

# Nickie Piscitelli, owner of Mike's Grocery, maker of May baskets, my pal, dies at 91

By Mark Frost  
Chronicle Editor

I lost one of my dearest friends on Oct. 19. Nickie Piscitelli died in her sleep at the age of 91.

To the day she died, decades after the death of her husband, Nickie operated Mike's Grocery on Maple Street in Hudson Falls, a timeless corner grocery that I often stopped by, because the connection between Nickie and me was strong and ran generations deep.

Nickie (Nicoletta) remembered my grandparents and shopping at their business, Frost Department Store, on Main Street in Hudson Falls.

"Your grandfather was a very nice man," she said many times, which meant a lot to me because, one, it was Nickie saying it, and, two, I never met my grandfather; he died before I was born.

Given that he and all my grandparents were Jewish Russian immigrants in the 1890s, it deeply interests me how my father's parents landed in this village in northern New York and were able to learn the language and establish a business from scratch. To my mind, it reflects on the community that accepted them.

### 'You keep the shoes'

Shoes were the specialty at Frost Department Store. Nickie said that one time as a little girl she saw a pair she really liked and brought them home, but her mother said "we can't afford them" and made her take them back.

Nickie said my grandfather told her "you keep the shoes" and gave them to her.

Nickie, the daughter of Frank and Vincenza (Sciancalepore) Battiste, grew up in the Italian neighborhood across the bridge in Fenimore, as did the late, great coach Tony Luciano.

But Nickie's and my relationship didn't just have to do with ancient recollections.

### Queen of the May basket

Mike's Grocery is renowned for the hundreds of May baskets that Nickie made every year of empty milk carton bottoms and crepe paper gathered like flowers.

It's a tradition that's largely fallen by the wayside, but as kids, for May Day, we left May baskets of candy at people's doors.

Nickie not only kept the tradition alive, she won new converts, especially after we and other media wrote stories about her. She told me about a woman who drove up from Ballston Spa to buy them after reading about it in *The Chronicle*, which amazed me as much as it did her.

For years, Nickie's May baskets were also sold at the Boston Candy Kitchen. When it closed, she worried at the impact. But no problem. She still sold every May



Chronicle photo Mark Frost

basket she made.

A few years ago, the particular crepe paper she preferred became unavailable because the distributor went out of business. Nickie tracked down the manufacturer in Minnesota and wrote a letter pleading for them to deal with her directly. They did. (Nickie's letters were in cursive long-hand; I was fortunate to receive many of them.)

### Penny candy, fresh ground beef

The other specialty at Mike's Grocery was penny candy. You could buy it by the small brown bagful. When our sons Alexander and Max were little, we'd stop by and the kids (and I) would load up — on candy and an ice cream treat. Kids frequently stopped by for candy when I was there.

Mike's Grocery insisted on being a real grocery. Nickie still sold fresh ground beef long after corner stores had given way to convenience chains that didn't bother. Finally, Nickie unplugged the meat case.

(Corner stores hung on longer in Hudson Falls than in most places. Eddie's, Trello's,

Battiste's and Dom's all operated in The Chronicle era, and Lewis Super, which grew out of a neighborhood store, is still doing business on Burgoyne Avenue.)

Earlier this year when I stopped by Mike's, Nickie told me she was giving up her beer license, that it wasn't worth her while anymore and only one customer bought beer.

"What are you going to do with your neon beer signs?" I said.

Which is how the vintage Genesee Beer sign adorns the Frost family basement.

Mike's Grocery was always a *Chronicle* outlet, of course. Nickie touted us constantly and read it closely.

Last Memorial Day, we ran a story headlined:

### HF student finds grave of local MIA sailor lost at Pearl Harbor

Written by Hudson Falls teacher Matt Rozell, it told of sophomore Jessie Johnston's visit to Hawaii, where she searched for and found on the *USS Oklahoma* mon-

ument the name of Randy Holmes, who left Hudson Falls at 17 to join the U.S. Navy and died during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

1941 was Mike's Grocery's first year in business.

Poignantly, Nickie now told me that the Holmes family lived around the corner from the store. She said Randy's mother came by Mike's that day, and when the news came on the radio that the *USS Oklahoma* had been bombed (Nickie pointed to where the radio had been on the shelf), Mrs. Holmes said, "My son is on that ship."

Of course, Nickie also could use *The Chronicle* to keep tabs on me! When we published a photo I'd taken of the field of blue flowers (*squill scilla siberica*, as Tim Watkins identified them) at the former Bill Bronk house, the next time I stopped by, Nickie remarked, "You were over on Pearl Street but you didn't come see me.")

### 'Just had my hair done'

Nickie was of my parents' generation, which made me appreciate all the more that she and her store endured with seeming timelessness. The upper shelves featured sports clippings and memorabilia, along with family photos, that carried us through seven decades.

I knew how lucky I was all these years.

"You look great," I'd tell Nickie.

"That's just because you came on the day I had my hair done," she'd respond.

The last visit, she told me she was having so much trouble walking, but that was the extent of her health complaint.

My every visit to Nickie started and ended with a hug. I'm thankful for every one.

The obituary provided by Carleton Funeral Home said in part:

"She was a communicant of St. Mary's-St Paul's Church. Her store was her life.

"Besides her parents and her husband Michael, Nickie is predeceased by a daughter, Maria Vincenza Piscitelli and a brother, Carl Battiste.

"Survivors include her children, Anthony Piscitelli and his wife Marcy of Saratoga Springs, Teresa Piscitelli Dickinson and her husband Peter of Glens Falls, Mary Vincenza Yoshimoto and Jeff McNeil of Hudson Falls; her grandchildren, Kathryn Piscitelli Frank, Michael Piscitelli, Steven Piscitelli, Michele Dickinson Wescott, Christopher Dickinson, Dean Yoshimoto and Kristy Brennan; her great grandchildren, Zachary Frank, Nicholas Frank, Evan Piscitelli, Allison Piscitelli, Taylor Wescott, Jayce Dickinson, Madyson and McKenna Brennan, Eddie and Baxter Yoshimoto, her brother and sisters Philip Battiste and his wife Grace of Hudson Falls, Mary Cortese of Hudson Falls, Rose McKenna and her husband Ted of Binghamton; as well as many nieces, nephews and cousins."

The funeral mass with the Rev. Thomas Babiuch, pastor, officiating was on Oct. 24.

The obituary said, "Donations in memory of Nickie may be made to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, 501 St Jude Place, Memphis, TN 38105."

And it concluded: "Nickie will miss all of her special friends, big and small, you know who you are!"



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