

## EMMA MICHELA LEONARD

**Emma Michela Leonard** was born in her family home, 82 Phillip Street, Albany, on May 6, 1915. Her parents were Mario Michela and Agatha Ciaccia Michela. Mario, born in Castellamonte, Italy, in the foothills of the Alps, was a concert violinist who immigrated to America for a better life. He was also a good businessman traveling up the Hudson Valley. He eventually settled in Albany where he had several ethnic bands, taught music lessons, and met and married Emma's mother Agatha in the early 1900s. Agatha, a very devout woman and homemaker, was conceived in Gildone, Italy, and born in Philadelphia upon the family's arrival there. Her father, a stonemason, came to America and Albany for work.

Emma, at a very young age, showed greatness as a soprano. Mentored by Sister Anna Rita CSJ at the Cathedral Academy, she developed into the top soloist in the Cathedral Choir. Emma became the female lead in very elaborate plays put on by Father Emmett O'Connor from St. Anthony's. Also, at the young age of twelve, Emma became a second mother figure to her two siblings and several cousins when her father died and two of Agatha's brothers also lost their wives, leaving children in need of a home while their fathers traveled for work. In her early twenties, Emma met the love of her life, "Jimmie", James Leonard who was another south-ender, though of Irish descent.

Emma and James were married by Father O'Connor on August 19, 1942 at St. Anthony's Church. Jim was in the Army at the time and life was in turmoil; but, the Lord would, over the next eighteen years provide them with four children: Michele, Mary Serena (named after Emma's close friend Sister Mary Serena CSJ), Mark, and Anne Rita (named after her mentor). In 1955, they would move a few blocks from Phillip Street to where they thought would be their final home, 93 Park Avenue, the current address of the Cathedral Convent. What was to happen to their new "dream home" became a nightmare in the early 1960s when the South Mall was announced. Over 5,000 households in the area would be taken through the project, leaving those families, the Cathedral Parish and businesses devastated. Emma and Jim began another dream home. This one was to be built far from "downtown" on Hillcrest Avenue off of Western Avenue in Albany. Emma, Jim, their children, and Grandma Michela would be the last family out of the South Mall, forced out of their home two days before Christmas to placate the then Governor, who was angry that the project was behind schedule.

At first, Emma and her family had their work cut out for them. The Hillcrest Ave. home was not yet finished. There was only one bathroom finished, no stove, refrigerator, washer or dryer. An unscrupulous builder stole most of their money they had saved to build the house, by not paying workers or supply companies. Somehow, the Lord provided and with Jim's steady, hard work, they pulled themselves out of debt and prospered in many ways. They managed to care for Agatha as well as their children and grandchildren, physically, financially, and spiritually. Agatha died in 1988, after years of caring for others, then being cared for by Emma.

Grandchildren would come to Emma. She loves little ones, even when they grow up! First, Michele's daughter, Andrea in the early 1970s, then Mark's daughters, Vicky, Claire, and Marissa in the mid-1980s, then Anne's son, Daniel in the mid-1990s. To this day, there is a clear pecking order...grandchildren first, children second, everyone else later!

Emma said good-bye for a while to her "Jimmie" who passed in June of 1991. It took her some time to rebound; but, being such a person of faith, she did. She was soon back at daily mass as well as helping with the kids and grand-kids.

Emma lived at 201 Hillcrest Ave. until coming to Teresian House a few months ago. Her story is condensed here; but, a better picture of her life is etched upon her face and found in her smile. She is grateful for being the chosen resident of the month for October, 2011.