

A very special Christmas tradition

For 47 years, three generations of the Illuzzi family have helped set up Nativity at St. Margaret Mary's Church

By **VIRGINIA N. SHERRY**
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MIDLAND BEACH — Three generations now participate in a proud family Christmas tradition that patriarch **Frank Illuzzi** started almost a half-century ago at St. Margaret Mary's R.C. Church on Lincoln Avenue in Midland Beach.

For the 47th consecutive year, family members gathered at the church earlier this month and worked together for several days on the installation of an elaborate Nativity scene (*presepe*, in Italian; *crèche* in French), adorned with exquisitely painted and beautifully detailed figures of the Holy Family, angels, shepherds, ordinary peasants, and animals — from camels to sheep. Many of the figures are treasured family heirlooms.

Illuzzi — a long-time Midland Beach resident who emigrated to the U.S. in 1948 — designed and constructed his first Nativity in the church as an inspirational salute to the *presepe* that his mother, **Lucia**, prepared every year in their home in Giovinazzo, the small fishing village on Italy's Adriatic coast, near Bari, in the Apulia region, where he was born.

When Illuzzi died in 1992, at 56 years old, his son, **Michael**, who also calls the neighborhood home, was determined to carry on the family tradition in his father's memory. This year, his children — **Michael Frank**, 6, and **Grace**, 3 — helped with the installation, along with his mother, **Marie**; wife, **Kelly**; brother-in-laws **Anthony Gallinari** and **John Orbon**; nephew **Alex Gallinari**, and niece **Jessica Orbon**.

Asked to identify her favorite figure in the large *presepe*, blonde-haired Grace replied, "Baby Jesus," pointing to the manger.

'TEAM EFFORT'

"It's a fairly large project, taking up the whole side St. Joseph's altar," said Michael Illuzzi, describing the annual work to prepare and install the scene.

"It's a wonderful, very special tradition that the parishioners love, and look forward to every year."

"This is really a team effort," added his mother, as she appreciatively surveyed the Nativity last week, surrounded by three of her grandchildren.

Assembly of the Nativity begins with plywood and saw-horses for the base, and then erection of two-by-fours "at all four corners, followed by extending braces on the sides and framing out a box," Illuzzi explained.

For the mountain scene he uses smaller pieces of wood, and then covers the structure with "heavy construction paper, crumpled and then reopened, to create crevices. "This was my father's system — some of the wood we use is 47 years old," he added.

The sky overhead is fashioned with sheer, see-through material, and what he calls "effect lights" are carefully hidden in the rear. To achieve a sense of perspective, the smaller figures are placed toward the rear.

One sadly missing piece this year is the original manger holding the infant Jesus. "It was destroyed during Hurricane Irene, when the rectory basement flooded," Illuzzi reported.

A SPECIAL LIGHT

