lose my thread someplace?

Interviewer: So you worked here with your brothers, and how did it come to a point where it transitioned into – how did the Fante family transition to you then having a relationship with the store?

Mariella Esposito: My brothers and I worked part time. We had other interests, obviously. I was teaching and stayed on, as I said, part time because I loved it. But I also, at one point, the Fantes decided that they were going to retire, and they were trying to sell the business, but the person that approached them at the time was not someone that they wanted to sell the business to. So I talked to my brothers, and they said let’s do it. Unfortunately, we didn’t have money, so that was a huge issue. But the Fantes decided to wait until we had enough money to do it ourselves.

Dominic Fante and Lou Fante were the two brothers that were running the business, and Dominic was truly like a father to us all throughout. I mean, he didn’t have kids of his own, but he looked after us. Even when we would come in after school to work, he would always say is your homework done? Do you need some time to go finish it? Go upstairs, they lived upstairs, go upstairs and sit for a half hour and finish your homework. So this is the kind of man that trained me for the business, and when he realized that I was really interested in the business and what was going on, he taught me the buying process and the bookkeeping process. So he was a very patient and loving man.

And so when he decided to retire, he said I’ll wait until you have the money. And meanwhile, he taught me more. And my one brother was working for a bank at the time, he was vice president, so he had a good job. So he stayed onboard while I learned everything else that I could learn about the business. And when we
finally got enough money together, we were able to get a loan, we took the business over. And it’s been a great experience. It’s been a great ride, whatever you want to call it. We love it, and that’s why we’re doing it. Otherwise, I mean, you don’t want to have a small business in this country if you don’t love it because it’s hard. It’s not easy to have a small business.

Interviewer: And around how old were you when you finally were able to buy the business?

Mariella Esposito: I was 29 years old.

Interviewer: So pretty young adult.

Mariella Esposito: Yeah. I felt very old at 29. I mean, you know, when you’re in your 20’s, you know everything. I felt pretty old at 29. Yes. We were young. Looking back, we were young. We made a lot of mistakes, but we worked hard, and we took over during a really bad recession, and the early ‘80s were not good. But the one thing that we did, we turned the business around a little bit. We went from selling all the really fancy items, crystal, china, which were not moving because people didn’t have money as today. We switched to more practical things. We created a gadget wall, which is what has been like our lifesaver.

No matter how bad it gets, people still love to buy the extra spoon or the extra gadget. So we created the gadget wall. That was one thing that we did. And we also, because being Italian we couldn’t get a good cup of espresso, we created a little coffee corner, which became our coffee shop. At the time, it’s amazing. I tell people today. People come in and say oh, espresso. Years ago, like in the early ‘80s, nobody knew espresso. Unless you went to Europe, you didn’t know about espresso, and everybody called it “expresso.” So we set up a little coffee maker, and we would make espresso for us, and then we started selling. We started selling coffee. So our business kind of expanded more by feel rather than what we thought we should do.

We kind of had a general idea, but whatever customers would ask for, we went in a direction that we thought would be what people wanted. And it worked out well for us.

Interviewer: And you can tell me if this is too personal, but you and Lee are both married?
Mariella Esposito: Yes.

Interviewer: So how did that happen? How did you meet? Was there kind of like a courtship within the families to get you together? I hear similar stories like that in the market, but I just wanted to see if that was the case for you?

Mariella Esposito: Lee and I met on the market. We knew each other by waving, you know, a lot of the people, you wave and we always waved at each other, but we never really knew each other. So we knew each other that way. I was teaching, so I met his parents on many occasions because they were involved in the Italian community, which I was teaching Italian. So I knew the parents, and I knew his sister before I actually got to know him. His secretary was my friend, so that’s how we actually started just getting together, come over for dinner, let’s have some – that’s how we met. So it was interesting.

He’s a wonderful man. He still is a wonderful man, which is really nice after 26 years, almost 27. So but, yes, it was because of the market. If it hadn’t been on the Market, I probably would have never met him. The one thing that we decided once we decided to get married is that I have my business, you have yours. At home, we don’t discuss business unless we really have to. It has kept us from arguing about things that have to do with work because there’s always a problem with work. So it’s worked out really well. We have two kids, and I started them working when they were babies here because I was working full time. I couldn’t take time off.

And so they both learned the business, but neither one of them is interested, at the moment anyway, in taking over either one. So let’s see what happens.

Interviewer: And so you say you’re from Italy. Do your children speak Italian? Do they understand Italian since you were also an Italian teacher, or is it – not that much time? Five minutes, okay.

Mariella Esposito: Okay. My children never learned to speak Italian for two reasons. One is I felt so rushed when they were little because I was working so many hours, and I felt like if I said it in Italian because my husband didn’t understand Italian, I would have to say it in English. So I just felt this total rush constantly, and I just kind of
decided not to do it. And so I hoped my parents would teach them, but my parents used my children to learn English. So they learned their dialect, which is Friulano, so both of them understand Friulano, although they don’t speak it. But I have one that’s fluent in French and is now living in France actually. And the other is fluent in Spanish.

So the background because they heard enough drew them to learn a different language. But when they’re in Italy, they’re okay. They understand enough, and they just don’t speak it.

Interviewer: Since we don’t have that much time, what I wanted to say is you talked a little bit about how your perspective was of the market. And if I were to say one or three words that represent the market to you, what would it be and why?

Mariella Esposito: Oh my gosh, the market. International market. I think it’s so interesting. When people come through, and they’ve never been here before, there’s a feel of being alive in the market, even though like a lot of the stands are closed, there is something here that doesn’t exist in other places. You can’t go to a supermarket and see what’s out here and feel what’s out here. Being here so long, I’ve learned to love it. Maybe I see it from eyes that are different from other people. But there’s just a vitality in the market that I’ll always enjoy and love, and I’ll do whatever it needs to keep it going. I would like to really keep it alive and well.

Interviewer: The last question, I know it might run out, but that’s fine. I think I’m interested in your perspective as a woman owning a business and running a business. Have you ever had any challenges? I mean, I see that in some of the other stores. It’s mostly run by the men.

Mariella Esposito: There are many challenges being a woman, but it’s mostly to do with my business here rather than being part of the market because there have been many women out there. I mean, if you talk about the Lombardi women, talk about strong persons and whatever. There were so many women that ran businesses out here. But in my industry, when I took over, there were very few women, so I had a hard time dealing with that and being young. Being young and being a woman was a definite drawback in here. But out here, I had great examples. My husband’s grandmother, Margaret Esposito, my God, she ran the business for years. Mrs. Giordano,
there were so many strong women on the market that I never felt out of place.

In the house wares industry, I was more of an anomaly, but on the market, no. Great women on the market. The Di Bruno women. I mean, there were so many. I mean, as you will speak to the people along the market, you'll find that there were many good examples for me to follow.

Interviewer: Anything else you would like to add?

Mariella Esposito: I can’t think of anything else.

Interviewer: How about for yourself as an immigrant coming into this space. What would be the message or what you have learned about coming here? What message would you give to these newly arriving immigrants that are in a very similar position as you were years back in coming into this country and moving forward? What would you say?

Mariella Esposito: Being an immigrant is never easy, no matter what. No matter how easy the government or the neighborhood you live in makes it, it’s never easy because you’re plopped from one culture into another. I mean, that’s the biggest adjustment that they have to make. The immigrants of today, mostly Mexican, have a huge community behind them, so it’s not as much of a change for them because, I mean, from my perspective. They come into a neighborhood where there’s enough people with the same background. It’s not as much of a shock to our culture. When the Koreans and Vietnamese first came here, I think they had a huge shock.

I mean, that was a much bigger culture difference. And that’s the whole thing. It’s really like what you’re used to, what you grew up with, and what you come to. It’s never easy to be an immigrant. And it doesn’t matter. You have to work harder, longer hours, you have to prove yourself more so than if you were born here. It makes us stronger. I think it makes us more willing to do things that other people don’t do like working outside, hot or cold. I always tell people that come through here, I mean, it’s been a market of immigrants because they don’t really need to speak a lot of English to be able to communicate, and they’re willing to work harder than anybody would work.
I mean, if you have a high school degree or college degree, you don’t really want to be out there selling fruits and vegetables in 100 degree weather or 10 degree weather, so it makes you more resilient when you are an immigrant. You learn to be more resilient to survive.

Interviewer: Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]