

# The Boston Globe

## Recalling life with grandfather



Helena Leet-Pellegrini's solo show "The Luigi Code" draws on her childhood with an Italian anarchist grandfather.

By Denise Taylor | August 30, 2007

In the midst of the Boulder International Fringe Festival, 70-year-old storyteller Helena Leet-Pellegrini of Wayland fielded a call from a reporter about her one-woman show, "The Luigi Code." The piece tells of her years growing up with an Italian anarchist grandfather -- a grandpa who hobnobbed with the infamous Vanzetti (of Sacco and Vanzetti), and she's there to perform it six times.

"I feel like I'm on the high-wire act," said Leet-Pellegrini through a static-filled connection. "There are so many people here. . . . It's quite the ride."

A psychologist, mother of three, and grandmother of four, Leet-Pellegrini began performing just three years ago, but when she launched into a line from the show over the phone, she has the lilting, riveting delivery of a pro.

"I remember a gentle man," she said in a slow, measured voice.

"My grandfather used to love to fish, but he never used a bait or a hook. He didn't want to hurt the fish. He used to say, 'The beauty of fishing is not in catching the fish,' " she concluded in a robust Italian accent.

The one-hour show goes on to explore the humor of growing up in a Worcester triple-decker overflowing with family, the contradictions of her grandfather's gentle nature and his passionate political beliefs, and the fear of persecution that dogged three generations of her family.

"My mother was 10 years old at the time that Vanzetti [was executed]," she said, explaining that the Italian anarchist from Boston, who many believe was put to death for his beliefs and ethnicity and not for a crime, was often a guest at her grandfather's Worcester home.

"So a lot of the piece is made up of passed down, scattered memories. It's primarily about how it affected our family emotionally and how all the fears get passed down through a family," she said. "But there's plenty of humor, too. I like to combine the humorous and the poignant."

On Wednesday, Leet-Pellegrini returns with her show to the place where her newfound career began, the Out spoken Word Series at Amazing Things Art Center in Framingham.

When she learned her grandchildren would be moving away a few years ago, Leet-Pellegrini began looking for something to fill her free time. A born storyteller socially, she decided to give the stage version a try.

"I had this eight-minute story that I started practicing on my 8-year-old granddaughter, who after I finished said she liked it and smiled and said, 'But next time, grandma, a few less um's and er's,' " said Leet-Pellegrini.

So she polished her act, braved the open mike at Outspoken Word several times, and studied the craft at workshops until Outspoken host Libby Franck suggested she do a feature-length piece. It was daunting, but she overcame her fear by making it her theme. "Living Out Loud: Odyssey to Creative Expression" chronicled her struggle to find the confidence to perform. "The Luigi Code," or "Living Out Loud Part II," followed.

"I had this 1913 photograph of my grandfather with Vanzetti, and I met a historian researching Sacco and Vanzetti and that gave me the impetus to pull this all together," she said. "I believe stories are alive and they call us to them, and this one called to me."

*"The Luigi Code" 7:30-10 p.m. (preceded by open mike) Wednesday at Amazing Things Art Center, 55 Nicholas Road, Framingham. \$6. Call 508-405-2787 or visit [amazingthings.org](http://amazingthings.org) or [helenaleetpellegrini.com](http://helenaleetpellegrini.com). Also at Club Passim in Cambridge on Nov. 19. Call 617-492-7679.*