

As Young as You Want to Be™ ✨

Generation

Monthly

Volume 1 Issue 2

Ulster, Dutchess, Columbia & Greene Counties

Complimentary

Hurricane Heroes

Nancy Barton, (pictured right) Dorothy Maffei and Martha Frankel came to the rescue after Irene's wrath.



Inside:



Paul McCartney

How a Beatle became a fantasy father.



In Full Bloom

Take advantage of the area's beautiful gardens.

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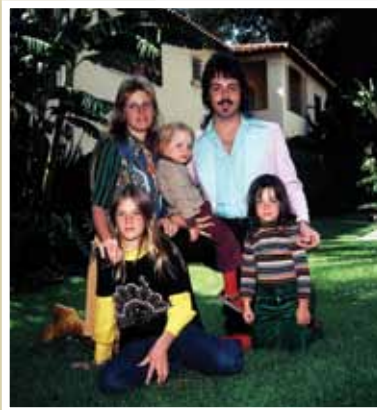
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Revisiting the wreckage and the recovery of Hurricane Irene



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Laurina Ecobelli

Cover Images:
 Nancy Barton, by Franco Vogt;
 Paul McCartney and family by James Fortune



Deer tick (Ixodes scapularis)

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Bringing "Chickadee" To Life...

HOW A TEENAGER'S
TRAGEDY LED TO A
GRANDMOTHER'S TRIUMPH



Jn the early 1920s, in the sleepy village of Ballston Spa in upstate New York, 12-year-old Laurina Ecobelli experienced an unimaginable horror: her rape and resulting pregnancy by the man her widowed Italian immigrant mother had recently married.

In the aftermath, however, she somehow found the courage to do something remarkable and unprecedented: she took her stepfather to court. Her actions resulted in a landmark case, and the decade's most controversial child abuse trial, with her rapist sentenced to 20 years in jail. Laurina wrote about her experiences in a journal that she gave to her two teenage grandchildren just before her death in 1981. Now, 90 years

after they occurred, these cataclysmic events are proving the inspiration and source material for a new movie called *Chickadee* and a memoir/recipe/cook book entitled *Laurina's Kitchen*, both written by those same two grandchildren: Saugerties-based actress, writer, musician, teacher and producer Lora Lee Ecobelli, and her brother, screenwriter Tom Ecobelli, who lives in Los Angeles.



*Laurina Ecobelli in the kitchen of her popular
Ballston Spa restaurant*

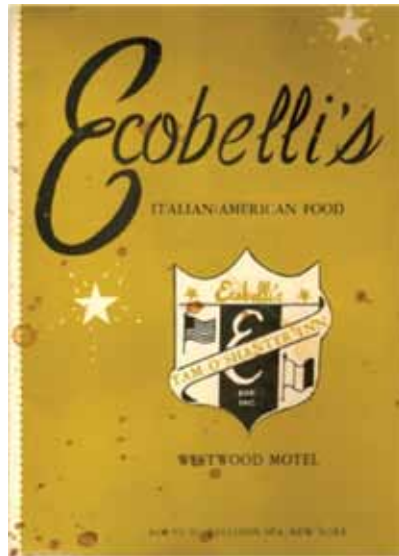
◆ **By Ann Forbes Cooper** ◆

Initially, the Ecobellis didn't know what to do with the diary. "It was crudely written, yet poignant," says Lora Lee. "She gave it to us because we were involved in the arts, and she said, 'I really want this story to be told. Can you do it for me?' And we went, 'Ehh, OK.'"

It wasn't until years later that Lora Lee reread the diary and began researching court transcripts and newspaper clippings and interviewing people who'd known her grandmother.

"When I found out what a monumental case it was, and how it had influenced so many people of that period, I was incredibly moved," she says. "It strengthened our admiration of her. Sexual abuse went on a lot back then, and goes on today — which is why my brother and I realized how important her story was for those children who don't have voices."

In 1994, Lora Lee Ecobelli developed the journal material into a successful stage play. "But everyone kept saying, 'It's a bigger story, you need to write a screenplay,'" she re-



A sauce-stained menu from Ecobelli's

calls. Finally, in 2005, she and her brother began working on that screenplay, while both juggled other projects.

The screenplay for Chickadee follows real life events. Shortly after the Ecobelli family arrived from Italy, Laurina's father died of pneumonia. With limited options Laurina's mother placed her and her sister in an orphanage in New Jersey, where they lived until her mother remarried and the family relocated to upstate New York. A family friend owned a farm there, and jobs were available in the textile mills lin-

ing the Mohawk River, where Laurina and her sister ended up working. A secondary plot line became that of the American immigrant experience itself. "There were labor laws, but no one paid attention and children as young as six were chained to sewing machines in some mills," says Lora Lee.

As the stepfather became increasingly frustrated with his lot in life, he began drinking and gambling. "When he started sexually abusing my grandmother, she was so young she didn't know what was going on until she be-



Lora Lee

WHO ARE THE ECOBELLIS?

With her cascading corkscrew curls, Lora Lee has the elegant, ethereal looks of a pre-Raphaelite muse, combined with a vibrant, warm, earth mother quality and concern for others clearly inherited from her grandma Ecobelli. She lives in a bucolic retreat near the fabled Big Pink house in West Saugerties, where she is currently cooking her way through all 60 of the recipes in the new cookbook — in order to provide its photographs. It helps that her three adult, Brooklyn-based children — who are all artists and who have each contributed a recipe to the book — often come to stay. She believes in keeping it in the family; her first husband, musician, composer, conductor and writer David Amram, created the musical score for the film.

Lora Lee is also co-founder of Blue Horse Repertory Company, along with her second husband, the late actor Leo Burmester (whose movie credits include *The Abyss*, *Passion Fish*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, among others) and the actress Peggity Price. Lora teaches acting at Russell State College in Troy. Brother Tom is writing a TV treatment based on his experience working in an animal clinic, and is co-writer on the movie *Prairie Dogs*, starring Danny Glover and the Hudson Valley's own Melissa Leo, which, like *Chickadee*, is in pre-production.



the Ecobellis' script is being turned into a major motion picture.

It's incredible that this little 12-year-girl in the 1920s took this man to the authorities and pressed charges.

it is for everyone involved with this movie. They all either have parents who are immigrants, or have similar stories."

The choice to make the film as an independent, non-studio production was deliberate. "Tom and I could have optioned out the script and sold it," Lora Lee says. "But I didn't want someone casting Angelina Jolie as my grandmother... With no offense to Angelina Jolie."

The Ecobellis tried a variety of ways to raise money, including websites such as Indiegogo and Kickstarter. But it wasn't easy. "We had a goal that we didn't meet," admits Lora Lee. "You have to provide perks for your investors, so we thought we'd write a cook book. Laurina's restaurant was written up in Gourmet magazine, and we thought we'd tell that story."

They put the growing film/book project up on Facebook and began getting letters and recipes from people who had known the grandmother during her 40 years as a Ballston Spa institution. "It snowballed and before we knew it, it took on a life of its own," the granddaughter adds.

The film, with most of the funding raised, is currently in pre-production. The book, meanwhile, is being published this month by Square Circle Press, which specializes in works of historical significance to New York State.

Did Lora Lee, who herself has a small part in Chickadee as an eccentric next-door neighbor, discover anything about her grandmother from all these recent experiences? "I interviewed a waitress who came from a tough background and my grandmother had taken her in at one time. Years later, Laurina still followed this woman's life, and every so often would send her \$5 in the mail," she replies. "There were many stories like that I didn't know about before. I discovered her strength, and ability for inspiring people to do something positive with their lives. She was the head chef of the restaurant. It didn't matter if you couldn't afford to pay, she'd feed you anyway. She was an amazing woman." ■

came pregnant," says Lora Lee. "It's incredible that this little 12-year-girl in the 1920s took this man to the authorities and pressed charges. There was a huge trial. It united the entire town. All walks of life came together."

After the trial, the wealthy owner of the textile mill where Laurina worked offered to adopt her baby. "My grandmother told her the child needed to stay in their family," says Lora Lee. So that child ended up being raised as Laurina's sister by her mother. Eventually, Laurina married and had more children and in 1947 the family bought the restaurant, the famous Ecobelli's Tam O'Shanter in Ballston Spa, where she went on to become the chef.

Flash forward to the year 2012, when Laurina's story is getting close to finally being realized on film. Lora Lee had shown the script to actor Chris Cooper, a good friend of her late husband's. Cooper's wife, an Italian American, loved it and persuaded her husband to become involved in the project.

"With that we were able to get the attention of actors Julie Kavner, Ellen Burstyn and director Arthur Allan Seideman, an award-winning television, film, and theater director," says Lora Lee. "It's a personal journey for him, as