



West Hartford actor, Joe Mascolo shares how he became 'Stefano DeMira' on NBC's 'Days Of Our Lives'

by Erin Zeidenberg

*from* **Daytime TV's Joe Mascolo**  
**Ravenwood**  
*to* **Hollywood**



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ell, they say laughter is the best medicine and that may be the case but I can attest, first hand, that it can also be a distraction when trying to conduct an interview. Especially an interview with daytime television's most powerful villain, Stefano DeMira whom I was expecting to be cold, calculating and arrogant like the character he plays on TV. Actor Joe Mascolo's refreshingly playful personality and charm, however, instantly melted all of my preconceived notions. At times it seemed as though I was laughing it up with an old friend rather than interviewing one of television's most popular daytime soap opera stars. When I asked him if he always wanted to be an actor, he replied, "No, at first I wanted to be Robin Hood."

As a young boy Joe was enchanted with nature. He loved running through the woods, climbing trees and building forts. Joe was born and raised in West Hartford and cherishes all that went on there during his childhood. "To me, West Hartford was the center of the earth. Growing up there was like being in the adventures of Huckleberry Finn. It was the kind of world where you thought this is what America stands for." His mother, Anna, stayed at home nurturing Joe and his younger sister, Marie, while his father, Peter, worked as a toolmaker for Pratt and Whitney. Every Sunday Joe's mom would simmer her sauce on the stove filling the house with a mouth-watering aroma of roasted garlic and fresh tomatoes. The family would then gather for a classic Italian meal of spaghetti or lasagna. Joe's parents, from the town of Lauro, Italy, were married for eighty years and after coming to the United States, lived in the same house on Ravenwood Road, in West Hartford until shortly before they passed away at Jefferson House in Newington. His mom was a hundred years old when she died, and two years prior, his dad passed at age 104.

Around the time Joe was eleven, he uncovered a peculiar looking instrument in one of his dad's bedroom drawers. He held the shiny black instrument in his hands like a newfound treasure, pressed it to his lips and began honking away. Overhearing the cacophony, Joe's dad raced into the room. He must have sensed his son's desire to master the warbling

woodwind because he hired a music teacher right away. And so began Joe's life-long affair with the clarinet.

After graduating from Hall High School he spent the next three years doing his army soldiering in the band at West Point. "At that time I was not a good soldier in the sense of what it represented. I was a bit of a mischievous character at West Point, like Tom Sawyer, always trying to screw things up." From there Joe went to the University of Miami on a full scholarship to study music. During his last year in college his English professor wrote a one-act play and asked him to be in it. After watching his performance, members of the faculty, staff and some of his fellow students told him to take acting seriously. He pondered their advice, thought it might be fun and decided to head straight for the Big Apple. While in New York he played in the orchestra at the Metropolitan and studied alongside revered acting coach Stella Adler. Two years after honing his skills he began to work as an actor doing Off-Broadway and, eventually, Broadway shows.

Joe has been an integral part of Days of Our Lives for the past twenty years. The show has been running for 45 years. Depending upon the script for the show, Joe's day can begin at 7:00 a.m. and last for 6 or 7 hours. "My parents were so happy when I started in daytime television because I finally had to wake up early to get to work," he says. "In theater and on Broadway you work at night." Joe describes what he does as playing. "It's wonderful. As soon as I walk into the studio I begin speaking with an accent. It's a lot of fun."

Joe never dreamed that he would end up living on the West Coast. But working in television required that he be out there for 10 months at a time so he eventually had to give up the East. He now lives in Lake Arrowhead, about one hour north of Los Angeles. He chose the area because the landscape, with its rolling hills and deciduous trees, reminded him of West Hartford and the East Coast's seasonal changes that he so badly misses. He still has cousins who live in West Hartford and he owns property in Cape Cod. "I miss the East Coast and get out there whenever I can."

Bob Laraia, of West Hartford, was very close to Joe's parents and tries to see Joe when he comes to town. He and his wife, Lesa, along with other Italian relatives would get together over

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the years for many family events. Bob, who is founding partner at Northstar Wealth Partners on South Main Street, says his mom Rose Toro Laraia is Joe's late mother's god-daughter. "Most of our family also comes from the town of Lauro, in Italy. It's my understanding, when Joe visits there, he is treated like royalty!"

To keep his stamina up Joe likes to go for walks and work in his garden. When he's not thumping around NBC studios as a big bully with a thick European accent, he's celebrating life by admiring the perennial flowers in his garden, playing tennis, listening to music or going for a ride on his powerboat with his wife, Patricia. Patricia was the head of publicity for NBC. She and Joe have been married for five years. They have a new Pomeranian puppy named Lucky whom Joe likes to call "Pomegranate." Joe also has a son, Peter, from his first marriage.

With the demise of so many television soap operas recently, Joe is grateful for the success and longevity *Days of Our Lives* has had. The show still remains strong while other shows, such as *As the World Turns*, *Guiding Light*, *All My Children*, and *One Life To Live* have already left the airways to make room for more reality television. Why the sudden shift in daytime television programming? According to actor, Walt Willey (ex-Jackson Montgomery, *All My Children*), with the popularity of DVR's, "the audience watching in 'real time' is quickly dwindling, advertising revenue (based on viewership in 'real time') is falling, costs are going up, and network executives no longer consider all daytime dramas a viable business model anymore."

Joe is thankful to the fans of DOOL who keep the show going. He speaks passionately about his feelings towards playing one of the most powerful men in daytime TV and his fans. "Stefano is a fascinating character," he says. "I've had a great time playing him all these years. Stefano is all about power. It's good power and sometimes it's shady power. But it's always about winning. Whatever it takes to win, that's what he does. And the fans have been amazing. They are so dedicated to the show. You get to become a part of their lives and family because you are in their home every day."

I guess, in a way, Joe is like the character, Stefano he plays on TV. Just like Stefano, he has figured out what it takes to win at the game of life. He doesn't do it by spending hundreds of dollars on designer supplements or vitamins; nor does he maintain his dynamism by adhering to diets or exercise regimens. The secret to Joe's success isn't really a secret at all. He's simply become the conductor of his own symphony by being tuned in to the moment. He fills his cup each day with joy by reaping and sowing in the garden, stopping to smell the roses, and playing with the power and energy of life by doing what he loves. He admits his life has it all. "It's a wonderful living fantasy." ■

## Unlike the 'big bully' he

*plays on the NBC soap, Joe Mascolo simply celebrates life by admiring the flowers in his garden, playing tennis, listening to music or boating with his wife.*



Joe's Yearbook photo from Hall High School, class of 1948.



Joe Mascolo visits for a family event in Connecticut. Here with Lesa & Bob Laraia, of West Hartford.