Some might say that the American Dream is dead. To me, the American Dream is the vision that my Fiore relatives had in their heads when they crossed the Atlantic to start a new life, a life where they might have the freedom to pursue their passions instead of toiling with backbreaking work that hardly pays enough to survive. I believe that dream is still alive today, because when I march for women’s rights, I think of my great-grandma Adele, who attended law school and worked as a legal examiner before she could even legally have her own bank account. When I dream of earning a PhD and teaching in universities, I think about my great Uncle Dante, whose taught Spanish and French in universities in England and prestigious boarding schools on the East Coast. When I perform in a musical, I think about my great-great Grandfather, Louis Fiore, the artist, who, despite challenges, made a living pursuing his passion.

The Fiore family is from Agrigento, a rural area in Sicily with fertile soil and beautiful beaches. In the 1880s, free trade policies devastated the Italian economy. Sicily still had a feudal system. The vast majority of the population was peasant class and wealthy landowners exploited the Sicilian peasants, charging them high rent for land to cultivate, so in 1888, the Fiore family fled to mainland Italy. Louis Fiore was just four years old.

The Fiore family lived for 10 years in Campania, the area of Italy best known as the home of Mt. Vesuvius. In 1898, Louis moved to New York along with his father and his three siblings, as well as several of his aunts and uncles. In New York, it was common for immigrants to stick to their own people, so Italians lived in an area called “Little Italy,” and many lived and worked with people from their own part of Italy. Shortly after arriving, Louis married another Sicilian, a woman named Rose.

Italians in New York tended to work in either the garment industry or the construction industry or as a barber.

When I review the sources left behind about my family, one thing is clear to me: my great-great grandfather Louis Fiore wanted to be an artist. He enjoyed designing and decorating furniture, specifically cabinets. When Louis was 21 years old, he listed his occupation as “professional furniture,” but just five years later, in 1910, he called himself a brick mason. Masonry work was easy for Italians to find in the early 1900s, so it is not surprising that this is what Louis ended up doing. However, by 1917, on his World War I draft registration, he says he is a cabinet painter. Louis, the artist, would dabble in other artistic pursuits, working in the 1920s at a phonograph factory. In the 1930s, in the midst of the depression, Louis started his own furniture painting business.

In 1920, Louis’ daughter, Adele, my great-grandmother, was attending New York University, where she studied law. Given that NYU
Law school only first began admitting female students in 1890, and that most universities at the time were not admitting women, Adele’s academic pursuits make her my feminist role model. She had passed the bar exam before women were even given the right to serve on a jury. I believe that Louis would have supported Adele’s choices, because if Louis valued social conformity, he would have stayed as a brick mason, but he didn’t. He continued to pursue his love of the arts, and so will I.