

Mullica Hill NEIGHBORS

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SORBELLO GIRLS MKT



Meet the Sorbellos *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*

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Meet the Sorbellos

Girls Just Wanna Have Fun

By Allcia DiFablo | Photos by Michelle Pardo Photography

How did a basket of peaches under a beach umbrella turn into a South Jersey landmark and six local farm girls inspire a famous Top 40 song? Just ask the Sorbello girls.

THE SORBELLO SISTERHOOD

Whether you are a long time resident, new to town, or just passing through, chances are you've heard of the *Sorbello Girls Farm Market* on Route 77. But, how many know who the Sorbello girls actually are?

Joan, Nedda, Rosemary, Susan, Julie, and Debbie — the six daughters of local farmers, Rosario and Mary Sorbello. These sisters grew up in Elk Township when it was truly rural, building forts out of asparagus boxes, searching for arrowheads in the

fields, ice skating on the irrigation pond, and working daily on the family's farm. Their "big city" was Mullica Hill! The Sorbello girls are now accomplished women, with grown children of their own. They went into law, education, nursing, physical therapy, accounting, and public relations.

But Debbie Sorbello Connors returned to her roots in 2003, leaving her career in Public Relations to take over as the Manager of the *Sorbello Girls Farm Market*. At 87 years young, their mother Mary Sorbello can still be found working alongside Debbie daily at the market. The market, after all, is an extension of Mary's home. She created it long ago as a way to sustain her family during the leaner years, and it has endured for more than half a century. Along with her six children, 14 grandchildren, and one great grandchild, the market is a big part of Mary's remarkable legacy.

LIFE ON THE FARM

Mary Nicolosi Sorbello grew up on a farm in Mannington Township, balancing the hard labor of working in the fields with her academics. She was the first in her family to graduate from high school and received a scholarship to attend the Moore College of Art, but she turned it down to continue helping on the family farm.

Mary met Rosario Sorbello, Jr. at a Ford Tractor Dance in Swedesboro. He, like Mary, grew up working on his family's farm. Rosario was the namesake of his father, a man who immigrated to America in the early 1900s at age 17, saved his money, and bought farmland in Woolwich Township, Swedesboro, and Mullica Hill. Rosario Jr. and his two brothers joined their father in the farming business and together they ran *Rosario Sorbello and Sons Farm* for decades. "At one point they farmed hundreds of acres," says Debbie. "Several years after my grandfather's death the brothers each took their parcels and started to farm independently."

When Mary and Rosario married in 1956, they were given a parcel of farmland on Route 77 right outside of Mullica Hill, which became *Rosario Sorbello Farms*. They worked side by side on the farm, growing mainly asparagus (as well as tomatoes, soy beans, and sweet potatoes) and also growing a family.

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The Sorbello Girls in the greenhouse.

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Then & Now: Mary and her daughters at the Farm Market in 1979 and 2022.

"Both of my parents were extremely kind and generous," Debbie says. "They would give you the last bit of food before they ate, drop everything to offer you a lift or help you if you needed it." She describes her mother as a beautiful and talented young woman who was very active in the community. "She organized and ran the bicentennial celebration for Elk Township and was voted one of the 'Top 20 Outstanding Women of Gloucester County,'" Debbie continues. As a talented artist, Mary expressed her creativity throughout her whole life via photography, sculpting, wood carving, painting, and multimedia. In fact, she has an art studio in her home— which she refers to as her "playroom" — filled with her beautiful pieces and works in progress. "Although she has many talents, she always said her greatest accomplishment was her six daughters."

Debbie describes her father as "the salt of the earth." Strong and steadfast, modest and humble; an intelligent man of faith and conviction and an excellent farmer. "My father worked long hours to support his brothers and his family, often leaving the house at 4:00 or 5:00 am and not returning until 10:00 or 11:00 at night," Debbie recalls. Rosario served on the Elk Township Zoning Board, was a Volunteer Fireman for Ewan, a member of the St. Alfio Church Committee and the past president of his deer club.

Most importantly, he was a man who loved his family more than anything. "Many people would ask him if he wished he had a boy. His answer was simple — *never!* He always said we worked

harder than any boy would have," Debbie says. As children, the girls worked on the farm from 6 am to 8 pm. And, one of the places you could find them was at a little roadside farm stand aptly named *Sorbello Girls Farm Market*.

GIRLS JUST WANNA HAVE FUN

In 1961, the Sorbello Farm was struggling with issues affecting a profitable season, such as weather damage and bad market pricing. To help feed their family during a lean year, Mary put a basket of peaches and tomatoes under a beach umbrella in front of their home on Route 77. Little did they know, this would be the beginning of a landmark farmstand that would endure for 60 years. "My mother started *Sorbello Girls Farm Market* in 1961 out of necessity," says Debbie. "With six daughters, it was logical that the name would be representative of the women running it."

For a small, rural, family-run farm stand, Mary's masterful marketing really put it on the map. Over the years, its popularity grew. To accommodate this growth, they had to build a permanent structure in 1975.

Mary received a good deal of press coverage from news reporters, including a few spots on Don Polec's World on Action News, and one promoting a cookbook she wrote titled *101 Ways to Use Zucchini*. She became somewhat of a local celebrity. She also had celebrity visits to the market, like television personality Sally Starr.

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Perhaps the most interesting visit was by the popular singer/songwriter, Robert Hazard. He would frequently drive past the farm on his way from Philadelphia to visit his mother in Bridgeton, and see the six teenage girls out working in the fields. In the early 1990s, Hazard came into the market with his entourage and let Mary know that the Sorbello girls were the inspiration behind a little song he wrote called "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" made famous in the 1980s by Cyndi Lauper.

The market was also put on the map in the '80s when they were requested to represent the state of New Jersey in the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folk Life on the Mall in Washington D.C. "For one week we set up the market in the shadow of the Washington Monument and educated people on produce farming and what it was like to be a family farm in New Jersey," Debbie says. "My sister, Joan, gave brief talks twice a day on farming concerns and related issues."

Through the ups and downs of life, Sorbello Girls Farm Market has remained open. "The market helped to pay for six weddings and help all six children through college," says Debbie. What's made the market so successful for 60 years can really be boiled down to three things that have never changed— quality produce, a fair price and friendly customer service. "Our business model has remained the same ... which is why we continue to have such a loyal customer base."

LEGACY OF LOVE

When Rosario grew older and his health declined, Angelo Grasso and Sons took over the homestead farm. One of the Grasso sons, Leonard, is married to Nedda, so the farm stayed in the family so to speak. In 2016, at the age of 83, Rosario passed away 10 days shy of his and Mary's 60th wedding anniversary. He left behind quite a legacy; one that extended far beyond farming.

"A wonderful benefit of owning a family business is that all of the grandchildren worked on the farm and at the market with their grandparents," says Debbie. "Each got to learn so much more than a good work ethic. Each had a close, wonderful relationship with their grandparents." There are a total of 14 grandchildren—Katie, Richard, Julianne, Kyle, David, Jenny, Jeremy, Lenny, Joey, Sophia, Ben, Jake, Billy and Josh — and one great-grandchild, Scarlett.

(story continued on page 14)



Mary & Rosario Sorbello married in 1956 and worked side by side on Rosario Sorbello Farms.



Known as the "Gentleman Farmer," Rosario adored his six daughters and wife beyond measure. In addition to farming all his life, Rosario was a volunteer firefighter and served on the Elk Township Zoning Board. He passed away in 2016 at the age of 83.

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Mary Sorbello was raised on her family's farm, and continues to work side-by-side with daughter Debbie at the Sorbello Girls Farm Market at the age of 87.



Mary's sense of humor and joy is evident in the Facebook promotional videos for Sorbello Girls Farm Market!



Mary wrote and illustrated a cookbook featuring zucchini, which was featured on a local TV news segment.



The Sorbello girls have carved their own paths, using their unique talents and strong work ethic to make their community a better place. Rosemary Botto became a Physical Therapy Assistant, Susan Lewbart an Elementary School Teacher, Julie Barile a Nurse, Nedda Grasso an Accounting Professional, Joan Adams a lawyer... and of course Debbie Conners who worked in Public Relations before taking over the farm stand.

But, she wasn't the only one whose life came full circle. After spending 15 years as a big city Philadelphia Attorney, Joan opened a small law practice in Swedesboro where she advocates for farmers and their rights. As a local expert on the Right to Farm Act and land issues, she was recently recognized by the Gloucester County Farm Bureau for her contributions to agriculture.

As for the matriarch of the Sorbello girls, you will still find Mary at

the market daily, husking corn, packing tomatoes, picking basil, showcasing her art pieces, and starring in the creative, funny videos that light up their social media page.

"Small family farms are a necessity to the survival of our planet. They are the backbone of the community, providing food and jobs to the area," Debbie explains. She encourages folks to make the market a regular stop for produce. *Sorbello Girls Farm Market* sells produce from the family's cousins and neighbors, so shopping at one market supports many local farmers in Southern New Jersey. "By shopping at your local farm stands, and insisting that your supermarkets carry Jersey Fresh produce from local area farmers, you are directly and indirectly providing a positive impact on your local farmers and their ability to sustain their crops and family businesses. Buying local is vital to preserving the farms and their families for years to come." ♦

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