

## BUSINESS PROFILES

# Bill Valenti... banker, hiker, world traveler

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As Bill Valenti relates stories about his past, a multi-layered self portrait is gradually revealed — a vivid insight into how he became the president of one of Southwest Florida's fastest growing banks and an avid student of life experiences.

Sitting in his office at Florida Gulf Bank's College Pointe headquarters where he presides over seven branch offices, it's hard to imagine Valenti as a young child in Staten Island N.Y. — humble beginnings where his immigrant mom helped him with homework at their kitchen table. He explains that she had a great passion for education and even though they couldn't really afford it, there was no question that he would eventually go to college and become a successful professional. Valenti's dad, a construction worker whose parents came from Italy, had a friend who was a branch manager at Chase Manhattan and encouraged young Bill to seek out such an esteemed career.

Heeding both his mother and his father, Bill went on to college and took a part time job at a New York City bank while struggling financially to pay his tuition. He describes how he had been called several times to the treasurer's office to discuss late payments until one day, to his surprise, he was told

always remembered that he was the leader. He viewed his employees as peers, not subordinates."

It was also Marto who introduced Valenti to the world's possibilities.

"Joe had an interest in everything," says Valenti. "We were two guys who had never been out of New York City and here he was teaching me about hiking on the Appalachian Trail, tying flies for trout fishing, cross county skiing and traveling. He had an amazing intellectual curiosity that led me to expand my own experiences."

Valenti's wife Eneida also traveled extensively and the couple has gone to Costa Rica, Peru, Argentina, Germany and Italy — a country they visit every year. During the past five years, Valenti has become fluent in Italian and hosts a conversation group one night a week at the bank with his professor and other students. In just a few weeks, he will participate in a Rotary group study exchange trip to Malta and Sicily where he and his group will present in Italian.

"All of these experiences are valuable to me in my work and in my life," says Valenti. "The people I work with are my friends, really like family, and I hope that I am bringing added perspective to our work together."

Valenti's current passion? "Florida Gulf Bank," he says. "It's amazing how far we've come in such



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Bill Valenti, president and CEO of Florida Gulf Bank in 2005, with his guide on the Old Inca Trail in the Andes on their way to Macchu Piccu. For Valenti, travel is one way he satisfies his intellectual curiosity, and adds dimension to his work and home life.

that the tuition had been paid in full.

"It turned out that my aunt and my uncle, who were not very well off, came in anonymously and paid my tuition," explains Valenti. "This was a defining moment for me — when I realized the impact of taking responsibility for doing something for someone else."

Valenti says that this experience, along with his dad's involvement with the American Legion, laid the groundwork for his own commitment to his community. Since then, there has never been a time when he was not actively involved in several charitable organizations, finding his own way to give back.

Valenti doesn't hesitate to cite yet another great influence in his life — his friend and mentor Joe Marto. After serving his country and obtaining a master's in finance on the GI Bill, Valenti returned to his original bank job where Marto was in charge of several branch offices. Marto hired Valenti to solve challenges at the "problem" branches and a lifelong friendship was born. Valenti eventually became Marto's second in command and even relocated to Melbourne to advance his banking career under Marto.

"That's how I got to Florida," Valenti explains. Marto's impression stays with him even today, resulting in a similar style of leadership.

"Everyone loved Joe," says Valenti. "But they

a short time. I think of the continuation of this company as the culmination of all I have done and it is like a legacy...one day in 15 years or so I'll come back into the boardroom and some young guy will say 'Who's that old guy?' and someone will reply, 'That's Bill Valenti — he's the one who started it.'"

The Valenti children are his legacy as well — and all four seem in one way or another to reflect his own interests and influences. His oldest son Bill Jr. heads up the investment division at Florida Gulf Bank while daughter Debra has just published a book of poetry. Daughter Maria will study Italian in Florence this year before heading off to medical school and his youngest daughter Cara may want to attend culinary school after college. "It all comes back to the kitchen table," comments Valenti.

Musing on retirement as a far off prospect, Valenti dreams of a villa in Tuscany overlooking the hills. Under a grape arbor, there's a long wooden table where his whole family sits — his children, their spouses and the children's children. There's wine and pasta and a spectacular view.

"Un giorno in Italia," Valenti exclaims. "One day in Italy."

But that's tomorrow. For today, he's here in Southwest Florida planning the eighth location of Florida Gulf Bank, his next trip overseas and the next intellectual challenge he'd like to take on. ■

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