Thank you to writer Maria (Mia) Millefoglie for submitting this story about her longtime family friend, Sefatia Romeo Theken.
Sefatia Romeo Theken
The Making of an Advocate
BY MARIA (MIA) MILLEFOGLIE

I hustle down Main Street to Sefatia Romeo Theken’s office, a one-story brick building across from Virgilio’s Bakery with its loudspeaker blaring Dean Martin crooning the Neapolitan song, “That’s Amore.” In the mid-afternoon light, I catch a glimpse of Gloucester’s working harbor with several fishing boats tied at the docks. The west end of this historic Main Street—home to Saint Peter’s Club, Café Sicilia, and several Italian restaurants—is a fitting setting for Gloucester’s Deputy Commissioner for the Department of Fish and Game, a former mayor, and a community leader who continues to be a dynamic, vocal force for helping people in this City.

We are two daughters of Sicilian immigrants to Gloucester, shaped by our family’s strong culture, traditions, and religion. As children, we both spoke ancient Sicilian in our homes, even as English evolved into our second language. I am the daughter who moved away; she is the daughter who stayed. Now I am driven to understand what drives her advocacy and what fuels her tireless spirit to help the people of Gloucester.

Sefatia sits behind a small desk overflowing with notes and folders. She is tall, dark-haired, and meticulously dressed in a shimmering black and white outfit, polished nails and jewelry flashing a hint of bling. She’s just returned from a luncheon fundraiser for the Madonna del Rosario, a religious and cultural organization dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary. “Today, I looked around, and there might have been seventy women, many in their nineties. My God, these people, right here, are our history.” She sighs, “Soon, this will be gone.”

I sense her nostalgia, and I share it too. But then she shifts: “Since 1927, families have been celebrating Saint Peter, the patron saint of fishermen. Here in Gloucester, we’re fortunate to have five days of Saint Peter’s Fiesta…we take over the whole City.” Now she and I indulge in childhood memories of dressing in white for St. Peter’s processions, dancing in the square, and cheering on the Greasy Pole contenders. Of course, her favorite contender was her beloved brother Anthony “Matza” Giambanco, a champion pole walker who won five times from 1975–1980. Anthony died on October 14, 2019; his passing a tremendous loss for the family.
Sefatia doesn’t dwell on losses. We reminisce about “Joe Popcorn,” the smiling man who sold popcorn at Stacey’s Boulevard and hawked twenty-five cent grab bags filled with trinkets. We laugh at how we stockpiled these trinkets, a memory that reminds us how our families collected bomboniere—the traditional Sicilian wedding favor—a white organza bag filled with five sugar-coated almonds and tied with a ribbon imprinted with the couple’s names. The sugar coating symbolizes the wish that the marriage will be more sweet than bitter. The almonds represent the five wishes for the newlyweds: health, wealth, happiness, fertility, and long life. Sefatia’s smile fades. “I want to attend more weddings now, not funerals,” she says. I wonder if she sometimes believes that the good wishes of the bomboniere almonds have failed her, failed us.

Faith and pride are woven into her memories. “My grandmother would take me to the Mother of Grace Club,” she tells me animatedly. “I learned my prayers at this little club.” She asks me now, picking up speed, “Do you know the story behind this club?” Now she’s on a roll and recounts how a group of primarily Sicilian women formed the organization during World War II with the mission: Pray for Peace. In 1944, they leased an abandoned building on 48 Washington Street where women still gather at a simple altar praying to Our Blessed Mother of Grace. “We’re doing a fundraiser for them tomorrow,” she says. I am not surprised.

I sense her connection to this past, her sadness in what is gone, and her hold on what may soon disappear. History is the connection, and now I am driven to uncover what formed her spirit of advocacy. What drives this daughter who stays, who remains intensely committed to the City and its people. “What tethers you to Gloucester?” I ask.

“‘To give people a voice.’ She looks directly at me with no trace of a smile, as if conveying that there is no higher purpose than giving voice to those who may have been silenced. “Growing
up, the Sicilian immigrant community differed from the ‘mericana’s. Our families ate different meals, talked in ‘broken English,’ and practiced Sicilian traditions, but we lacked the language to give us a voice.” Similar to mine, her childhood was filled with contradictions. We were both raised and rooted in the Sicilian culture but sought to be accepted as Americans.

“Even the schools differentiated us,” she reminds me. Children of first-generation immigrants entered Gloucester classrooms speaking Sicilian or, at best, a hybrid mix. The teachers did not always understand our traditions or our language. “We didn’t have English as a Second Language Program to support us,” she says. Sefatia explains how she didn’t fit the American culture as she didn’t play on softball teams or participate in after-school activities. “Our playground was the churchyard.” I nod, remembering it all too well as if she is telling the story of my own childhood.

These family memories spark recollections of discrimination. “There were some who called us guineas,” she says, referring to the racist slur against Italians, especially Sicilians, who tended to have slightly darker skin. Sefatia nods at me. “That word trailed me to the Mayor’s office where someone once said to one of my aides, ‘How many guineas are in her office?’”

I suspect she probably rolled her eyes, rolled up her sleeves, and went to work. Earning the trust and confidence of the community, Sefatia was appointed interim Mayor in January 2015, won election as Mayor in that fall, and was re-elected in 2017 and 2019.
She is known for her tireless work helping youth access community programs, assisting seniors with health benefits, and organizing prayer groups for people in need. Several of my family members were beneficiaries of her counsel and support, and she asked nothing in return.

“Who paved your path to community service?” I ask, intrigued to learn who helped fuel the fire in her today. She smiles. “If you read my father’s obituary and my resume, the only difference is I became mayor, and he helped people become mayor. You see he was involved with many political campaigns and committees.”

Sefatia’s father, Enzo, always believed in his daughter’s strength, and lit a fire in her from the earliest age. He immigrated to New York from Partinico, a small village in northwest Sicily, with plans to marry his fiancé Rosalia. But when his sponsor failed to arrive at the immigration office, the officials deported him back to Sicily. With no other solution, Rosalia returned to Sicily, married Enzo, then journeyed back to Gloucester with him.
Self-taught and self-made, Enzo made a strong impression with his jet-black hair, blue eyes, and “dressed to the nine yards” sporting a bow tie, button-down shirt, and suit jacket. She reels off his accomplishments: active member of the Democratic Party; president of the Board of Directors at Action, Inc., assisting low-income families, out-of-work fishermen, and elders struggling to meet their basic needs; advocate for the first “Meals on Wheels,” Fisherman’s Loan Fund, and Fisherman’s Wives Association. Enzo once met with John F. Kennedy, a young representative in the House trying to aid Gloucester’s struggling fishing industry. Sefatia laughs, “and my father wasn’t even a fisherman.”
Enzo worked a variety of jobs including as a builder, produce manager, and chef, before attending college to become a social worker. Community activism was woven into the fabric of this family. As Sefatia lists Enzo’s accomplishments, it sounds like a recounting of her own purpose-driven life.

But her father also gifted her with a prophecy. When she was an infant of six months, her father sat by her crib and composed a letter that foretold how Sefatia would carry her unusual name with strength and become someone special in this world. Her father also once said a variation of her name can be traced to an Egyptian queen who reigned more than 5,000 years ago. A rabbi once told Sefatia the name means Goddess; another person said it was the name of an African king. “I guess I was meant to rule,” she says. We both laugh. “I keep this letter with my father’s poems in a drawer. He was a poet, and I write poetry too.” I probe to learn more about her poetry, but this is a private space. “It’s heavy stuff, life, and death, but thank God I write it,” Sefatia says. “It relieves stress.”

Enzo, the zealous advocate, broke his back in a work accident. The severity of his injuries required a long and painful hospitalization. Doctors told the family that he might not survive. The medical bills mounted, and the family struggled with the loss of income and benefits. For the first time, her mother Rosalia, needed to find work outside the home, which changed the family dynamics as Sefatia and her older sister helped to manage the household.

Enzo survived, but three years later, another tragedy struck when he was diagnosed with cancer, an illness that debilitating and changed him. “He turned different,” Sefatia says quietly. She was fifteen when her dad died in 1977. Her eyes darken; her voice rises, “I remember no one telling us about support systems or the Hill-Burton fund that could have helped with the mounting medical bills. As a young widow, my mother kept working because no one opened doors to help us. No one showed us how to apply for benefits that could have helped a working widow with five young children. I was taller and bigger than anyone my age and had a name that no one could pronounce. It was hard, but I felt I needed to be strong.”

I begin to understand the seeds of her passionate advocacy and her unrelenting push that

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1 In 1946, Congress passed a law giving health care facilities grants and loans for construction and modernization. In return, they agreed to provide services to those unable to afford them. [www.hrsa.gov](http://www.hrsa.gov)
people receive the support they need in times of trial. She reflects now on the intolerance she has witnessed, citing names of individuals mocked and shunned for their differences. “I still remember their names and get emotional when I think of them. Some were homeless and living on the streets, while others were lost in mental illness. We didn’t have a system in place for these people, and I wanted to change this.” There is a determination in her voice when she speaks of systems that fail those in need, systems that once failed her family.

When Sefatia’s mother Rosalia first arrived in America, she believed life would be easier. People in Sicily had told her, “You don’t have to wash the dishes in America; they throw them away after eating.” But like many fierce, proud Gloucester mothers I knew, Sefatia shares how her mom could be tough. “You and I craved to be like the Americans,” she tells me. “But our parents didn’t get it.” She recounts when she asked her mother for macaroni and cheese from a box. Her mother said no and called it “junk,” knowing Sefatia wouldn’t like the processed version of her mother’s cooking. But determined, Sefatia earned twenty-five cents and bought a box. Because it had cost money, her mother insisted she eat it. “Oh my God, it was gross.” Sefatia laughs. “And now, how I wish I could have one of my mother’s meals again.”

In the 1960s, Rosalia worked long hours as a fish packer in the Fort but never complained to her family. Sefatia often visited the plant and watched her mother smiling and joking with the other women fish packers who formed their own support system, knowing that this job was their best option to feed their families. Rosalia once jokingly told friends, “I went from being serenaded in Italy to being covered with fish guts in the freezing cold.” One day at work, Rosalia went home, changed into her brother’s pants, and returned to work. She told her boss, “If you make me work like a guy, why can’t I dress like one.” Because she was a good worker, she didn’t get fired. But the boss docked her pay for leaving work to change her clothes. Now, I see where she gets some of her fire.
“My mother used to say that the world can be evil, especially when I cried about my name and size. She didn’t allow me to fester in self-pity; instead, she said, ‘If people were busy helping others, maybe they wouldn’t have time to talk about other people’s problems.’ She was a realist and knew some people would not change but she did not mince her words when she told me, ‘Sefatia, do the extra work, stay busy, and always help others.’”

I approach the subject of her first marriage and how she found the strength to endure the tragic loss of her beloved husband, Antonino “Nino” Romeo. Nino had emigrated from Sicily and worked as a fisherman throughout his life—his life was cut short through suicide at the age of thirty-eight. I shudder thinking of his death and how she had to cope as a young widow with three young daughters. Sefatia breaks the silence, “I thank God every day that I got to spend that year with my mother.”

She speaks directly about that tumultuous year of her husband’s death on September 11, 1997, followed by her mother’s passing on November 11, 1998. “My mother and I bonded that year; she showered me with love.” Prayers and her mother’s presence helped her through the grieving process. “I was at my mother’s house every day; we were best friends. After I lost Nino, people told me what’s the sense of going back to work, just collect Social Security benefits and stay home.”

But Sefatia had started a new job working as a community liaison at Addison Gilbert Hospital, and she vowed not to give up, “No one was going to make me feel defeated.”

She plowed forward with a commitment to care for her young children and to advocate for the community. Her advocacy efforts were recognized with an award, but it is the party that
Sefatia remembers most. “My mother gave me a surprise party in celebration of my award. It was my first party; I’ll never forget that night.”

Sefatia had now gained recognition as a community advocate. She was incredibly proud to share how a group of local seniors made her feel seen and appreciated when they stitched a quilt and presented it to her calling her the “Mayor of the People.”

Now she launches into the “working class” challenges in Gloucester or those often labeled as the working poor. “If you are rich, you’re lucky; if you’re poor, you can apply for programs. But you will always be a dollar short if you’re working.” She raises a fist in the air. Her voice has fire, and I sense how injustice fuels her advocacy.

“Who is there for you?” I ask her now. “Matthew Theken, my husband, is there for me. We have been together for fifteen years, and he is my advocate; he loves my daughters and grandchildren as his own. I have other great people in my life: my sisters, other family and friends.” Committed to her family, she still finds time to champion a vast range of causes. One only needs to glance at her Facebook page to get the latest information about senior tax credit programs, fuel assistance, community fundraisers, new businesses, prayer groups, and many photos of Sicilian food. If you’re lucky, you might get one of her recipes.
We laugh as she shares her first day as Mayor in City Hall: “The bathroom was so far from the office that I knew I wouldn’t need to go to the gym. I kept telling myself I loved my City, but it felt surreal. I walked through that door and didn’t know what to expect, but I went right to work.”

As Mayor, she led the City through grave economic challenges, enormous hurdles in the fishing industry, and the devastating COVID-19 pandemic.

What were you most proud of as a Mayor? I ask. She hesitates and then says, “Collaborating with the state, working as a team, and keeping a sense of humor.” What she doesn’t mention are her numerous awards and achievements as Mayor. She helped create and implement the Massachusetts Fishermen’s Partnership which offers health coverage to workers in the Massachusetts fishing industry; launched “Gloucester Fresh” to promote sustainable seafood; received a PAARI (Police Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative) Government Leadership Award in 2018 and 2019; and presented with numerous advocacy and public service awards.

I recall a photograph of Sefatia on her last day as Mayor. She stood on the stone steps of City Hall, her shoulders back, a slight smile on her face. “What would your mother have whispered in your ear that last day?” I ask her now.

She smiles. “My mother would have said, ‘I’m proud of you.’”

After seven years as Mayor, thirteen years on the City Council, and a lifetime giving voice to those in Gloucester who are silenced, Sefatia is still a fixture at the Rose Baker Senior Center. Every Friday, you can find her volunteering to help seniors with their applications for benefits.

My Gloucester friends and family tell me, “She turns no one down.”
It’s all about family, past and present.

Left to right: Sefatia’s daughter Carla; grand-daughter Emma; daughter Lia in back; grand-daughter Bianca in front; Sefatia; grandson A.J.; daughter Melissa and grand-daughter LiAnna. Circa 2015.

Sefatia with her sister Grace (on left), circa 2017.

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ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

Sefatia browsing the books and photo albums at the Rose Baker Senior Center before her volunteer shift. Photo credit: Terry Weber Mangos, 2023.