



Commendatore Peter Caruso

Peter Caruso was born April 4, 1927 in *Ferruzzano*, a tiny mountain village on the Ionian coast of the Italian peninsula, in the Province of *Reggio Calabria*. He was raised by his mother, Teresa and an older brother, Vincent, in a one-room stone house.

In order to help support this fatherless household, Peter became apprenticed to the village tailor at the age of nine. By 1941, Peter had learned the basic skills of needle and thread, but the economics and political climate of the time made the tailor's art a luxury which few villagers could afford. Being industrious and open to new challenges, Peter offered himself as a courier for the local pharmacist who needed a courier to travel north to Milan and other industrialized area to obtain medications. Peter, then 14, routinely boarded a train in *Ferruzzano* with two empty suitcases. If he was lucky and didn't get robbed by thieves and hoodlums along the way, he would return with sorely needed medicine and medical supplies.

In 1945, at the age of eighteen, Peter move to the northern port city of Genoa, where he attended the *Istituto Nucia Maria*, a school of fashion design where he learned to make garment patterns. When not attending school, he worked as a custom tailor for an exclusive men's haberdasher. In 1947, he earned a degree in pattern making and fashion design and opened a small custom tailor shop on Vico Valoria.

Having secured a trade and a livelihood, it was time to start a family. As a teenager, Peter fell in love with a beautiful *calabrizella*, a distant cousin whom he had known all his life. He courted Carmela Victoria until they wed in September of 1950. The newlyweds immediately set up house in Genoa where Peter continued to work as a tailor. It was there that their first two children were born.

The desire to make a better life compelled Peter to uproot his young bride and infants when the opportunity to emigrate to the United States presented itself. Like countless Italians before them, they left their homeland with little in the way of property and absolutely no comprehension of English. Boarding the *Andrea Doria* on March 21th, they arrived in New York City on March 29, 1956. It was to be the Italian steamship's last docking in the Port of New York.

The Caruso family settled in Jersey City, New Jersey in a rented 2 bedroom apartment on Duncan Avenue. The exploitation of immigrants was common and Peter's experience was no exception. As a pre-condition to renting his tenement apartment, he was required to take out the trash for all the entire building, a task he performed without question, twice a week for two years.

Wasting no time, Peter found suitable work in the garment trades. In relentless pursuit of his dream to open his own custom tailor shop, Peter worked two jobs, as a pattern maker for a large factory (Majestic Sportswear), and another smaller company. Seeing his children awake was a treat he seldom allowed himself.

His tenacity and drive bore fruit in September of 1957 with the opening of his first shop, Marileather Fashions, Inc. in Passaic, NJ. The company started with \$2,000 of his savings and opened its doors less than 18 months after his arrival in the U.S. Beginning with hand-stitched, custom-made leather gloves, Peter soon put his creative talents into designing and manufacturing high-quality, made-to-order, high fashion leatherwear at a time when leather garments were reserved almost exclusively for the motorcyclists.

By 1972, Peter's factory employed 60 people manufacturing suede and leather garments for a number of national retail chains. In 1974, his status within the leather garment industry was confirmed by his receipt of the "American Designer Award" presented by the Leather Industries Council to the nation's outstanding designers for their creativity and popularization of leather outerwear.

During the next decade, the business entity came to be known as PC Fashions, Inc., and then simply Peter Caruso Leatherwear. The business operated out of two buildings in Passaic, NJ and employed hundreds of people producing leather outerwear, as well as cloth suits and coats.

While seeing to the responsibilities of running his business, Peter still found time for charity and community work promoting his favorite subject: *Calabria*. He served on the "Comitato degli Italiani all'Estero" and as the committee's commissioner of Youth Sport; he is a trustee of the Italian American Political Action Committee; a member of the Lodi Chapter of UNICO; a founding member of the; "Ferruzzano Club of America"; a consultant to the Calabria region; the U.S. representative of the "Calabresi del Mondo"; served as Dinner Chairman of the 50th Anniversary fundraising dinner-dance for Boys' Towns of Italy; and serves on the Board of Trustees for the Mott Foundation, which provides merit scholarships for college students of Calabrese decent. He is the President of Calabria Tours, Inc., through which he develops itineraries and hosts annual junkets to explore the history and culture of the land called "Magna Grecia".

For his dedication and commitment to the Italian-American community and his exemplary career, he was honored by the Republic of Italy as a *Cavaliere* in June 1986, and in 1994, was awarded the rank of *Cavaliere Ufficiale*.

Peter lives in Clifton, New Jersey with his wife, Victoria. They have six children and five grandchildren.