

# **Charles “Charlie” Della Sala**

**1927 – 2020**

**FIREFIGHTER, REAL ESTATE BROKER**

**WRITTEN BY ANNAMARIE DELLA SALA-STANTON & CHUCK DELLA SALA**

Charlie was self-motivated and bright, a hard-working man who played brilliantly the hand he was dealt in life. Born on one continent, growing up on another after experiencing an early tragic loss and crossing the Atlantic Ocean twice before the age of 20--these events of Charles Della Sala’s early years shaped him into a strong, resilient and proud Italian American.

Charlie was born on May 5, 1927, in the Little Italy section of the Bronx, New York, the youngest son of Antonio and Anna (Moreno) Della Sala. His time in New York City was very short-lived. When he was three, Charlie’s mother died in a watch factory explosion, and Antonio felt he could not care for Charlie and his older brother, Nicholas, while working full time in his bakery. Antonio made the difficult decision to send Charlie and Nick back to his birthplace, Celzi Di Forino, in the province of Avellino, Campania, Italy, to live with and be cared for by his unmarried sister, Anna, and extended family. Charlie spent his childhood in Forino and his teenage years near Naples; he did not see his father again until he was 19 years old.

Charlie was grateful for his aunt’s love as a mother figure and remembered how she would hold him in her rocking chair with his head on her heart, stroking his hair. For 16 years Anna lovingly cared for Charlie and Nick. Antonio regularly sent money to Italy to support Charlie and Nick, but he never made the trip back to visit his sons. Years passed, and just when Antonio was in the process of bringing the boys--both American citizens--back to the United States, World War II broke out. Travel was suspended in and out of Italy when, under the leadership of Mussolini, that country became an enemy of the U.S.



**Charlie, student photo.**

Charlie attended public school in Forino until fifth grade, then became a boarding student through his high-school years at Castellammare di Stabia on the Bay of Naples, 19 miles south of metropolitan Naples. Charlie was known by the Salesian priests there as someone who asked many questions and had a mischievous and adventurous spirit. One weekend Charlie and a few fellow high-school students, short on cash but looking for adventure, hopped a train and, holding on for dear life to the top of the cars, rode all the way to Naples. Guess whose idea that was? After graduating from high school, Charlie considered becoming a doctor; but when he researched the cost, he found the education he would need was far too expensive.

Not knowing what to do, Charlie called his father, who suggested he return to America.

In 1946 Charlie traveled by ocean liner from Italy to New York City, leaving behind his brother Nick. (Nick had been given the choice to join Mussolini's army or be shot, and that choice to live cost him his American citizenship. It took several years before Nick was able to reunite with Charlie and his father in the United States.) On the voyage to America Charlie became extremely seasick and unable to keep food down. He lost a lot of weight and was even given last rites, but, although extremely emaciated, he survived the trip. Once he arrived in New York, Charlie moved in with Antonio and Antonio's wife Helen and took a job working in his father's bakery. Because Antonio had been isolated in his Little Italy community and never learned to speak English, Charlie realized he needed to learn the language as quickly as possible to do well in America and find his own place to live. Even though he was fluent in Italian, Latin and Spanish, English did not come easily and would not, as long as he was living in a neighborhood where Italian was the primary language. After working all day in the bakery, Charlie attended night school to learn English

After learning enough of the language to get by, Charlie told his father he wanted to join the army. His father was worried. “It’s too dangerous,” Antonio said. With the practical wisdom he lived by Charlie replied, “I want to go where I am forced to learn to speak English. If it’s my time to go, I will go.” When he went to the recruiting office, Charlie said, “I want to go soldier,” in his broken English. The recruiters naturally thought he was an Italian citizen, so he brought in his passport to prove his American citizenship. Once he passed the military tests, he was offered a choice of where to report. When the recruiters offered Fort Ord and described the Monterey area to him, Charlie thought, “It’s by the ocean, like Naples!” The choice was clear.

After completing basic training at Fort Ord, Charlie was assigned to teach Italian at the Army Language School at the Presidio of Monterey. Charlie had no prior teaching experience, but a retired consul general from Italy offered to write up all the lesson plans he would need to follow. Charlie had a three-month waiting period before beginning to teach his class, so he was assigned a job working with a dentist as a hygienist. He did extremely well at the job and was promoted to private first class, but it was clear that dentistry was not the job for him. Once he started teaching, he found he really enjoyed it. The retired consul general had advised Charlie to be very expressive with his hands during the lessons, and this came naturally to him anyway. When he met his students outside of the classroom, they would often mimic his hand gestures. He laughed and smiled with approval.

Life in Monterey was good, but there was one thing missing in his life, a woman. He told his military commander, “I have to get me a lady, someone to share my life with.” His commander suggested he try the USO, so Charlie, accompanied by his friend nicknamed “Popcorn,” went to the USO one Saturday night. They looked around the room, but Charlie wasn’t attracted to any of the women there, so they decided to leave and walk back to the Presidio. Just down the street as they passed the San Carlos Cathedral Parish Hall, they heard the sound of Italian music playing, and inside was a large group of young Italian women sitting on benches, giggling

and talking. Charlie noticed one beautiful woman sitting quietly in the second row, all alone. That woman was Rosie Bruno, born and raised in Monterey, who was working long hours at the local fish canneries on Cannery Row. "She sat like a saint," Charlie said. He motioned to her to come down, and when she approached him, he said, "Let's dance." Although Rosie was at first shy and embarrassed, Charlie took her in his arms and told her he would teach her to dance. He confessed, "I saw all those girls. You are the most beautiful one here," and gently kissed her cheek. She was smitten. That evening Charlie walked her home and was greeted by the sight of her Sicilian mother, waiting and peeking out the window!



**Wedding photo, November  
12, 1949.**

That love-at-first-sight romance turned into marriage two years later on November 12, 1949, at the San Carlos Cathedral, steps away from where Charlie and Rosie first met. Through the years came five children--Annamarie, Anthony, Charles Jr. (Chuck), Kathleen and Maryann. After leaving the military in mid-1950, Charlie took on many odd jobs, working hard to support his young family while applying for and pursuing a city job, which would provide more financial security. At that time fishing was a difficult but lucrative line of work, and, in spite of his disastrous boat trip back to America, Charlie gave it a try. He went out with skipper Noto; but after one night of

seasickness, Charlie let go of that idea. He worked at the sugar-beet factory and a lumber yard and did janitorial work--whatever he could find. Nothing was beneath him; he was willing to do whatever it took. That was a philosophy he lived by and instilled in his children through word and example.

Finally, the Monterey Fire Department called, and Charlie proudly served the city of Monterey as a firefighter. He started out as an engineer driving the fire truck and soon earned the nickname Lead Foot. He worked his way up to battalion chief and

retired after more than 26 years of service. At the fire department they loved his zest for life, his delicious homemade meatballs and sauce on Sundays, his sense of humor, generous heart and open ears. He was always ready to help in any way possible and was a motivational force in many people's lives.



**Charlie going down the fire pole  
“his way.”**

Mike Ventimiglia, a fellow firefighter, considered Charlie a good friend and mentor. “I had known Charlie for years, as we lived across the street from each other on John Street in the Del Monte Grove area of Monterey. I was hired by the Monterey Fire Department in 1969, and that is when I got to experience the real Charlie Della Sala. I was assigned to the headquarters station for overtime; it was fun and an experience. Charlie was senior captain in charge of the station and personnel. The fire station was built in 1959, and the interior walls were covered with soot from years of the fire-engine exhaust and needed to be cleaned. We couldn't just spray water on the walls, as it

Rosie often took her young children to visit their dad at the city fire stations, all of which had fire poles. The usual way to slide down a fire pole is feet first; however, fun-loving Charlie had a “better” way--he slid down the pole *head* first. He had a playful spirit, a love for life and a penchant for doing things “his way.”



**Charlie and his station one crew. L-R: Charlie, Eugene Roncarati, Ward Chant, Donald Cavin, Frank DiMaggio, Alfred Long and Manual Solis.**

would create a mess on the floor and a slip hazard if we were to receive an alarm. Charlie had read in a *Reader's Digest* book that a loaf of French bread slit down the middle and coated with baking soda and salt could be used as a scrubber to remove the soot from the walls. Charlie sent us to Purity Bakery downtown, and we picked up several dozen loaves. Back at the station we moved all the engines outside, put up the extension ladders and went to work on the walls. We thought it was a crazy idea, but believe it or not, it did remove some of the soot, and all we had to do was sweep up the crumbs from the floor. Also, there was a plus side to this chore: We all had our fill of fresh-baked French bread while we were working. Charlie was one of those officers who were gregarious and fun to work for, but he would also let you know when you crossed the line. Men who worked for Charlie respected him and enjoyed being around him."

Over the years the Della Salas enjoyed many family gatherings, including barbecues and swimming at Bolado Park, Big Sur and Paraiso Springs. One summer in the early 1960s, Charlie and Rose packed the five kids into the Chevy station wagon and drove to Burbank, California, to visit Charlie's brother, Nick, and his family. That trip included a visit to Disneyland and Knotts Berry Farm. Driving to one of the amusement parks, they got lost and stumbled onto a taping of *Queen for a Day*, a popular weekly television show where housewives competed for the crown and accompanying prizes. On that day—and only that one time—the show was called "King for a Day," featuring men as competitors. As luck would have it, Charlie--a firefighter with five children, not sure of the criteria for winning--was chosen as one of the contestants, and guess who won? That's right, Charlie Della Sala was crowned King for a Day and went home with the prizes.

As a firefighter, Charlie worked 24-hour shifts followed by a day off before having to report back to the firehouse. Those days off provided an opportunity for him to have a second job working for Bekins Moving and Storage. With the additional income, plus savings accumulated through living modestly, Charlie and Rose purchased a lot on John Street in the Del Monte Grove area of Monterey in 1953.



**Charlie Della Sala and Jean Carrere, 1957.**

With the help of a fellow firefighter Charlie built their first three-bedroom/two-bath home which was completed in 1955, in time to welcome their third child, Charles Jr. (Chuck). With Charlie continuing to work a second job they were able to purchase another house on John Street in 1957. This one had only two bedrooms and was considerably smaller than the home they had built; but now with four children and one more on the way, they made the decision to move into it and rent out the larger three-bedroom property. Rental income from the larger home covered the bank-loan payments on both properties, with five dollars to spare. A year later the house across the street, a true fixer-upper, was for sale, and they bought

it. Working together, Charlie and Rose spent many long days and nights transforming the run-down property, and when it was fixed up and looking fresh and well-cared for, they put it up for sale. While signing the sales contract, they realized the realtor was going to make more money than they were, and with far less effort. Charlie said, "We are on the wrong side of this." This realization started both Charlie and Rose on the path toward obtaining their licenses to sell real estate.

After retiring from the fire department in 1977, Charlie became a real estate broker, and with Rosie as realtor he opened Pacific Street Real Estate. Charlie learned the importance of owning real estate from Rosie. When her father had diabetes and could no longer fish, Rosie saw how her mother was able to "stay afloat" with the help of income from her parents' rental units. Rosie looked for properties available for sale that needed work. She was

8 Monday, May 2, 1977. Monterey Peninsula Herald

**Retiring**

Monterey Fire Department Battalion Chief Charles Della Sala will be honored at a testimonial dinner Thursday at Rancho Canada in Carmel Valley, beginning with a social hour at 6 p.m. Della Sala joined the department in 1951, and has served as battalion chief since 1973. Tickets for the dinner are available at all three Monterey fire stations.

right by Charlie's side transforming run-down properties into livable units, painting, cleaning and collecting rents. They became very successful in real estate and encouraged others to invest.

With a more flexible schedule as a real estate broker, Charlie became very active in the community. He served as a member of the Monterey Kiwanis Club, delivered for Meals on Wheels, raised money for people in need and helped with the Special Olympics. He was deeply touched and had difficulty holding back the tears when one of the children at the Special Olympics said, "Charlie, I love you."



**30th Wedding Anniversary—Back row: Chuck, Annamarie, Anthony, Kathy and Maryann.**



**Charlie and Rose, 1979.**

When an earthquake struck southern Italy on November 23, 1980, Charlie--with friends Jerry Lucido, Peter Coniglio and Frank Nuovo--raised over \$20,000 for the Boys Town of Italy, Inc. Charlie and Rose, at their own expense, flew to Rome and personally delivered a check to Msgr. J. Patrick Carroll Abbing, the Boys Town of Italy president. They wanted to ensure that the victims of this disastrous earthquake were helped in their moment of greatest need.

Always looking for a new project, Charlie, Jerry, Peter and Frank were instrumental in raising funds for the new San Carlos Cathedral parish hall and the Santa Rosalia statue located at the Fisherman's Wharf #1. Charlie and Rose personally contributed

to funds for the bronze statue of the fisherman at the end of Wharf #1, the Monterey Sports Center, the restoration of San Carlos Cathedral, the National Italian American Foundation and the New York firefighters involved in the 911 disaster.

Charlie spent more than 35 years serving the Monterey chapter of the Sons of Italy as grand trustee, grand deputy, president, vice president, orator and trustee of the Monterey Lodge. He held local and statewide offices, traveling to Sons of Italy state and national conventions. On June 24, 1987, the Sons of Italy held their 52<sup>nd</sup> Grand Convention here in Monterey. Charlie was the general chairman with Aldo DeRose as his co-chair. Eight months of meetings involving countless hours of planning and preparation and help from numerous hard-working volunteers culminated in a highly successful convention.

As the Italian Heritage Society vice-president, Charlie was actively working to unify the various Italian American Clubs and create a place to proudly display and share their common heritage. Charlie's goal was to unite all factions of Monterey's Italian American community within five years. It wasn't a goal he took lightly or felt could be easily accomplished, but he believed that with determination, motivation, leadership and cooperation it could be done. Unfortunately, it was a goal that has yet to be reached. Charlie was honored by the Italian Heritage Society in 2010 for his many contributions to the Italian American community.

Charlie was a member of the Monterey Italian Catholic Federation, ICF Branch 36, the Knights of Columbus, and the Compari Club. For ten years, as a member and donor to the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF), he attended yearly meetings in Washington, D.C. There were about 3,000 members from the United States and Italy. NIAF donated yearly about \$1,000,000 to provide financial help to Italian American students in need and aid to people affected by earthquakes in Italy.

Full of life and unconditional love, Charlie displayed these traits through acts of generosity toward those less fortunate, not only monetarily but also by donating his

time and energy with nothing expected in return. His passion for life and his can-do attitude were great gifts to his family and friends. Anna Panetta, the late former president of the Italian Heritage Society, once said, “Charlie always asks ‘What can I do to help?’ He is always there volunteering and helping others.”

Charlie and Rose enjoyed their trips to Reno and Las Vegas. In the late 1980s Charlie and Rose took a flight from Monterey to Las Vegas and experienced severe turbulence. When they touched down, Charlie was as white as a ghost and as sick as a dog. He told Rosie, “No matter what, I am not going to fly back to Monterey.” Charlie and Rose visited the Sahara Casino, which had a promotion going on—a giveaway of one car a day during the entire month of June. While they were gambling, an announcement came over the loudspeaker that the winning ticket was about to be drawn. Charlie turned to Rosie and said, “Stand up, you are going to win that car.” Sure enough, when the winning ticket was pulled, Rosie won! It was a long drive home in the summer heat with no air conditioning in a Datsun 210 economy car, but Charlie got his wish not to fly home.

On Friday nights Charlie enjoyed playing cards on a regular basis with his brothers-in-law. He loved listening to music, especially at high volume. In the early 1960s he purchased a ten-speaker stereo system, and on a sunny day with the stereo cranked up and the windows rattling, the neighbors got a free concert of Italian favorites. Oddly enough, no one ever complained. Charlie was a master in the kitchen—his version of focaccia had a potato in the dough topped with crushed tomatoes, olive oil, and fresh basil, Napolitan style, and his spaghetti sauce with meatballs and Italian sausage was delicious. When he was cooking, mouth-watering aromas drifted all the way down the block! He enjoyed barbecuing and dancing at weddings; he and Rosie were often the last couple off the dance floor. Charlie and Rose always looked forward to getting together with the family, grandkids and great-grand kids for dinner at their home during the holidays.



**Christmas at the Della Sala's, 2004.**

Above all, Charlie loved being together with family, a large local group that included Rosie's siblings and their spouses--sisters Mary and Charlie Storelli; Angie Colletto Merrill and Mike; Katie Evangelista and Al; brothers Gus Bruno and Florence, and Frank Bruno and Barbara--and all their children. Charlie was proud of and had great affection for all his many nieces and nephews. He was a wonderful storyteller and was often the center of attention at family gatherings.

Through the years Charlie was an avid reader, especially of various motivational books and articles on health and positive thinking. He put all those books and articles he loved to read to good use, motivating his friends and family to be their best. When he came across something new or helpful, he would make copies of the article or page and give them to all his children. He was a good listener who wanted to find out "what made people tick," a cheerleader and a positive role model and

motivator. Charlie always told his children “Don’t be a braggadocio,” but in reality he had a lot to be proud of because he excelled at many things he put his mind to.



Charlie went to walk among the angels on October 2, 2020, the Feast of the Guardian Angels, only six weeks before he and Rosie would have celebrated their 71<sup>st</sup> wedding anniversary. Thank you, Charlie, for sharing your life with all of us!

## ITALIAN HERITAGE SOCIETY HONOREE 2010