

Upfront

My father has been writing features for this magazine since its inception in 2003. He has profiled hundreds of veterans of military service, most of them locals. Because we share a surname, some people occasionally confuse us, but we are two definitively distinct people. A few days after this magazine arrives in your mailbox, my dad will turn 92. You can find his most recent article in this issue, but I will tell you his story, as I know it, in the encyclopedic style he often employs, here. Like I do with all the submissions I receive and edit (including my dad's), I'll try to spice the material up a bit for your enjoyment. I'm working from perceived memory, so this narrative is part legend, mostly fact.

Ronald Frances Lauretti was born August 17, 1934, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to Pacientino "Pat" Lauretti, native of Valle Corsa, Frosinone, Italy, and Frances Schultz Kilpack Lauretti, of Indiana before her family headed to Oregon with a wagon train. Pat left Italy and a difficult childhood behind as an early-teen and entered the U.S. — it was touch-and-go for medical reasons — through Ellis Island, like many immigrants of his day. With no formal education beyond 4th grade and limited language skills, he inquired about work. Convinced that demand for shoes was relatively inelastic, he took a job in a small footwear factory in Lower Manhattan. He learned the craft and demonstrated capacity to lead, so he aspired to operate his own shoe manufacturing business. Pat pursued this aspiration through several iterations; somewhere along the way, he met Frances. When the couple, along with a few helping hands, were making little white baby booties in an apartment above the Cumberland County jail, little Ronnie was born. Financial fits and starts would challenge the family business — for a year or two during Ronnie's high school days they chased the American dream to Southern California — until they ultimately landed in tiny Newville, Pennsylvania, a rural community where they built a factory that provided hundreds of jobs.

Ronnie was an only child. Like many American boys of the time, his imagination was captivated by his contemporary heroes, sportsmen and warriors. His father knew little of either, so Ronnie figured things out himself. Smallish, he worked summers at a local farm to increase his strength until he became a valuable member of his high school football team.

He was good enough to play (and score

touchdowns) in college, where he was first in his family to earn a degree. In the days of two-way players, Ron was a fullback and defensive lineman/linebacker at Lehigh University, where he began his studies as a mining engineer (and worked in a mine during a summer) and completed them in business administration. Ron's Lehigh teams were good; the quarterback, Dan Nolan, played for the Pittsburgh Steelers after graduation before he took his vows as a Catholic priest. As for the switch from engineering to business, Ron enjoyed an active social life on campus, joining Sigma Nu fraternity, home to many of his gridiron teammates with working-class roots. There are plenty of stories I've heard over the years; one features a stolen cow.

As to the other heroic archetype that inspired young Ron: He dreamed of earning the uniform of a U.S. Marine. During his early college years and the Korean War, he joined the Reserves, eventually leaving school for Marine boot camp and an enlistment as a regular, active-duty rifleman. His college administrators and coaches did not expect to see Ron again, but the Korean fighting ended with an armistice and Ron's enlistment period came to its natural conclusion. He returned to campus as a 21-year-old sophomore and a new member of the Southside Bethlehem American Legion, where his collegiate status among the confederacy of steelworker patriots got him elected post adjutant.

In 1959, Ron graduated from Lehigh and headed to New York City and a job as a management trainee at Manufacturers Hanover Bank (which was subsequently subsumed by Chemical Bank, which, in turn, yielded to the JP Morgan of today). Soon, though, Pat needed Ron's help, and the young would-be banker moved back to Pennsylvania to learn how to make shoes. Mostly girls' shoes. Infants, through size 7 women's, and a minority share of boys' styles. Lots of the patent leather dress models you used to see in church and at birthday parties. Leather and suede designs. Ron, my sometimes-grumpy, rugged, big-game-hunting, motorcycle-riding dad, conceived of things like "the puzzle shoe," an oxford with overlapping swatches various-hued dyed pig hides. He reverse-engineered elaborate bows to affix to the spot where the toes meet the instep. He learned how to use the machines his father had invented. He got to know the cutters and the stitchers and the men and women who glued and attached soles. The small and large ladies who loaded countless cardboard cases, each with 18 pairs in their own branded boxes, onto an endless stream of tractor trailers. He was like family with his office staff. Sometimes, at lunch, he would fish for a half hour at a local stream with a shop foreman. He took daily trips to the post office and bank, and snuck naps in his car. He was a very good shoe-man.

He lived in an apartment in a former single-family home in Carlise near his Aunt Ruth. Ruth noticed a pretty, young nurse-in-training in the neighborhood and invited Ron and Gerri to dinner. Gerri became Ron's wife and my mom.

Ron and Pat worked side-by-side and, as it would be with most fathers and sons, there were magical moments and there were passionate fights. When Pat died unexpectedly in 1968, Ron was ready to steer the company through its next 25 years. At its apex, despite relentless pressure from lower-priced imports, Newville Shoe shipped 1 million pairs a year.

Ron ran a business, but at his core, he's a family man. His mother's sister, Ruth, drove to our house every morning, jumped in my father's car, and the two of them commuted 25 minutes to the factory each way. Ruth and Ron got to work early, in time for the 7:30 shift, mostly so my dad could get home by 4 to play with my sister and me or attend one of our performances or games. To this day, he bickers with my mom, but he worships her and realizes how fortunate he is.

In 1994, having sold his company and honored his management contract, Ron and my mom moved to Burlington, Vermont. But he's not good at inactivity, so he bought a messenger service and managed it while driving some of the routes himself. After seven years of New England cold, my parents followed me to Skidaway Island for the most important and rewarding vocation of their lives — Grammy and Grampy.

In 2003, my friends and I started this magazine, and my dad has been writing for it ever since. He and my mom have consistently delivered it to our local advertisers over the years. He: behind the wheel; she: the smiling face with the stack of periodicals who many of our clients have told me they love to see every two weeks. A few months ago, my dad hung up his car keys for the last time, but his keyboard still works.

A life is not an encyclopedia entry. As his editor, I've made that point to my dad over the years. Yet I've synthesized his to one here for the purpose of telling you about him. But sharing his story and having you know him are different things. He's a proud man. A man of integrity. A stubborn man. He's loyal, almost to a fault. He was often funny and a little devilish. He now feels somehow less than he once was, but that isn't so. Because, at his core, he's my dad, and he always will be.

Ronald A. Lauretti

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