

Newsday

# LI life

Richard di Donato  
with bricks from his  
father's last project

## New chapter *for a* bestseller

A SON WORKS TO RESTORE  
THE LEGACY OF LI AUTHOR'S  
1939 NOVEL ABOUT LIFE  
AS AN IMMIGRANT  
BRICKLAYER **E2**



HEATHER AINSWORTH

act2 | Long Islanders find comfort in homecoming **E13**

## In this issue

E2

Today's cover story showcases efforts to rebuild the legacy of a Long Islander whose semi-autobiographical novel about the immigrant experience was a bestseller in 1939.

In Act 2, we share the happy homecomings of Long Islanders who were born in other countries.

And check out today's Faith and Seniors calendars, which list virtual and in-person events.

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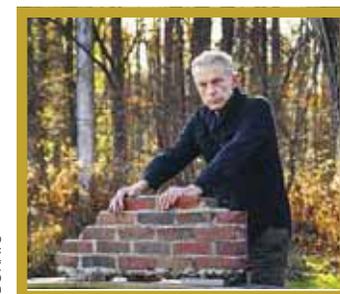
# A LITERARY REVIVAL



## Efforts breathe life into legacy of Pietro di Donato

BY MATTHEW DADDONA  
Special to Newsday

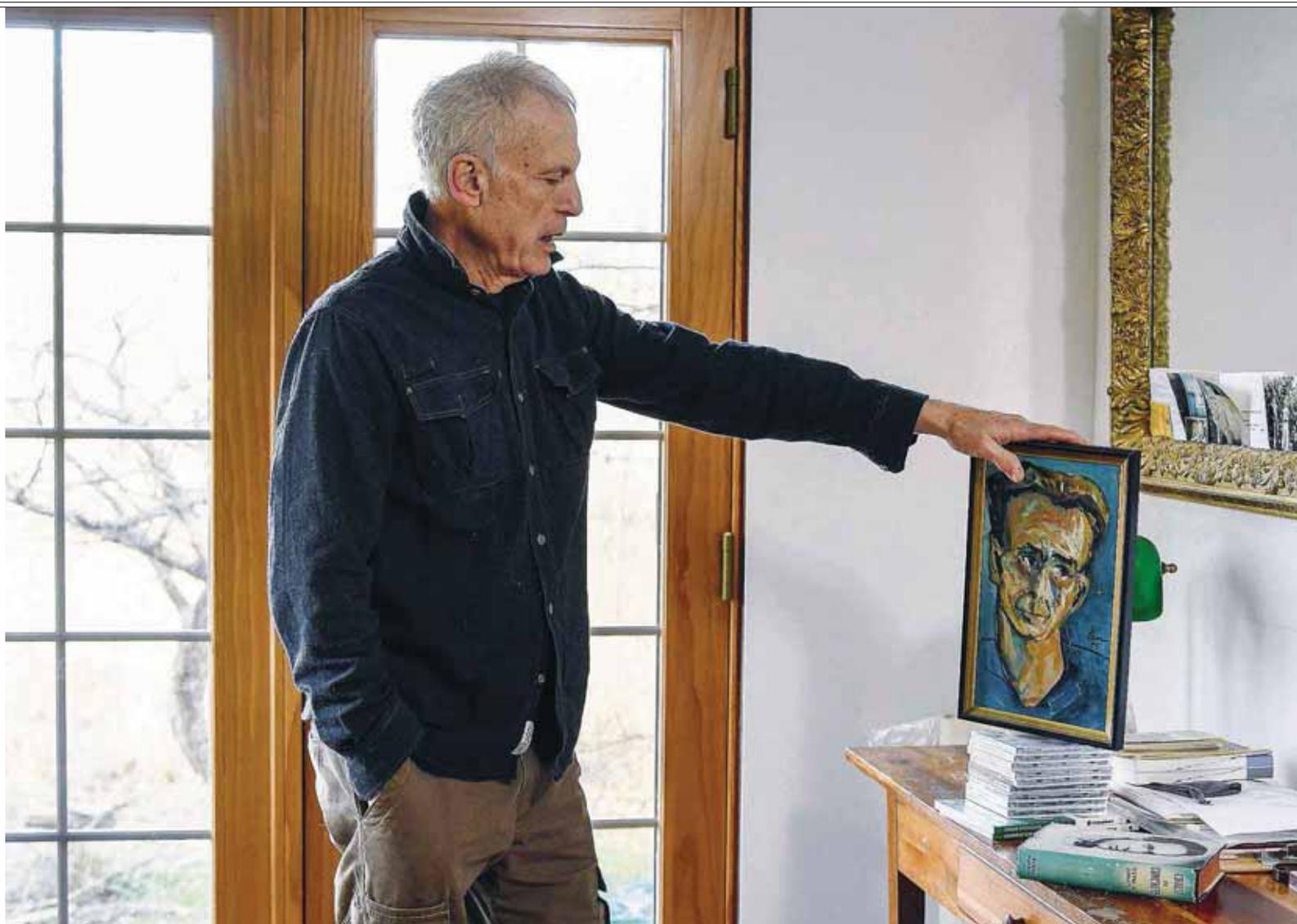
**R**ichard di Donato cannot bear to visit his childhood home, a Cape Cod that sits in Strongs Neck, a peninsula on Long Island's North Shore tucked just below the Sound. Three miles north of Stony Brook University, the hamlet is named for Anna Strong, part of the Culper Spy Ring during the Revolutionary War. And it's where, centuries later, Richard's father, Pietro — the critically acclaimed but oft-overlooked American writer — laid the final bricks of his life before dying of bone cancer at age 80.



RICHARD DI DONATO

**ON THE COVER.** Richard di Donato rebuilt in his Ithaca backyard a wall his father had assembled from bricks pilfered from a job site on Long Island.

Pietro di Donato places the final two bricks of a garden wall he was working on in the summer of 1991 at the home he built in Strongs Neck. It would be his final project.



**Richard di Donato** examines a painting of his late father, Pietro, at his home in Ithaca. The painting is by Cam Price, a good friend of his parents' who lived in Bay Shore.

**Pietro di Donato**, left, in Strongs Neck with his wife, Helen, his stepdaughter, Harriet, and sons, Richard and Peter, circa 1950.

HEATHER ANSWORTH

## More information

Read more about Pietro di Donato's life and works at [pietrodidonato.com](http://pietrodidonato.com).

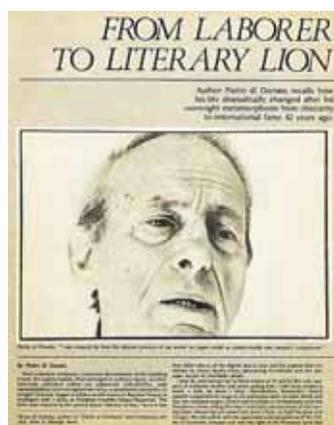
Much like bricks in a building, bones are the framework of the human body, providing form and function until they no longer can.

For Pietro, the realization about life's precariousness came in 1923 when his father, Geremio, an Italian immigrant, was killed in a building collapse while working as a bricklayer in lower Manhattan. Rather than run from the perilous job that devastated his family, Pietro took his father's place on the scaffold at age 12 to support his seven brothers and sisters.

"He behaved like the most mature man in the world," Richard said from his home in upstate Ithaca, where he has lived for the past 15 years. "Even though he was traumatized beyond belief by his father's death, he was a survivor."

Pietro modeled this tenet of survival in his 1939 semi-autobiographical novel, "Christ in Concrete," which brought the writer praise for its portrayal of working-class immigrants. As a New York Times review described it: "There are sadness, longing, pain and tragedy; but these are imbedded in the rich and tender volubility of these Italian people with their earthly awareness of all the good things of life — wine, food, spring air, a wife, little children, blessed religion, the job well done, the paycheck — all that gladdens the heart; awareness, too, of all that saddens, of pain bereavement, fear and injustice."

The novel tells the story of Paul, who, like Pietro, takes his father's place as a bricklayer after Geremio's gruesome death. In this slim but effusive tale, the characters, among them Paul's co-workers, contend with death, poor pay, looming misfortune, and the role of God and faith in their lives. "Is it not possible to breathe God's air without fear dominating the pall of unemployment?" Geremio asks early



RICHARD DI DONATO COLLECTION

**NOV. 15, 1981**  
Newsday published a memoir by Pietro di Donato.

on, exuding the novel's signature incantatory tone. "To rebel is to lose all of the very little. To be obedient is to choke. O dear Lord, guide my path."

### LIFE BECOMES ART

"Christ in Concrete," which evolved from a short story published in Esquire magazine

See **COVER STORY** on E4



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NEWSDAY, SUNDAY, JANUARY 2, 2022

AYDS/AM



A 12-year-old Pietro di Donato with his brother Peter on a West Hoboken, N.J., sidewalk just weeks before his father's death. At right, a New York Times review of "Christ in Concrete."

RICHARD DI DONATO COLLECTION

## A Fine and Unusual First Novel

Pietro di Donato's "Christ in Concrete" Is the Moving Story of an Italian Family's Changes of Fortune in America

**CHRIST IN CONCRETE.** By Pietro di Donato. 311 pp. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company. \$2.50.

By FRED T. MARSH

ONE of those more or less autobiographical first novels, "Christ in Concrete," is an original and quite stunning performance. A bit of it appeared in Esquire last year and promptly found itself in O'Brien's 1938 collection of best short stories. Like his hero, Donato is a bricklayer and son of a master bricklayer who lost his life on a construction job. Like him, too, he is of Italian peasant stock, as good a stock as any in the world, from Abruzzi. And like his hero he had to step into his father's shoes, for he was the oldest of eight, in his early teens, was still a very young man when his mother died six years later, leaving the youngsters in his care.

There are sadness, longing, pain and tragedy; but these are imbedded in the rich and tender volatility of these Italian people with their earthly awareness of all the good things of life—wine, food, Spring air, a wife, little children, our blessed religion, the job well done, the pay check—all that gladdens the heart; awareness, too, of all that saddens, of pain, bereavement, fear and injustice.

Donato is the untutored sensuous artist, or rather that is the role he has chosen in this recreation of his own story. He is attempting to portray life and work as experienced by his own people and does not attempt to tackle mental concepts impinging on working people from the outside. It is the story of the job and the home and the family circle, in good times and bad, from the inside.

There are only five chapters, five long tales bound together to tell a six years' story. The father, Geremio, foreman and master bricklayer, meets a violent death when the ancient, gutted building collapses and buries him under the debris of brick and mortar. That story is the one that has already been so highly acclaimed.

Then comes "Job," in which the thin, small boy fights for work for his mother and his little brothers and sisters, and finds it, too; and although at the beginning it nearly kills him and he is expected to do almost a man's work on a boy's pay, he hangs on. And he grows bigger and stronger in the face of exhaustion, for his home is filled with sprawling love, with that peculiar Latin sense of gearness and innocent sensuality that warm spirit and flesh.

Now the family cannot hope for the fine home the beloved father planned for them. The third story, "Tenement," tells us of family and neighbors, of the job, of the boy growing older, of the mother, lost without her husband, worried about her children, worried about Paul, our protagonist, doing work beyond his strength, worried about her brother in the hospital, working all day at piece work, but ever the rich, warm (superstitious, maybe) Italian peasant mother.

Then comes "Fiesta," when Uncle Luigi comes out of the hospital, gets a wooden leg and marries. What matter that times are hard (the depression has come), that everybody is hard up and fearful. There's wine aplenty, and food, too, for the celebration. And among the unmarried folk that peculiarly Latin graceful amorousness abounds. Only our Paul remains outwardly (although inwardly he is seething) the American Puritan. This is a lovely chapter, full of fun and Italian gregariousness, full of tales and songs and wine and compliments and flirtations and a bit of bawdry. But it's all as innocent as it is hearty.

The last story, "Annunziata," is about the death of the mother. It's as lovely as it is sad. It's per-



Pietro di Donato.

fectly rendered. And lest I say too much, I'll say no more.

Donato has told his own story here in the way of the artist as story-teller. But he's a writer;

he has the gift. He will go on from here. There are enough unfinished stories right here to provide another volume while he is feeling his way around.

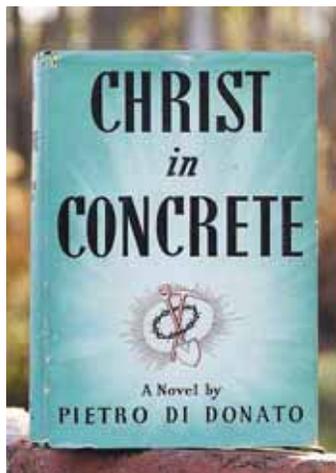
RICHARD DI DONATO COLLECTION

# Novel returns to spotlight

COVER STORY from E2

in 1937, became a Book-Of-The-Month Club selection and New York Times bestseller, earning di Donato a place in the pantheon of American literature. "Give Us This Day," a film based on the novel, was released in London in 1949; starring Sam Wanamaker and Lea Padovani, it would be swept away in the 1950s' Communist witch hunt in Hollywood.

Yet, as quickly as "Christ in Concrete" brought Pietro di Donato acclaim, it would seemingly disappear. Though he would publish more books — including the novels "This Woman" and "Three Circles of Light" — none reached the critical and commercial success of his first. In 1993, a year after Pietro died, Signet — an imprint of Penguin Random House — released a Classics edition of "Christ in Concrete" that has been used in college courses but has never been a staple like the works of such di Donato contemporaries as John Steinbeck. His "The Grapes of Wrath," to which Pietro's novel about working-class struggles has often been



HEATHER AINSWORTH

"Christ in Concrete" is based on Pietro di Donato's experience taking the place of his father, Geremio, at right in a 1923 photo, as a bricklayer after he was killed in a construction accident.

compared, was also published in 1939.

For even the most passionate admirers of Pietro di Donato, this is where the story usually ends. But since 2019, his son Richard, 73, has been on a mission to rescue his father's life and legacy from certain oblivion. "It is by no means too late," Richard told Newsday in August.

Richard, an ardent advocate of his father's work, has been



RICHARD DI DONATO COLLECTION

for the past several years the caretaker of Pietro's estate and legacy — "the tender of the archives," he jokes. In 2019, he created pietrodidonato.com, a site rich with photos and memorabilia, interviews and critical studies, and PDFs of published and unpublished works. Most of the material comes from Richard and his brother Peter's collection.

Though Peter, 76, who has lived in San Jose, California,

for the past 30 years, has not been involved with the website, his fondness for his father's works, particularly "Christ in Concrete," is profound. "His writing of 'Christ in Concrete,' despite a formal education which ended at age 12, was a genuine expression of love for the working class that he considered noble," Peter said in December. "His persistence, resulting in international recognition, is his inspiring legacy."

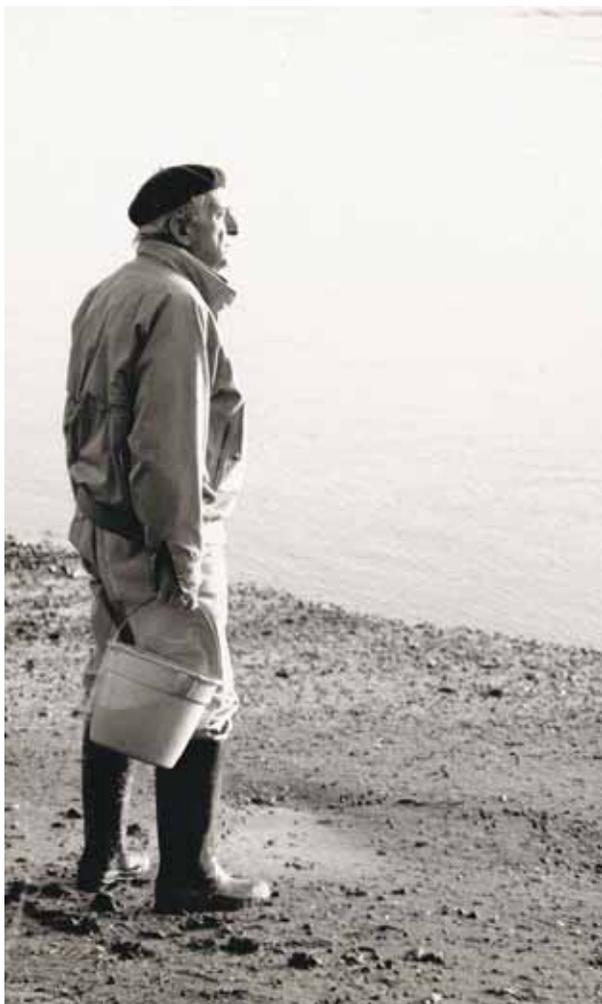
In 2022, for the first time, Signet will release an ebook of "Christ in Concrete" and Audible will release an audiobook, milestones made possible through Richard's unyielding determination to create an online presence for Pietro's career. Beyond reverence, Richard's motivation for his tribute is deeply personal, part of his own reckoning with his relationship with his father. "Like a dutiful son, I've been the keeper of this history and works," he said. "I felt like I owed it to him and myself."

### STORY OF SURVIVAL

That Pietro di Donato returned to bricklaying after his first novel's success, even after

hobnobbing and corresponding with such luminaries as the Italian actor Alberto Sordi, filmmaker Federico Fellini and President John F. Kennedy, was a testament to his survival skills, the same that sent him bricklaying when he was 12. As Newsday noted in Pietro's 1992 obituary: "Di Donato earned about \$100,000 from the book, but, in his own words, 'I squandered most of the money. I never was any good at handling it, and I was overgenerous. The time came when I was back at the bricks and back on the booze.'"

Richard grew up in the Strongs Neck house his father built — on land purchased with the book money — after marrying Helen Dean, a widow with a young daughter, Harriet Mull, who died in 2006. Pietro and Helen would have two sons, Peter and Richard. Born in West Hoboken, New Jersey, Pietro had discovered Long Island's North Shore through work with Turner Construction Co., with whom he built parts of the former Pilgrim Psychiatric Center in Brentwood. "The walls were 4 feet thick," Richard said. "They would've



TOM MCINTYRE



RANDEE DADDONA

Simone Brioni, left, associate professor at Stony Brook University, and Loredana Polezzi, D'Amato Chair in Italian American and Italian Studies, are gathering artifacts from the life of Pietro di Donato, in left photo, to preserve in the college's Special Collections and University Archives. ■ Video: [newsday.com/LILife](https://newsday.com/LILife)

stood for centuries if they hadn't been knocked down."

In Richard's early, wide-eyed child's perspective of the world, Pietro wasn't a famous writer but another father providing for his family. In one of his earliest memories, Richard is 3 and standing in the kitchen, where his father and uncles are sipping coffee while his mother and grandmother eddy in and out, profuse with loud chatter. The world is Chesterfield cigarettes, flannel shirts, wool caps; it's lime and concrete trapped in the soles of Red Wing work boots. Before his father heads out for work, Pietro takes Richard by the hand and lets him climb into the middle seat of the work truck. His father turns the key as the old truck rattles and shakes. Richard, crazy with euphoria and expectation, is about to burst. He's ready. Then Pietro says, "OK, honey, you have to get down now." Richard sighs retelling the story.

Richard describes himself as a rebellious teen. At 15, he discovered rock and roll in Haywood's Music Shop in Setauket, lured by a "candy-apple-red Fender jazz bass,



NEWSDAY

**Pietro di Donato works at a typewriter in an alcove dinette of his Strongs Neck home, circa 1950. He usually wrote in longhand, then transcribed with a typewriter.**

like a rocket ship on a skewed angle." It was a discovery, he says, his father never forgave. After high school, Richard lived in Santa Barbara, California, as a musician.

Yet, he returned to Long Island in the '80s to care for his parents and was at both their sides when they died. "I feel like in the last couple of years I've done tremendous things with my life," Richard said of working to restore his

father's legacy — after a life following his own "whims." "I've vindicated myself," he said.

#### 'A REAL HIT'

On the banner atop [pietrodidonato.com](http://pietrodidonato.com), a tab called "The American Gospels" leads to an unpublished novel that imagines four ethnicities of Christ on Long Island. Pietro worked on the novel for 20 years, from 1969 until his death.

"American Gospels" is, like Pietro's other works, laced with religious allegory as well as responses to heinous and tragic events of the 21st century. According to Peter di Donato, his father was rendered speechless after seeing the December 1969 Life magazine featuring the Ronald Haeberle photos of the My Lai Massacre that Peter had bought after spotting the graphic photos plastered across one of his professors' doors.

"That changed his [Pietro's] life," Richard said. With a single-edge razor, Pietro cut out the photos and taped them to the writing desk in the upstairs bedroom so that they faced him when he wrote. "He couldn't ignore it," Richard said. "He was obsessed with justice."

Although "American Gospels" remains virtually unknown, Richard yearns for it to reach a new audience. In 2006, Richard and Peter agreed to sell their father's archives to Stony Brook. In 2019, he contacted Loredana Polezzi, now Stony Brook's D'Amato Chair in Italian American and Italian Studies, after

coming across her academic writing about "Christ in Concrete" before she joined the university. Polezzi and her colleague Simone Brioni, an associate professor at the university, have since been on a mission to include artifacts from Richard's collection in the Special Collections and University Archives. The final phase is to be completed this spring, in time for the 30th anniversary of Pietro's death.

"Pietro di Donato's voice is as unique today as it was in 1939," Polezzi explained, "and the central themes of 'Christ in Concrete' — migration, community, the tug-of-war between individual freedom and responsibility — speak to us as powerfully as ever."

Polezzi and Brioni have emerged as a new generation of di Donato devotees: academics by profession, fans by nature. Describing the first time she read "Christ in Concrete" while teaching at the University of Warwick in England, Polezzi said, "It was a real hit, a punch in the stomach." She became interested in more than the book itself

See COVER STORY on E6

# Classic for a new generation

COVER STORY from E4

and, arriving at Stony Brook in 2020, seized the opportunity to build a collection from the very place where di Donato had lived, worked, written and raised a family.

## LIFE ON LONG ISLAND

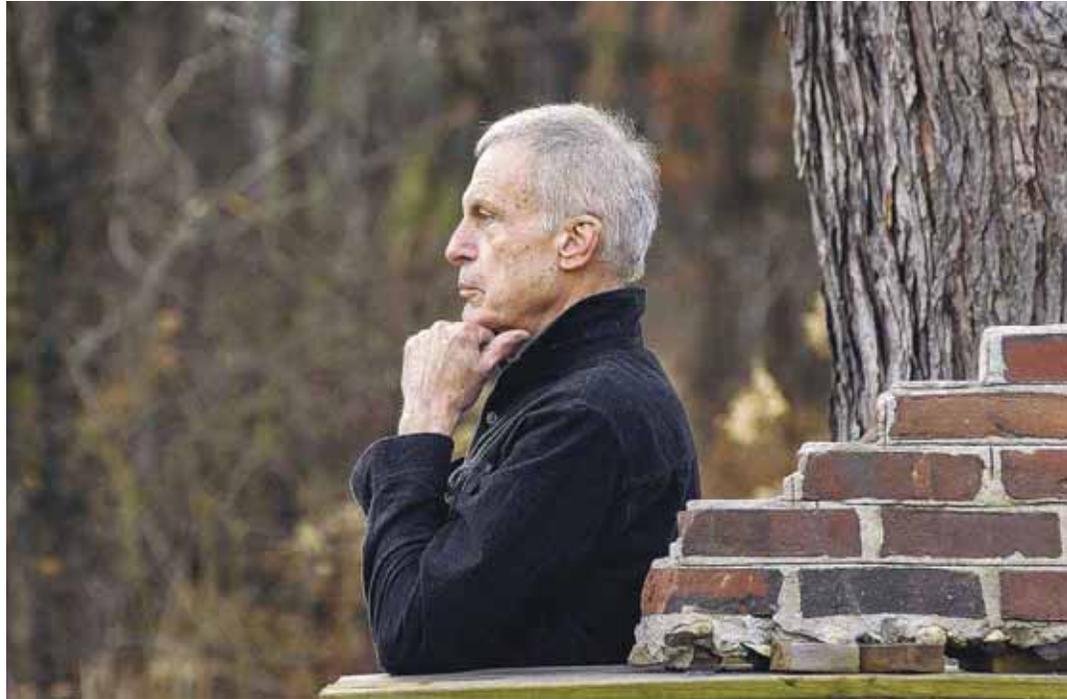
Pietro di Donato moved to Long Island in 1935, living in rentals in Northport before building and settling into the Strongs Neck house in 1945. It was in Northport, just a few miles from where Pomezzi and Brioni each live, where Pietro dug for clams and mussels in the harbor; and it was in that public library where he discovered such classic authors as Émile Zola, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Charles Baudelaire. According to Richard, his father was among a small cadre of “leftys” and Communist sympathizers who met at the village green to read one another’s poetry.

“One day, one of his friends handed him the play ‘Awake and Sing!’ by Clifford Odets,” Richard said. “He took it home, read it and brought it back to his friend, and said, ‘This is crap. I can do it much better than that. I’ll just write the story of my father.’” Hence, Richard said, “Christ in Concrete” was born.

“His last union job was working at Stony Brook University,” Richard said. According to a story that sounds like myth, Pietro would pilfer bricks from the job site to build a barbecue grill under a maple tree in the Strongs Neck backyard. Each afternoon he’d bring home a brick, maybe two. When Richard and Peter sold the house in 1996, Richard began — slowly, carefully and brick by brick — to take the bricks with him to Ithaca, where he has reassembled a section of the wall.

Three of Pietro’s hand-scored bricks are among hundreds of items in Stony Brook’s archives.

“Students are always thrilled to know more about an extraordinary man whose story is so connected with Long Island, and Stony Brook in particular,” Brioni said. “It can be reductive to limit the relevance of di Donato exclusively to Italian American history, because history is made up of stories of



HEATHER AINSWORTH



TOM MCINTYRE

**Richard di Donato says he has done “tremendous things” with his life in his mission to preserve his father’s work and introduce it to new readers.**

**Pietro di Donato clamming in Conscience Bay in 1991, just a year before he died.**

migration. Pietro di Donato’s story resonates with many of our students because of their backgrounds and family experiences of migration.”

Pomezzi and Brioni have picked up the work begun by such scholars as Fred Gardaphe, distinguished professor of English and Italian American Studies at Queens College.

It was Gardaphe’s friendship with Pietro and championing of his work that led to Signet’s 1993 Classics edition of “Christ in Concrete,” which includes an introduction by Studs Terkel. Gardaphe had once told Pietro that the book wouldn’t be adopted in schools until it became a Signet classic.

Gardaphe, 69, recalls attending literary conferences with Pietro in the 1980s, when he was an older man and Gardaphe himself was a younger writer, scholar and mentee. “He liked to incite people,” Gardaphe said. “He used four-letter words in the middle of his talk just to get people going.”

Back home, Richard says his parents’ stormy relationship was a feature of daily life in Strongs Neck. As a kid, Richard recalls having to step between frequent arguments, sometimes four or five nights a week. “My mission was to rescue my parents’ love,” Richard said wistfully, “so that all would be happy and secure in our Strongs Neck house.”

Such memories, Richard said, make it emotionally hard for him to return to Long Island. When Richard traveled back to the North Shore in July 2021 to meet Pomezzi for the first time, he took her to Port Jefferson to show her the main streets and back streets of his youth, areas that also greatly factored into his father’s work.

Richard pointed at a building and explained, “This was Wally Brown’s Fish Market where the Chinese Christ in ‘American Gospels’ first appears.” He pointed out the old ferry dock — once home to the SS Martha’s Vineyard — and at storefronts where antiques dealers used to hock goods.

Just north, beyond the harbors and bays that cosset Strongs Neck, sits his childhood property. Out of sight is the brick chimney, the elegant stonework and the garden wall, di Donato’s last work.