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Quick, Timely Reads *Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*

Savocchio Broke One Glass Ceiling After Another

By: Dr. Judith Lynch
Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
November 2020


ELECTED WOMEN

Following is the seventh in a series of articles about women elected leaders from Erie County written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Judith Lynch. Jefferson Vice President Ben Speggen will host an online interview with Dr. Lynch at noon each Wednesday featuring the leaders.

"SAVOCCHIO, JOYCE"

From Elvis to Kennedy to teaching, it's on to the 5th Floor for Savocchio

N 11-8-89



At nine months *In fifth grade* *College graduate* *Mayoral candidate's pose*

The Savocchio scrapbook

By JEFF PINSKI
Morning News staff reporter

When Joyce Savocchio was 13, she was "more into Elvis than running for anything," says the new mayor-elect's life-long best friend, Rita Cappello.

"We had Hound Dog banks, DA haircuts, everything," according to Cappello, the woman who just engineered the historic election of Erie's first woman mayor.

Cappello, who served as Savocchio's campaign manager and closest adviser during a campaign that saw Savocchio overcome a field. Five other candidates in the Democratic spring primary election and breeze to victory during Tuesday's balloting. Savocchio spent most of her adult life interested in politics.

"After those Elvis Presley days, her interest changed to politics. She was always politically motivated," Cappello said.

Savocchio was born in Erie, Nov. 9, 1942, the daughter of Daniel and Esther Leone Savocchio.

While the family lived above the Brown Avenue Food Market, operated by Joyce's father, Joyce attended Irving Elementary School, Roosevelt Junior High School and then graduated from Strong Vincent High School in 1961.

She went on to Mercyhurst College, then the University of Pittsburgh and finally Edinboro University for her school administrator's papers.

She began her teaching career at East High School, then participated in the Erie School District's "Project Individual" program before returning to Strong Vincent to teach.

During that teaching career, she served as president of the then 1,000-member Erie Education Association before becoming assistant principal at Strong Vincent.

For the past eight years, she served as a member of City Council.

"In her early years, I guess she was pretty shy," recalls her mother. "I guess it was about the fifth grade when she sort of took hold of herself."


"We lived upstairs of the store and she would come home from school and go upstairs and do her homework or whatever had to be done. She knew where we were; she needed us."

Mrs. Savocchio said she also considered her daughter "maybe a little more mature" than kids.

See SAVOCCHIO on Page 9B

Another 1989 first for the Erie, Pennsylvania area and for women was the election of Joyce Savocchio as Mayor of Erie. Born in Erie, the daughter of Daniel and Ester Leone Savocchio, the owners of a Brown Avenue Food Market, Joyce Savocchio had always lived a rich communal life in the Erie area. She attended Irving Elementary School, Roosevelt Junior High School, and graduated from Strong Vincent High School. She then attended and graduated from Mercyhurst College and obtained her masters at the University of Pittsburgh. She received her school administrator's credentials from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania.

Along with many of other Erie elected leaders, such as Charles Williamson, Art Gardner, Lou Tullio, Jerry Mifsud, and Brenda Pundt, Savocchio came to the attention of the residents of the city through the School District. Savocchio taught first at East High School and later at Strong Vincent and then became assistant principal of Strong Vincent High School. She served as President of the Erie Education Association before launching her career in politics, first as a member of Erie City Council where she served two four-year terms, from 1982 to 1990, and then throwing her hat into the ring in 1989 and running for mayor when incumbent Mayor Louis Tullio decided not to again seek re-election.



"As Mayor, I propose to develop Erie as the finest city in Pennsylvania ... strong in its economic base, fair and equitable in taxation, secure in its sense of safe neighborhoods, and proud of its civic, educational, and cultural offerings. Indeed, a city to be proud of in the nineties..."

"I ask you to join with me in making Erie the great city we know it can be, by giving me your support and your vote on Tuesday, November 7th."

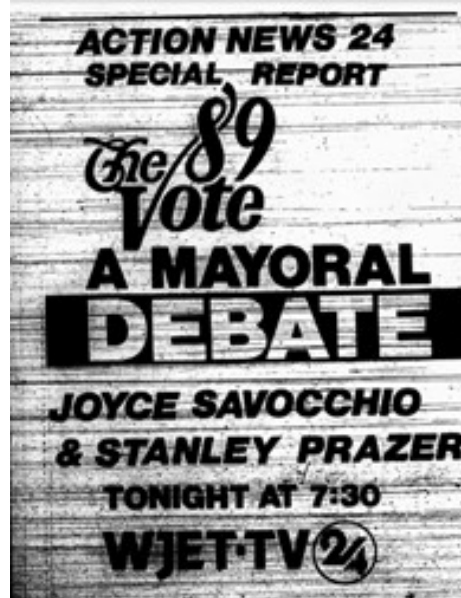
JOYCE SAVOCCHIO
for
MAYOR

For a ride to the polls,
call 864-2941 on election day.

Paid for by the committee to elect Joyce A. Savocchio

By that time, Mayor Tullio, who had been

elected Mayor in six successive elections, was already suffering from the advancement of amyloidosis, sometimes referred to as the “Mayors Disease” because the Mayor of Pittsburgh, Richard Caliguiri, also contracted amyloidosis. As Mayor Tullio’s sixth term drew to a close, he was unable to perform the functions of mayor. It was time to pass the mantle to a new leader.



Late in her second term on City Council, Savocchio, according to her close associate, Rita Capello, began talking about the possibility of running for mayor (Pinski, *Erie Morning News*, 11/8/89). When she officially announced her candidacy, she found herself in a field of five others:

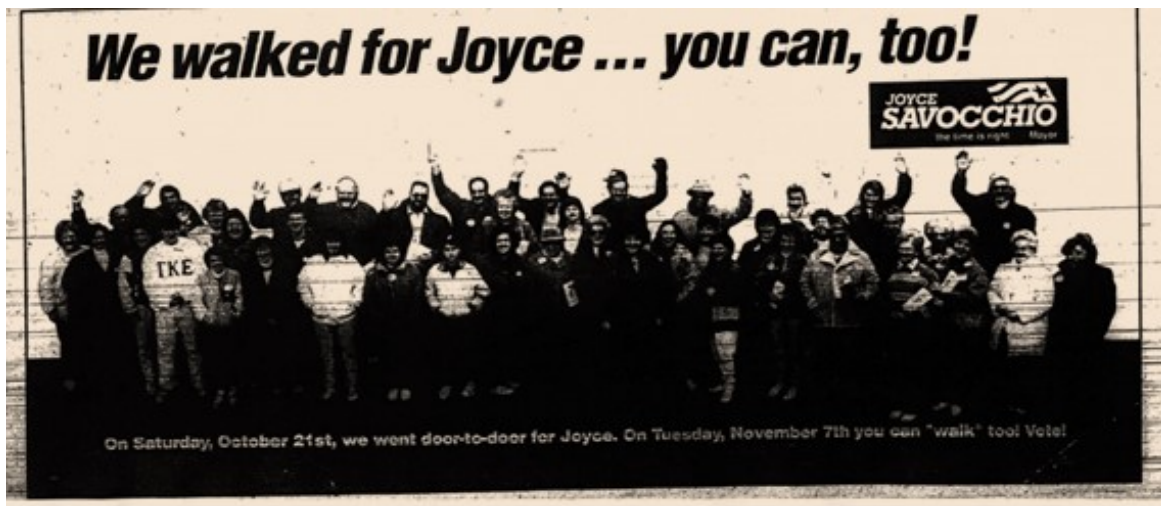
1989 Primary Votes	
Savocchio	5,855
Cannavino	5,408
Maras	4,242
Cappabianca	4093
Liebel	3,190
Brabender	2,511

Carl “Skip” Cannavino, Chris Maras, Pat Cappabianca, Pat Liebel, and Bob Brabender.

Tullio’s preferred candidate was his administrative assistant, Liebel. When he left for a respite in California, Tullio appointed Liebel as Acting Mayor.

By the beginning of 1989, Savocchio declared her candidacy for mayor. The first test would be the May 1989 primary, which was critically important because the city voters were overwhelmingly registered as Democrats; therefore, the winner of the Democratic primary was likely to become the next mayor. In the primary, Savocchio was running against some of the best-known Erie politicians. Although she had served eight years on City Council, most of her primary contenders had spent decades in the political arena, either on council or in the city administration. Even though a relative newcomer, in the May 1989 mayoral primary, Savocchio won by a margin of 477 votes. This was less than 2 percent of the total ballots cast (Garvey, *Erie Pennsylvania Mayors*, 357).

In November's general election, Savocchio's Republican opponent was Stanley Prazer, the well-known retired city water department head. The election brought Joyce Savocchio a landslide victory winning by 12,876 votes, taking all six wards of the city, thus making her Erie's first elected woman mayor.



Savocchio, elected mayor in November 1989, took office in January 1990. Her political career would bring two more successful elections and administrations. She would be the first mayor of the city of Erie to serve under the newly imposed term limits, restricting elected officials to a total of three four-year terms.

In her first administration, she faced exceptional challenges because her predecessor, Tullio, had been unable to manage the day-to-day affairs of the city since the middle of 1989. Tullio's failing health was particularly noticeable in the two-month period between Savocchio's election and her inauguration. In order to facilitate a smooth transition, Tullio named Liebel as acting mayor but did not resign. In addition, Savocchio did not push to assume the mantle of mayor after her election. She indicated that she wanted to complete her term on City Council. In reality, Liebel had held the reins of city government since May 1989 when Tullio's disease became completely debilitating. In assuming the position of acting mayor, Liebel indicated that her purpose, which she carried out with dedication and skill, was to assist the in-coming Savocchio administration and provide a smooth transition (Garvey, *Erie, Pennsylvania's Mayors*, 359).



Upon being sworn in as mayor in January, Mayor Savocchio moved to put together 100-, 300-, and 1,000-day plans to address the problems confronting the city and pave a way for a brighter future. In devising paths forward, Savocchio enlisted the assistance of Dr. David Kozak to serve as chairman of her Transition Committee. Transition plans were to be created with the assistance of private-sector leaders. While Savocchio remained chairwoman of the various committees, she appointed 10 partners from the private sector to be vice chairs of the committees charged with examining various aspects of the city administration and recommending changes. One of the most important committees became the Partners Program headed by Ralph Wright, president of Reed Manufacturing Company. Other vice

chairs included Tom Hagen, head of Erie Insurance who was given finance and administration. John Horan became vicechair of the Economic and Opportunity Development Committee. The Sewer Department vicechair was Max Funk, former executive vice president of Zurn Industries. Maintenance vice chair was accepted by M.S. Richardson, former vice president of Erie's General Electric plant in Lawrence Park. The Police vice chair was Frank Mara, division director of Penelec. The Labor vice chair was Ted Dombrowski, Erie Labor leader and a former city councilman.

These community experts, along with others, were charged with identifying ways to stream-line city government through combining various bureaus, implementing central purchasing, and employing better accounting procedures to improve operations and save the city tax dollars. They were also to recommend possible layoffs (Pinski, *Erie Morning News*, 1/17/1990).

The greatest challenge lay in the city's finances, in which the city faced a declining population and millions of dollars in unfunded pensions. However, during this formative period, the Savocchio administration also confronted additional crises. Shortly into the new administration, on February 15, 1990, there was a crippling storm. The city was coated with a half-inch of ice. Trees and power lines were down and emergency resources were strained beyond capacity. Savocchio and her staff persevered and there was no life lost, but damage to power lines and trees was abundantly evident. In fall 1992, the roadway at the busy intersection of West 12th and Liberty streets collapsed. The mammoth hole was caused by a sewer cave-in. This was indicative of the aging infrastructure of the city of Erie.

While confronting these physical crises, there were also the ever-increasing economic changes of a shifting economy that had begun in the early 1980s and continued, decimating the number of jobs and increasing the vacant stores as consumers moved to the surrounding malls, and decreasing the value of property in the city.

**LIST OF SOME OF THE
ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE
SAVOCCHIO ADMINISTRATION**

- Replacement of the Old Canal Sewer
- Upgrade of city parks and playgrounds
- Celebration of 200th Anniversary of Erie's founding
- Construction of the Bicentennial Tower
- Creation of apartments in Boston Store
- Baseball stadium in former Sears parking lot
- Parking garage at East 10th and French St.
- Renovation of Warner theater
- Continuation of We Love Erie Days
- Separation of storm and sewer systems to create a "clean Bay in 10 years."
- Reuse of vacant property as industrial parks

The budget, more than anything else, brought the reality of insufficient revenue and of economic change home. To balance the budget, the city required reduction of employees, an improved accounting system, revamping of services, and higher taxes. To gain a fiscal advantage, the Savocchio Administration moved the city water system to an authority, worked to obtain federal and state dollars to create two new industrial parks, and obtained \$1.2 million settlement from Hamot Medical Center, which had lost part of its tax-exempt status. By 1993, these maneuvers and additional budget cuts allowed the Savocchio Administration "to balance the budget for the first time in a decade without an increase in taxes or fees" (*Erie Times-News*, 1/24/1993). During the first Savocchio Administration, the finances of the city improved to such an extent that its bond rating was moved from a BB rating to an investment grade of A-minus, dramatically improving the city's ability to borrow funds for its improvement projects (Garvey, 378).

After being elected three times and completing her three terms allowed by city law, on her last day in office Mayor Savocchio left the fifth floor of City Hall with a feeling of sadness. Then there was a call for her to return. Savocchio learned it was not for a crisis, but for a celebration and a tribute to her. The tribute was from the NAACP and others in appreciation for her excellent service as mayor (Gardner, Jule, *Erie Times News*, 1/5/2002).

Savocchio savors challenges of role as 'Erie's CEO'

TN 1/24/93

Erie City Savocchio, Joyce



Times-News Photo by Jack Hanrahan

By JEFFREY HILMAN

ERIE MAYOR JOYCE SAVOCCHIO regards comparisons to her predecessor, the late Louis J. Tullio, as inevitable. "I don't think anyone coming in after Lou Tullio could not expect the comparisons," she says.

But three years into her term, Savocchio sits in the fifth-floor mayor's office — the office Tullio occupied for most of her adult life — and falls back on an old story to explain why the comparisons are of little consequence.

At the time of her inauguration, the 50-year-old mayor says, she warned that she couldn't be expected to fill the shoes of Tullio, who died April 17, 1990, in his 24th year in office. His feet were too big, she quipped, and her shoes had heels.

The point was to highlight the differences between them. Tullio was an institution; Savocchio was — and is, she contends — an agent of change.

If Tullio's known for the grand gestures — remembered for his effusive personal style and his ability early in his tenure to bring home the bacon in the form of federal grants and subsidies — Savocchio's legacy is likely to be more subtle. According to the projections of a citizens' panel named last year to analyze the city's financial picture, just balancing the city's precariously jury-rigged budget will be a Herculean feat for this former teacher and eight-year city councilwoman, who has recast herself over the past three years as a manager and problem-solver — in her words, "Erie's CEO."

Challenges met

As a woman who professes to relish challenges, Savocchio has found herself in the right place.

Almost from its outset on New Year's Day 1990, her time at the helm of the city of Erie has been marked by the kinds of unexpected difficulties that inhibit the long-term vision she advocates.

Nature delivered the first blow on Feb. 15, 1990, coating the city she had led for just a month and a half with nearly a half inch of ice. Trees and power lines were down all over town, placing an immediate strain on police and firefighters and creating a mess that occupied streets employees for six weeks.

"That was my first challenge," Savocchio says, "and it has just never stopped."

A more recent and more telling event was the collapse last fall of a large portion of the busy intersection of West 12th and Liberty streets. In addition to the need to reroute traffic and fill, at a cost of about \$112,000, the mammoth hole caused by a sewer cave-in, Savocchio says such episodes have helped focus attention on the longer-term problems of this city of 108,000 residents.

THREE YEARS into her term, city's first woman mayor walks a fine line between legacies of the past and realities of the future.

Two Centuries of Erie Leadership



"While remembering those who came before us, let us dedicate ourselves to building an outstanding city on the Great Lakes and a government that will lead us forward into the next century." Mayor Joyce Savocchio

Sources: Erie Daily Times, Erie Times News,

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judy Lynch, Ph.D., is a Scholar in Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society. She was named the Jefferson's Decadean Scholar in 2018. She continues to serve on the Jefferson's Board of Trustees and was its first chairwoman. From 2004 to 2017, she served as Associate Professor of Political Science and History at Mercyhurst University. From 2002 to 2004, Dr. Lynch taught at Allegheny College and was part of the Civic Engagement Institute. Prior, she worked as an analyst for the CIA and served for 20 years as Erie County Executive. She received her Doctorate With



Distinction in Political Science in 2001 from the University of Pittsburgh and her M.A. in Social Studies from Gannon University. Her undergraduate degree, a B.A. in History and Political Science, is from George Washington University.

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