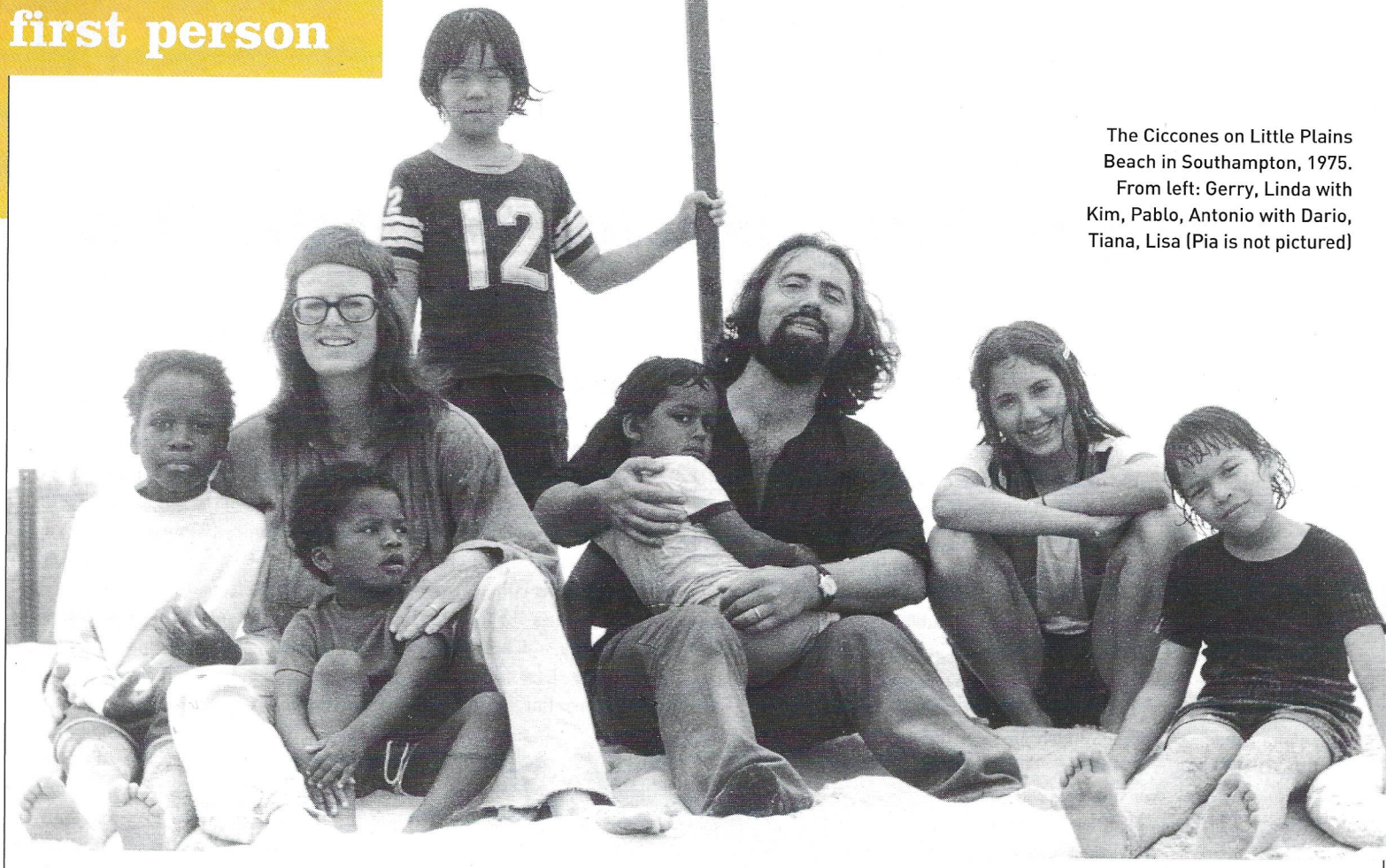


The Ciccones on Little Plains Beach in Southampton, 1975. From left: Gerry, Linda with Kim, Pablo, Antonio with Dario, Tiana, Lisa (Pia is not pictured)

The Ciccone Spirit

Remembering the Hamptons of the 1970s and my adopted family of nine

By Vanessa Geneva Ahern

Call it Hampton Melancholy Syndrome. There is a feeling that steals over me when the scent of chimney smoke infuses the sea air, Halloween passes and I flip my calendar page over to November. I become nostalgic for the Southampton of the 1970s and the feeling of that time around the holidays. I'm grateful for the things that haven't changed—like the village's tradition of having Christmas trees brighten the streets and Our Lady of the Hamptons' church fair with the best bake sale—but what made growing up in Southampton special for me was the endless hours of fun and mischief I had with the Ciccone family, an eccentric clan of seven children, six of them adopted. If you are old enough and lucky enough to have eaten at the Buttery or shopped at Herbert's Grocery and Bohack's, you may remember them too.

Born the eldest of nine in a family of shepherds, Italian portrait and landscape artist Antonio Ciccone always knew he would have a big, happy brood. He met his future wife, a raven-haired American named Linda, while both were studying art in Florence. From the very beginning, they seemed to complement each other perfectly. While Linda was reserved and shy about sharing her drawings and sketches, the larger-than-life Antonio opened his studio door to any and all; always supportive of Antonio's work, Linda was the anchor to his ship, the "good cop" to his "bad cop." Both artists, both family-oriented, they were soon engaged and got married in Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, in 1966.

At the suggestion of Linda's parents, who had a house in Wainscott, they decided to "explore Southampton" as an art community ideal for raising a family. After having their first child, Tiana, they started growing their family by way of adoption in the early 1970s. The youngest was Kim, adopted from Vietnam, and the oldest was Pablo, from Korea; while Lisa, Gerry, Dario and Pia arrived from American foster homes. I never asked the Ciccones why they adopted so many children but, as an only child, I felt like they adopted me too.

When I was teased at Hampton Elementary School for my athletic clumsiness and my mother's French accent, it was liberating to run wild in a multinational camp where imagination and gumption trumped everything else. And there was always something going on at the Ciccone's, a festive chaos that seemed to swirl centrifugally around the man of the house. In 1976, when Hurricane Belle made its way to Long Island and I was invited to bunker down at the Ciccones', we kids noticed that the ever-resourceful Mr. Ciccone, apparently fearing an apocalyptic flood, had purchased a flimsy white canoe—made of Styrofoam—that sat poised and ready in the basement. Conjuring up an image of Mr. Ciccone in the bow of his makeshift Noah's ark, one finger pointing to the beautiful storm clouds, the other stopping up a hole, Dario, Kim, Lisa and I laughed the entire night.

In the same way that I clicked with Lisa, my inseparable double who calmly led me into danger (she introduced me to pantyhose), my mother found a kindred spirit in Linda, who loved to teach her offbeat American expressions ("Don't put me through the meat grinder!" became a favorite catchphrase in our household). While my mother and Linda discussed New Age philosophies and listened to Rod Stewart, oblivious to Dario's back flips off the beds, the kids and I would transform a bedroom into Studio 54 with Christmas tree lights and lip-synch to Donna Summer's "Bad Girls."

When third-grade classroom discussions turned to family holiday rituals, I was tight-lipped, thinking my family's traditions were too untraditional. The ceremonial was not our forte, to say the least. We never went to Mass or said grace and ate Thanksgiving dinners at John Duck's restaurant. My mother abhorred the commercialization of Christmas in America but couldn't wait until the day-after-Christmas sales. But since my family often started opening gifts on Christmas Eve, our short, somewhat anticlimactic Christmas Day left us plenty of time to visit Camp Ciccone at its most crazy.

An artist's salary can only go so far with seven children, even an artist starting to make a name for himself with portrait commissions from the likes of Malcolm Forbes. Still, Linda and Antonio always hit the holiday sales at Toys "R" Us with a vengeance, sometimes claiming afterward they had no money left. ("I have spent the hair on my legs!" realist painter Fairfield Porter's widow, Anne, who once housed the family, quotes Antonio as telling the children.) Linda wrapped the gifts in newspapers. One year, lacking a Christmas tree and not wanting to disappoint the children, Antonio assembled one from scratch by scouring the backyard for thick leafless branches and gluing them altogether. The tree was a work of abstract art that belonged in MoMA, even if his own children didn't think so. By e-mail, Tiana recalls: "He went out and cut a number of bare branches and arranged them in our living room, taping the long slender ones to the ceiling. 'There,' he said very proudly to us, 'now you decorate it!' I don't know what my younger brothers and sisters thought. I was at an age when that much creativity and imagination was just too much!"

None of the Ciccones' Southampton homes had fireplaces, so stuffed stockings were placed at the foot of the children's beds. "I can remember feeling the weight of the sock as soon as I woke on Christmas morning," Tiana says. "The rule was that we were to bring our stockings onto Mommy and Papi's bed—and we would all take turns opening the little gifts." Before they were allowed near the tree, the children were to have breakfast and dress. "Needless to say, no one was ever hungry," Tiana says. "Our overly decorated Chrismas trees could barely be seen through the mountains of presents!"

Indeed, I counted on the Ciccones to have all the toys on my wish list that my parents didn't get. When I wanted a Holly Hobby oven for Christmas, my parents went the safe route and gave me winter clothes. Lisa got the Holly Hobby oven, so I made cakes at her house, and my father didn't have to worry about me burning down our house.

But Antonio, who never vetoed a play-date request or seemed to mind the noise and confusion that followed, also ruled his family with an iron fist. The kids loved "Papi" but feared his wrath. He even yelled at kids that weren't his own. Once, when Lisa and I were misbehaving—we were at an age of being easily amused—Antonio glared at us, his eyes bulging out of his reddening face, and shouted at us louder than I had ever been screamed at before. I held my breath to fight back the tears. "Ah! Well, I had to. I felt responsible for you, as well as the other seven children," Antonio told me unapologetically years later. (I think I knew that even back then.)

After the family moved to Italy in 1980, Lisa and I became passionate pen pals, keeping up a correspondence about boys and school. In 1987, at 19, I went on a youth-hostel Eurail tour of Europe, which included my first visit to Florence. The reunion was bittersweet: Since I had last seen them, their brother Gerry had been killed in a motorcycle accident at age 18. It was a devastating blow to the family, and it was moving to see how they had come together after the tragedy: Pablo had begun working as a volunteer for an ambulance company, and the children seemed closer to each other than ever.

I had coffee with Antonio last September while he was in Manhattan for his exhibition at the Forbes Gallery: *The Lydia Series*. He gave me a bear hug when I greeted him and said, "Vane-za, you grew up!" Against the backdrop of Lower Manhattan, he seemed more soft-spoken. While he still had long hair, long sideburns and a (now graying) goatee, Antonio seemed calmer, more dignified. We walked in search of coffee. On Fifth Avenue as I tuned out a homeless man chanting a sales pitch, Antonio slowed down and reached into his pockets, throwing coins in the cup.

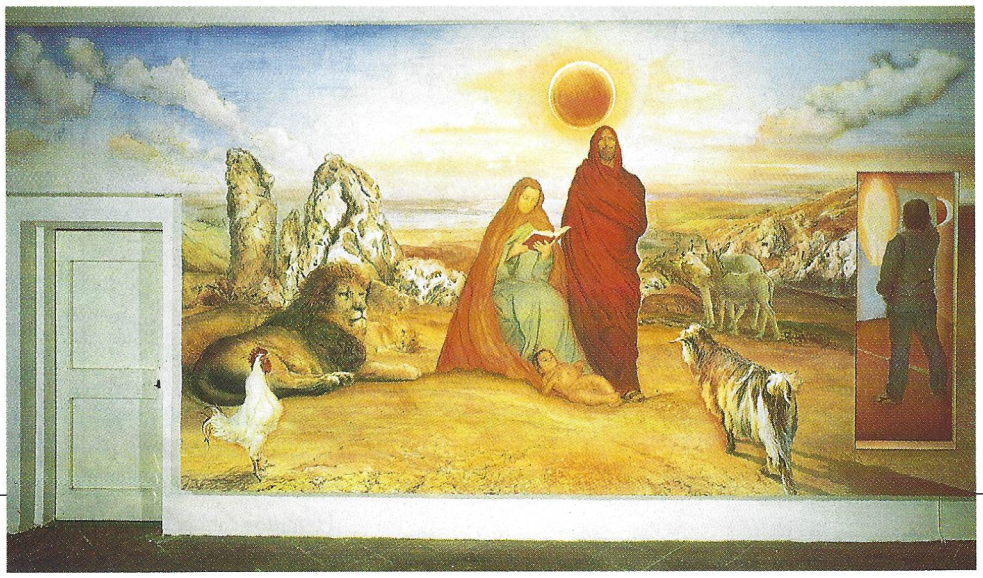
"God bless you, sir!" said the man.

"God bless you too!" said Antonio.

He was beaming from a weekend in Southampton, where the Porters threw a party for him and invited 20 of his old artist friends. "I miss Southampton, my friends, the ocean and the fantastic potato fields that I used to paint with great enthusiasm," he said, noting that despite the developments in town, the essence of the place really hasn't changed. He retraced the steps he had walked with the children, especially Little Plains Road, many times over the weekend. "I also visited the wonderful beach," he said, "to review in my mind the precious walks that I used to take here with my family."

Growing up, some kids from large broods envied me; some pitied me, but I never felt alone. Spending so much of my youth with the Ciccone clan, I don't really remember growing up as an only child. Although married with children of my own now, around Christmastime, when I feel the most maternal and generous, I revisit my Ciccone-inspired adoption fantasies, wondering if there is a child out there in a war-torn country waiting for me to make my move.

Visit antoniociccone.com to learn more about Antonio Ciccone and his art. His paintings are part of a permanent collection at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton.



Right: Antonio Ciccone's *Lisa and Clouds*, acrylic/canvas on board (1982). Below: Antonio Ciccone's *The Nativity*, fresco (1987)