



Office of the City Clerk

City Hall
121 N. LaSalle St.
Room 107
Chicago, IL 60602
www.chicityclerk.com

Legislation Text

File #: SO2020-859, **Version:** 1

City Council Meeting May 26,2021

BE IT ORDAINED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF CHICAGO

SECTION 1. That an ordinance heretofore passed by the city covincil which authorizes erection of honorary street name signs, the commissioner of transportation shall take the necessary action or standardization of southwest comer of 901 W.Randolph St to be known as "Honorary James F. Graziano Way".

SECTION 2. This ordinance shall take effect and be in full force hereinafter its passage And publication

Walter Burnett, Jr. I Alderman of the 27th Ward

Date:

Office of Budget and Management 121 N. LaSalle,
Room 604 Chicago, IL 60602

To Whom It May Concern:

S_____, Alderman of the _____ hereby authorize the
Office of Budget Management to withdraw the funds associated with the cost of installation for
this honorary street designation for _____ from my:

_____ Ward's annual menu program budget

☐ Ward's aldermanic expense allowance

upon passage of this designation ordinance, pursuant to Section 2-8-040 of the Chicago
Municipal Code.

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Sincerely, \

Alderman

6/1/2017

Vincenzo (J.P.) Graziano came to Chicago penniless in 1905 and by 1933 had built a thriving business, the J.P. Graziano Grocery Company, a business that his great-grandson operates to this day. His affection and commitment to his family was always evident and his sons, Alfredo and Paul, followed closely in his footsteps both as fathers and as businessmen. His fellow parishioners held Don Vincenzo, as he was sometimes called, in high-esteem for his generosity and warmth. He helped his neighbors through difficult times with loans and jobs and he was honored many times at weddings as the Grand Marshal.

Signor Vincenzo, as he was often called, possessed the qualities of a man of substance and character: well-dressed yet humble, self-made but devout and charitable. A charismatic and engaging storyteller, he delighted his audiences with his anecdotes and recollections of Chicago as it will never be again.

The history of the J.P. Graziano Grocery Company began with a young Sicilian from the seaside town of Bagheria, Sicily named Vincenzo Graziano. In the early 1900s Vincenzo left Bagheria and set out for America, as a stowaway, pursuing the girl he had fallen for. Leaving his hiding spot in the engine room, Vincenzo unexpectedly met one of his uncles who is bound for New York. He learned from his uncle that the girl he desires was in fact already engaged. Crestfallen, Vincenzo decided to follow his uncle to New York and assist him when he opened his butcher shop.

The next stage of Vincenzo's journey began with the untimely death of his uncle after which he moved to Chicago. It is unclear why he picked Chicago however, we know that like other Italian immigrants Vincenzo strongly identified with his place of birth (campanilismo). Getting word that many of his fellow villagers (paesani) were settling into a specific area would give him a big push in that direction.

As it turns out, a great many Sicilians from around Palermo and eastern Sicily were moving into Chicago's Near North Side at this same time. Vincenzo's home town was right outside Palermo and it stands to reason he was drawn to Chicago when he heard about this. Vincenzo, with nothing in his pockets, experienced real hardship during his early days in Chicago.

He survived by lifting pieces of fruit from these street vendors, then going around the corner and selling them. Quick enough to not get caught and smart enough to save up enough to buy his own basket, Vincenzo eventually became a legitimate street vendor. Before too long he traded in his basket for a fruit cart.

The next step up for Vincenzo was a big one. He bought a horse and wagon and began traveling through neighborhoods selling produce. Vincenzo's arrival in Chicago coincided with the so-called "Golden Age of the Street" when numerous street vendors and peddlers stationed themselves along the busy streets throughout the city.

When Vincenzo began navigating down Chicago's street with his horse-drawn cart, he was far from alone. During this era housewives could buy ice, groceries, meat, get their knives and scissors sharpened without leaving the house. Vendors with horse-drawn wagons were more profitable if they could figure out the most profitable routes through the neighborhoods. As Vincenzo was quite naturally servicing Italian immigrants this meant learning the best routes through the Italian neighborhoods near Halsted and Taylor ("Little Italy"), Grand and Morgan, and Division and Clyborn ("Little Sicily").

It's safe to say that Vincenzo figured out the best routes to follow because he opened a brick and mortar grocery

store in 1922. It's also safe to say that as he rode through neighborhoods young Vincenzo had plenty of opportunities to see and meet young Italian girls.

In time, he became enamored with a particular girl, and according to the family story, he absconded her and drove to Wisconsin where they got married

In 1933 Vincenzo's started his grocery store at 1376 W Grand Ave. squarely in the middle of Chicago's second-largest Italian area that stretched west along Grand Ave from the river to Western Ave. Vincenzo and his family lived on the third floor, rented the second, and ran the store out of the first.

Chicago's Italian population had surged from 13,000 in 1899 to 124,000 in 1920. As this population grew and even more Italian immigrants found their way to Chicago, Vincenzo's business expanded to meet the increasing demand for home delivery of specialty Italian products.

But the man who went from a hustling street vendor to owning his own store was not done expanding, not by a long shot. Signore Vincenzo needed more room to support his growing grocery business. So, in 1937 he rented part of potato warehouse located at 901 West Randolph Street, in the center of the wholesale meat and produce markets in Chicago, and set up his new wholesale business. His sons Alfredo and Paul were instrumental in helping Vincenzo expand the family business beyond the grocery store and into wholesale and distribution. Both Alfredo and Paul started working in the store as very young boys and both spent the rest of their lives working together at the grocery company their father started. After they opened it, the Randolph Street warehouse became home base for Vincenzo and his oldest son Paul. Meanwhile Alfredo and his mother continued to run the grocery store on Grand Ave. They continued to operate both stores until the mid-forties when they closed the Grand Ave store and brought the entire operation under one roof, which, it should be noted, they now owned.

Signore Vincenzo, along with his son Alfredo, handled operations and the back of the house at the Randolph Street warehouse. On the other hand, Paul became the ambassador of the family business, traveling back and forth between accounts and the warehouse. Decades earlier Signore Vincenzo began his business in earnest when he started traversing neighborhoods and delivering to his customers. Now his son Paul was doing the same, only now the customer's were restaurants and corner stores instead of housewives. Instead of a horse-drawn wagon, Paul got around Chicago in his large American-made four-door sedan. He worked at his family's store for his entire life and left an indelible mark on it. After WWII Chicago-area wholesaling firms boomed, and by the 1950s over 10,000 wholesaling firms were based in the Chicago area. "Only New York City was a more important American wholesaling center." One wholesaler that flourished during this time was the J.P. Graziano Grocery Company. With an ever-growing customer base, he became a leading wholesaler of imported and domestic grocery products in Chicago, especially for Italian specialty items.

With delivery trucks criss-crossing the Chicago area, the J.P. Graziano Grocery Store supplied a great many restaurants and independent grocers for many years. Beginning around 1900, the Italian population around Taylor Street area on Chicago's Near West Side swelled and the area became known as "Little Italy". J.P. Graziano's sat just a bit north of the Taylor Street and so was in a perfect location to serve Chicago's largest Italian community.

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By the 1940s, the J.P. Graziano Grocery Company had deep roots with customers throughout the Chicago area as a wholesaler and distributor of a wide range of Italian specialty items. Because they had

such a demand for olive oil the Graziano's began to "pack their own". That is, they bought fresh olive oil in bulk and then filled and sealed gallon cans sold it under their own label: Victoria. Like many wholesalers along Randolph Street, J.P. Graziano's ran a retail business alongside its wholesale operation. Already experienced as retail grocers from their original store on Grand Ave, it made perfect sense for the Graziano family to keep its doors open to retail customers. With its close proximity to Little Italy, J.P. Graziano's benefited greatly from its reputation as the spot to find specialty items like Moroccan snails, caponata, baccala, and oil-cured olives. These were not your typical retail customers; these were folks who didn't mind dodging forklifts and buying in bulk.

In 2007 the J.P. Graziano Grocery opened a sub shop inside the 70-year-old store. The brainchild of fourth generation and current owner, Jim, who believed strongly that serving sandwiches could increase the store's visibility in the neighborhood. Word of mouth quickly spread through the neighborhood with new faces every day. Before too long we had our first big order (60 sandwiches for a customer at the Board of Trade) which inspired us to add a catering business alongside the walk-in business. The menu expanded to include vegetarian options, soups, salads, and deserts like fresh-filled cannoli.

J.P. Graziano Grocery Company continues to operate the Sandwich shop at the corner of 901 W. Randolph street. Wholesale and distribution were phased out in 2015 and the business now focuses solely on sandwiches and a few specialty grocery items. The neighborhood has grown to amazing heights over the last five years and, for the most part, is very different from the 1930's when JPG started here but the heart of the neighborhood remains in tact and inside the corner of Randolph and Peoria has stayed the same as we look forward to celebrating our 83 year of business on June 7th.