

Karen Viscana

Lodi's First Woman Mayor:

The Mayor Who Almost Wasn't

By Artie Maglionico

Written for the Lodi Library in April 2008.

I recently had the pleasure of interviewing the Mayor of Lodi, Karen Viscana. This was our second such meeting since she took office in July of '07. Her enthusiasm remains energized by a burning desire to embrace her community and lead it into a bright and prosperous future. The love for the town that she grew up in gives her an inner strength to face each challenge with zest and to go that extra mile.

"My biggest challenge as Mayor is to make everyone happy." says Lodi's first woman Mayor. "Of course that can't be done, so I approach the community at large and do what I feel is best for our wellbeing." Mayor Viscana is on, what I like to call, a "Mayoral mission." Both she and her administration are revitalizing the Borough of Lodi with development programs and community projects. One such project is the Mayor's quality of life committee. The eight member team, headed by Deputy Mayor Paula Fiduccia and chaired by Butch Baldino, is focusing on maintaining an attractive looking landscape in and around town. "We'll make sure that shopping carts are off the streets and that garbage barrels are kept clean and out of public view." says the Mayor "The quality of life team will take care of these problems as they surface."

According to the Mayor, the history making re-vitalization of Lodi will include Main Street and areas west of the Saddle River. "At one point in time our Main Street was lined with shops and businesses of all kinds."recalls Karen. "We want to bring all of that back."

Anyone who knows Mayor Viscana can tell you that the community is in safe and caring hands. What a lot of you don't know, however, is that Karen came dangerously close to crossing the Jordan River on what may well have been a one way trip. Four years ago Karen found herself succumbing to the ravages of pneumonia and asthma. "My son came home and found me on the floor, unconscious." remembers Karen. "I was immediately rushed to the hospital." Once in the emergency room, doctors discovered large amounts of carbon monoxide building up throughout her body. "They didn't know how the carbon monoxide got inside of me." says the Mayor "I was extremely close to death. The doctors put me in a drug induced coma and proceeded to rid my body of the deadly fumes."

Karen's cousins Patti Polito and the Belli sisters Anna and Edna, remained at her side for the duration of the crisis. During that time Mayor Viscana recalls having an unsettling dream that she thinks about even today. "I dreamed there was a roller coaster towering over Lodi." she says. "A child then walked up to me and asked me to destroy it since his brother once fell from a roller coaster and became paralyzed." As Karen continued her story the look on her face became sullen. I could tell that she was digging deep into her consciousness where the line between life and death becomes thin as the choices

we make tilts the cosmos. Our existence hangs in the balance. "As I was about to board the roller coaster." continued Karen "I heard the voice of Jessie Salvacion warning me to stay off. Only when I gained consciousness did I realize that Jessie had passed away a few days earlier." As the coma neared its end Karen drifted into yet another state of awareness. She could hear but was unable to see beyond her own aura.

Karen remembers staring at the floor pointing frantically at an army of insects as they passed in untold numbers across the shadows of her mind and into oblivion. Karen chose not to follow them. Instead she was now stepping out of the darkness and into the light. Her loved ones were waiting for her there. But Mayor Viscana wasn't fully out of the grasp of the grim reaper. A few days after she was released from the hospital, her leg became severely inflamed and swelled to elephant proportions. "I had to be rushed back to the hospital." says the Mayor. "I was having a deadly reaction to the medication. For weeks I had to use a walker to get around."

Mayor Viscana, a teacher in the Lodi school system for 33 years, spent four months away from her students. Fighter that she is Karen went back to work a month early. "I wanted to see my students graduate." she said "Seeing them again helped in my recovery."

During the early stages of her recovery our Mayor had difficulty making sense of what had transpired. She had no idea where she was or how she got there. After spending a few days in the safe and familiar surroundings of her home Karen began to put the puzzle together one piece at a time until she found her way back from the far reaches of eternity. "Luckily I lived through it." sighed the Mayor. "I remember coming home to find hundreds of get well items from students and community members some of which I didn't know. It was a tremendous spiritual lift for me."

When I asked Mayor Viscana if her near death experience changed her outlook on everyday life she replied without hesitation. "Yes, don't sweat the small things."

Now there's a bit of sound advice from Karen Viscana. The Mayor who almost wasn't.

Karen Viscana has always been a favorite of mine. As Lodi's first woman Mayor she has become an indelible part of her town's history. I'm happy about that. Thank you Karen.