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From Italy to America: Photographs of Anthony Riccio

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From Italy to America: Photographs of Anthony Riccio Didactic Panels

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Boston's North End

Anthony Riccio first became fascinated with Boston's North End, the heart of that city's Italian-American community, in 1978 when Jim Amalfitano, the then-director of the North End Neighborhood Service Center, hired him to oversee the Senior Citizen Drop-In Center. Through his work there, Riccio developed a special rapport with the area's *anziani*, or elderly Italian citizens, many of whom he would eventually interview in their North End homes. The resulting network of trust and friendship provided the young Riccio with a priceless opportunity to hear firsthand about the experiences of many Italian immigrants who had arrived in America decades earlier.

Originally, the majority of Italian immigrants decided to begin their American lives in New York, the main docking port for most ships voyaging across the Atlantic. As the number of immigrants arriving in New York continued to rise, however, new ports became necessary. The first Italians began arriving in the North End of Boston, an area that came to be known as a haven for immigrants, in the 1860s. Many of the earliest Italian immigrants took jobs as factory workers and day laborers. Later they entered the workforce as produce vendors, fishermen, and construction workers. Families, often with large numbers of children, occupied cramped, "cold-water" tenement buildings originally built to house the great waves of Irish immigrants who had arrived before the Italians. Neighbors, who frequently lived in close quarters, left their doors open to anyone who wanted to visit. The Italian-American presence there enlivened the streets and parks and led to the creation of open-air markets on every other block. In a nutshell, Italians transformed Boston's North End into a true community.

Today, the North End has been radically transformed by a number of forces, the most powerful of which is gentrification. An ever widening economic gap, created by the arrival of wealthy newcomers, has contributed to feelings of alienation experienced by those who have resided in the area for decades. Jim Amalfitano's words seem prophetic when he predicted, "[s]oon all the people will be gone and the North End will be one big Italian restaurant."

-Matthew Mutone, Nico Tutino, and Max Weiss with Drs. Mary Ann Carolan and Jill Deupi

To hear audio clips from the interviews Anthony Riccio conducted with many of the individuals featured in this exhibition go to www.fairfield.edu/italytoamerica on your smart phone. You can also access these files through the museum's website: www.fairfield.edu/museum.