Italian-American
State Senator
District Attorney Marine
Hero of Higher Education
University Student
William Raggio

William J. Raggio '48 (political science)

As a young boy growing up in my native Reno, the University of Nevada loomed large in my life, especially during the '30s, the years of our nation’s Great Depression, and the early '40s, during the years of World War II.

Both of my parents, William J. Raggio, Sr., and my mother, Clara (nee Cardelli), were native-born Nevadans and had lived in Reno ever since their marriage in 1924. My paternal grandfather, Benjamin Raggio, a native of Genoa, Italy (where he had been raised in an orphanage as a toddler until he was age 15) came to America in the 1880s and took up ranching. He married my paternal grandmother, Angelina Avansino, who was born in the Truckee Meadows, and they had six children, five of whom survived childhood.

My mother’s father, Tancredi Cardelli, settled in the area near Dayton, and he also took up ranching. He was a native of the Lucca area in Italy.

The Italian heritage is deeply imbedded in my personal history. Reno and the Truckee Meadows became home for many prominent Italian families lured by the potential for jobs in mining and ranching.

The University of Nevada, during my formative years, was the only institution of higher learning in the state, and, of course, until around 1956, Reno was the largest city in the state. Up until that time, no one in my immediate family had ever been a student at the University or, for that matter, any institution of higher learning.

It was a small institution, maybe a little more than 400 students, with a campus that consisted primarily of two older buildings, Morrill Hall (still there) and Stewart Hall, and the Quad, with the Mackay School of Mines directly behind. Old Mackay Stadium, just beyond Nye Hall (the only men’s dorm), and its field house on the east side, was the scene of many Wolf Pack football triumphs (and some losses), and the games were always well attended by the locals. We even celebrated a huge victory over Cal and a real, legitimate All-American, James “Rabbit” Bradshaw!

The most picturesque part of the campus was Manzanita Lake, situated between Manzanita Hall (the only women’s dorm at that time) and the University Library (now the Clark Administration Building). Our family lived not too far away on what is now Valley Road, and our main playground was usually the huge slope of lawn just south of Manzanita Lake.

The whole town, whether or not they were alumni, always turned out for Homecoming. The Homecoming parade was a big local event and the Greeks spent countless hours on parade floats. The big bonfire the night before the game was also a special occasion and the whole town turned out for the festivities as well as for the annual Wolves Frolic and the open houses at the sororities and fraternities.

If there was a cultural center for Reno and Sparks and for the rest of the state, as well, during those years, it was the University of Nevada. There was never any doubt in my mind as a teenager and as a high school student (Reno High) that I would someday attend and graduate from this University. Unfortunately, World War II intervened and a young man of high school age in the early '40s had to set aside such goals and face the reality that upon graduation he had only one choice: military service. The course of the war at that time was still difficult and the future uncertain.

And so, in June 1944, I was sent to a Naval Officers Training Program in Ruston, La., after completing one semester as a freshman at the University. That semester prepared me for the academic program I was mandated to take until I was commissioned as a Marine Corps officer at the end of the war. I re-entered Nevada and graduated in 1948, along with an increasing enrollment, consisting mostly of war veterans. I had great professors and their efforts and my newfound determination paved the way for me to enter law school.

My career as a lawyer, a district attorney and a Nevada state senator would not have happened except for the education and training I received at our University. What I learned was the value of a higher education, the importance of good study habits, and a new commitment to reaching one’s goals in life. Since those days, during which I made many lasting friendships, all three of my children attended the University, as did my late wife.

All of this has resulted in my desire to be as supportive as possible for higher education and to strive to provide access and similar opportunities for all of our Nevada citizens. As a state senator for more than 38 years, I sincerely tried to do so and in some measure repay the opportunity that the University afforded me.

State Senator William Raggio ’48 (political science) was honored in February by the University’s Faculty Senate and the Nevada Faculty Alliance as a “Hero of Higher Education” for his nearly 40 years as a champion of education in the state of Nevada. In addition, Raggio will receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Nevada, Reno at the May Commencement.