

## Springsteen and Me: Two Stories from St. Rose of Lima

By Daphne Lombardi

My family and I moved from South River to Freehold, New Jersey, when I was four years old. They immediately enrolled me in St. Rose of Lima, where I would spend the next ten years receiving an education that combined academic excellence with the traditions and values of Catholic faith. As a second grader, I was nervously preparing for my First Confession. My parents pointed to the chair in the St. Rose of Lima Church where I would sit and confess to the priest. Noticing I was hesitant and somewhat fearful of taking this seat, my teacher quickly approached and whispered quietly in my ear. She told me that a famous musician once sat in that same seat and gave his First Confession. His name was Bruce Springsteen, and he used to live in the house just behind the school parking lot. At this age I had no idea who Bruce Springsteen was, but because I was told he was famous I chose to sit next to the priest and begin to recite my confession. The Catholic New Jersey experience weaves itself into our lives in many different ways. We see it in our Catholic schools and universities, such as St. Rose of Lima School and Seton Hall University. We experience it as we attend mass every Sunday at our beautiful local churches. We read about it in books and view it in its most beautiful form in artwork displayed in a multitude of settings. Locally, here in Freehold, the music of one of our own continues to influence the lives of New Jerseyans as well as others all over the world. Stemming from his early years at our local Catholic school, Bruce Springsteen's music is deeply rooted in his Catholic upbringing and faith. Many of his songs concentrate on principles entrenched in the Catholic religion. Salvation, redemption, prayer, hope, faith, and sense of community are themes seen throughout his musical career. Therefore, I propose that this New Jersey musical legend be recognized for his contributions to the Catholic New Jersey experience, as his songs continue to this day to inspire people in this tradition. I, too, am a product of this New Jersey Catholic experience dating back to my days at St. Rose of Lima School. Although I may not be as famous as Bruce Springsteen, we share many similarities in how the Church and school has influenced our path, our relationship with God, and our desire to inspire and help others.

Bruce Springsteen grew up in Freehold, New Jersey, just three miles from where my family and I have lived for the last 16 years. As he writes in his recent autobiography "We live, literally, in the bosom of the Catholic Church, with the priest's rectory, the nuns' convent, the St. Rose of Lima Church and grammar school all just a football's toss away across a field of wild grass" (Springsteen 5). He goes on to write "Though he towers above us, here God is surrounded by man—crazy men, to be exact" (Springsteen 5). Here, Springsteen describes how he and his extended family of aunts, uncles, and grandparents occupied the many houses in the Freehold neighborhood that surrounded our church and the important role this Catholic community played in his childhood. He completes an early chapter in his autobiography by writing, as if it were lyrics in one of his songs: "Here we live in the shadow of the steeple, where the holy rubber meets the road, all crookedly blessed in God's mercy, in the heart-stopping, pants-dropping, race-riot-creating, oddball-hating, soul-shaking, love-and-fear-making, heartbreaking town of Freehold, New Jersey. Let the service begin" (Springsteen 7). As I read how Springsteen describes his youth and hometown, it is evident how the nearby Catholic church and community has influenced him. Living with St. Rose of Lima in the background, Springsteen references God's mercy and the church's steeple, clearly demonstrating how Catholic traditions and beliefs have influenced his writing style. In writing, "Let the service begin," it almost sounds as if he is preparing to present a homily at a Sunday Mass to us as readers, as he embarks on telling his autobiography. In reading this brief excerpt from the book, I asked my parents, both avid Springsteen fans, if this is truly how he acts. They responded to me with a smile, remembering a four-hour Springsteen concert they enjoyed years ago. They informed me that the show was a combination of great music from superb

musicians combined with great storytelling from a man who at times acted as a preacher. It seems clear that his early life around the Church has played an integral role in who he is as an artist.

In order to appreciate the effect that St. Rose of Lima Church had on Springsteen and his music, we must first trace the history of the church and its patron saint. Saint Rose of Lima was born in Lima, Peru, in 1586. She grew up in a family that neglected her passion for the convent and expected her to marry. As Kendall W. Brown explains,

From an early age, Rose showed strong spiritual yearnings and profound mystical abilities. She preferred prayer, meditation, and solitude to social interaction. Her mother had difficulty accepting Rose's childhood vow of virginity, for it frustrated her hopes to improve the family's prospects through her marriage to a wealthy husband....Rose was determined, however, to reserve herself for a mystical marriage with Jesus Christ.

Rose preferred the secluded life full of prayer and dedication to Christ; therefore, she lived in her own home for the majority of her life. Rose made space for prayer in a section of her home; additionally, she transformed another room into an infirmary. Rose would care for the ill and house homeless children in this room. Her compassion and faith were exercised every day in the setting she created to honor God. As Brown explains, "From a modern, secular perspective...the life of Saint Rose of Lima raises questions of psychological abnormality. Rose's own culture, however, gave far greater credence to ascetic mysticism than does ours." During her time, her way of life was not normal; living to pursue her faith was more or less not an easy task. On August 24, 1617, Rose died and would later, in 1671, be canonized by Pope Clement X. Rose's passing

touched off a wave of popular mourning in Peru. A tumult erupted at her funeral as worshipers struggling to obtain relics seized pieces of her clothing and her corpse. Officials stopped the rites and buried her secretly. Within a year after her death, Church authorities began official inquiries to determine if she qualified for canonization. (Brown)

Today, she is the patron saint of Peru, Latin America, and the Philippines, known for the chastity and piety she embraced throughout her lifetime.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Reverend John Scollard purchased land in Freehold, New Jersey, that would soon grow into a beautiful parish community, St. Rose of Lima. Four years later, a school was built next to the Church in order to provide religious education to children in the area. It was not long until the leaders of the parish realized the impact of St. Rose of Lima Church within the nearby community as well as the increasing population of parishioners. After several renovations, the church developed more worship space and was able to properly welcome everyone into the arms of God. St. Rose of Lima Parish currently provides services to a very diverse surrounding community. Located in the borough, the church has welcomed families of several different cultures and evolved into a beautiful place of worship in the heart of the town and as a model for the New Jersey Catholic experience.

In Springsteen's recent autobiography he describes how he grew up in this borough in a poor household. He was surrounded by a loving mother and grandparents, but was forced to deal with the demons of an alcoholic father. Regardless, the "Church Next Door" played a significant part in his daily life. Springsteen and his younger sister, Virginia, rode their bikes regularly around St. Rose of Lima Church, past the rectory and convent, and back to their home. At times, the nuns would shout from the windows of the convent to chase them away. He describes his young life as "drifting to school, to home, to mass, to school again, our lives inextricably linked with the life of the Church" (Springsteen 14). He remembers the smell of incense, the Friday Stations of the Cross, the funerals and weddings that he could hear and see from his home. His early years were dominated by Catholic traditions. He even goes on to recall, "I think about the hours I spent devising a list of acceptable sins I could spout on command" (Springsteen

14), something I can appreciate having made my First Penance in the very same church. Springsteen speaks of his days as an altar server, a role I also filled from second grade until I graduated from high school. He recalls tales of his experiences with the nuns in his school: “the nuns at St. Rose could play pretty rough” (Springsteen 16) and his feelings of emotional strain that this Catholic world had placed on him. He does reflect on an experience with his fifth-grade teacher, Sister Charles Marie, after a priest embarrassed him for making a mistake as an altar server. She handed him a small holy medal to lift his spirits, an act of kindness he states he will never forget—a small act so true to our Catholic faith, forever reminding us all to be kind to others at all times. He writes: “This was the world where I found the beginnings of my song. In Catholicism, there exists poetry, danger, and darkness that reflected my inner self. I found a land of great and harsh beauty, of fantastic stories, of unimaginable punishment and infinite reward” (Springsteen 17). Springsteen writes that at times he struggled to fit into this life but learned to work through his conflicts to find his faith. He points out that he has a “personal relationship with Jesus. He remains one of my fathers, I believe deeply in his love, his ability to save” (Springsteen 17). While living next to St. Rose of Lima Church, he fondly recalls the church bells ringing, representing a wedding, a funeral, or a birth. He and his sister would clean up either the thrown rice from the weddings or the fallen flowers from the funerals. At a young age, through the eyes of the Church, he equated rice and flowers with life and death, happiness and sadness, heaven and hell. These countless experiences in Freehold, New Jersey, helped build a foundation that shaped how Bruce Springsteen approached his music and the stories he wanted to tell.

As previously mentioned, St. Rose of Lima Parish has long offered religious education to the community through a grade school around the corner. My sisters and I were fortunate enough to attend the Catholic school from kindergarten to the eighth grade. Like Springsteen’s, some of our classes were taught by nuns. One in particular, Sister Daniel, made such a positive impact on our lives as our second-grade teacher. Sister Daniel was more or less an angel on Earth. She spoke with the softest voice and sincerely cared about every one of her students. With every mistake or punishment, she offered us a sense of validation. She reminded us every day that God loved us and made us all in his image. She has had a lasting impression on all who have passed through her classroom, even her most famous pupil, Bruce Springsteen. Indeed, she often spoke proudly of how he would write to her and keep in touch over the years. Every year we had one class dedicated to religion which was highly focused on the Bible. We studied the life of Christ from the beginning of time to his presence in our everyday lives. In the second grade, I vividly remember one of the most embarrassing moments of my life while receiving the sacrament of Reconciliation. After taking my seat at the altar, I kicked off my slip-on heels while sitting with the priest reciting the prayer prepared for us. I slowly slid down the chair and onto the floor to put my shoes back on my feet. Additionally, Catholic education incorporated the “basics” of Catholicism. For example, the Ten Commandments, Seven Sacraments, and Mysteries of the Rosary were taught repeatedly throughout my years at St. Rose of Lima School. In the fifth grade I completed my first saint report on Saint Dymphna, the patron saint of nervousness and mental battles. I remember choosing this saint purely for the reason that her name reminded me of my own. Now I look back and am able to appreciate the wonders this saint gave our world as well as the lasting impact she has made on my life. Our education prepared us to receive the Sacraments; in fact, I still remember the day of my first Holy Communion, when I made the cover of the *Asbury Park Press*, holding an umbrella over my dress so the rain did not ruin it! Religious education also allowed us to research and learn about the lives of saints; in fact, the majority of my eighth-grade year was spent researching one saint that I admired and would later become my Confirmation saint name. My Confirmation saint name is Gianna. St. Gianna is known for the difficult decision she was forced to make during her pregnancy. She could live if she did not continue through the course of her pregnancy, thus, killing her unborn child, or she would die trying to deliver her baby. St. Gianna died giving birth to her child and was canonized a saint because of her faith

and trust in God during her pregnancy. I immediately took great interest in St. Gianna and to this day I am honored to have chosen her for my Confirmation name. Faith and religion have consistently been an important aspect of life within my family. I grew up around grandparents and parents who valued their relationship with God before anything else. Similar to Springsteen, I continue to admire the influence my parents and grandparents had on me and my faith. My appreciation for my faith and my experiences at St. Rose of Lima continues to grow as I mature as an adult. Growing up I began to notice some of the traditions throughout my family that make Catholicism and exciting. Everyday my grandparents would sit and pray the rosary together; similarly, my parents have slowly adopted this tradition. I hope that one day, I can pray the rosary every day like they do. These are the Catholic traditions instilled in me through my years at St. Rose of Lima. Similar to Bruce Springsteen, I find these lessons and themes repeatedly recurring in my life as I mature as a Catholic, young adult, student, and future nurse.

"I don't often participate in my religion but I know somewhere...deep inside...I'm still on the team" (Springsteen 16), Springsteen reports as he now looks back on his life. He often writes on how, as he grew up and began his career, he distanced himself from the Catholic Church. In our local town, stories circulate on how he was not a favorite amongst the clergy at St. Rose of Lima and how he grew to defy the authority of the Church as he found his calling in music and the quest to become a rock and roll star. However distant he may have become from the Church, his Catholic roots were ever present from the release of his first album, *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ*, to his most recent release nearly 50 years later. Early in his career, theologians wrote in review of this first album, that "evidence can be found for the recurring role that his Catholic upbringing would play in his lyrics. There are mentions of Jesus and Mary, nuns and priests, angels and devils, sinners and saints, and even the Vatican" (Chapman and Reinhard 2). Although Springsteen's relationship with the Church is described as complex over the course of his career, his faith seems to have grown stronger over the years with continued overtures of Catholicism appearing in his music to this day (Chapman and Reinhard 2).

"The imagination is religious and religion is imaginative" (Greeley 3) writes Fr. Andrew Greeley in his 1988 essay entitled "Andrew Greeley on the Catholic Imagination of Bruce Springsteen." Greeley insists that Springsteen's lyrics and artistry are tightly linked to religious imagery and that he is indeed "profoundly Catholic" because his imagination is heavily influenced by Catholic symbolism he adopted from his exposure to the Sacraments (Greeley 3). Greeley proposes that Springsteen's current album at the time, *Tunnel of Love*, was indeed an important Catholic event in the United States, comparing it to the visit of Pope John Paul II (Greeley 3). Greeley goes on to explain that while the Pope addressed the masses with religious doctrine, Springsteen wrote songs dealing with religious realities such as sin, temptation, and hope in a manner that average Americans could relate to. He makes the case that Springsteen's use of religious imagery allows his music to touch more Americans than the Pope himself (Greeley 3). In Springsteen's *Tunnel of Love* album, Greeley contends that Springsteen combines themes of tragedy with hope. The songs on the album reference light and water, symbols we often associate with Easter and baptism. Greeley feels this album expresses religion more so than any of Springsteen's prior works. God, Heaven, and prayer are themes running through these songs, while religion is used to deal with ordinary human conflicts such as love, sin, and rebirth (Greeley 3). In one of Springsteen's songs, "Two Faces," Springsteen writes that he is two men, one good and one evil: "one sunny, one dark; one that says 'hello' and one that says 'goodbye'" (Greeley 3). The song continues with Springsteen writing "at night he gets down on his knees and prays that love will make that other man go away" (Greeley 3). Greeley points out that it is apparent that Springsteen is referring to the Christian doctrine of original sin with his song, a theme that has existed in the Church for centuries. Finally, Greeley contends Springsteen's "Valentine's Day" is the most religious song on the album as it references the patron saint of romantic love, St. Valentine. Vivid Catholic images dominate this song as

the characters experience “God’s light came shinin’ on through” and “the water and wind rushing through their arms.” Finally, in the song, the singer realizes he is dreaming and that the wind, water, and light are actually his wife. The song concludes with the man then asking her to be his Valentine. It is a song about love, but Greeley insists it is based in “Catholicism, pure and simple” (Greeley 3). Greeley concludes that Springsteen’s music proves powerful and rich, as it combines spiritual imagery with ideals of hope, love, and rebirth from tragedy. He feels Springsteen, born and raised in Freehold, New Jersey, should be viewed as a treasure to Catholics as he provides a reminder of how special our Sacraments are and encourages us to embrace the imagination that religion permits us to have (Greeley 3).

Springsteen’s reputation as a spiritualist continues to this day. Thirty years after Greeley’s essay on Springsteen, author Brian Conniff revisits this topic in his article “The Enduring Catholic Imagination of Bruce Springsteen.” He revisits Greeley’s theories, pointing out how Springsteen has continued to present his songs against the backdrop of his New Jersey Catholic experience and upbringing. He insists that Greeley’s essay serves as the key reference point for the link between Springsteen’s music and religious themes (Conniff 4). Conniff feels over the 30 years since Greeley’s essay, Springsteen has used his Catholic imagination to convey themes of hope and renewal in the effort to overcome tragedy. Conniff points to other albums that incorporate traces of Catholicism throughout the lyrics. Springsteen’s song “It’s Hard to Be a Saint in the City” from his first album makes multiple religious references from “I was the pimp’s main prophet” to “the devil appeared like Jesus through the steam in the street” (Conniff 4). Springsteen’s song “Lost in the Flood” presents characters from a drag racer named Jimmy the Saint, to the “Bronx Apostle,” and a “storefront incarnation of Maria” (Conniff 4). His characters, clearly inspired by his Catholic background, flow seamlessly through each other’s lives, searching for meaning and understanding in their lives. Conniff stresses how in these songs, Springsteen’s Catholic imagination helps us recognize the connections between “the lost and the redeemed and the sinners and the saints” (Conniff 4). From Springsteen’s iconic album *Born to Run* is the famous song “Thunder Road.” Conniff describes how a young man, who only has a car, approaches the house of his love, named Mary. He hopes to convince her to join him in his car to escape the constraints of his small town. The young man rejoices as “Mary dances across the front porch to the sound of Roy Orbison singing to the lonely” (Conniff 4). At this point, redemption and hope become possible for the man, and his dream seems attainable. Here, Conniff points out that “the path to salvation might turn out to be nothing more exotic than the New Jersey Turnpike” (Conniff 4); however, this is enough to give hope. Interestingly, the love interest in the song is named Mary, most likely a reference to the Blessed Mother (Conniff 4).

Conniff outlines many other famous Springsteen songs that promote his theme of hope and redemption. Epic songs such as “Rosalita,” “Jungleland,” and “No Surrender” all describe stories involving struggles within society. Springsteen combines his religious imagery with the economic or social plight of many Americans in such a way as to promote hope so that “down the road there might be a ‘promised land’” (Conniff 4). Of particular significance was Springsteen’s work after the 9/11 tragedy. Springsteen’s songs “My City of Ruins” and “The Rising” focus on revival after this national disaster and became rallying cries for so many as our nation healed after 9/11 (Conniff 4). Conniff brings attention to Springsteen’s firefighter in “The Rising” climbing the steps in a burning World Trade Center tower wearing a cross (Conniff 4). The song references Mother Mary and visions of children dancing, which Conniff links to “modern reliving of the crucifixion and the resurrection” (Conniff 4). In these songs, Springsteen continues to interweave Catholic symbols and themes to tell his stories with a goal of inspiring and giving us hope of a better day.

Finally, Conniff details the significance of Springsteen's recent tour on Broadway, entitled *Springsteen on Broadway*. Conniff is convinced that this show represents Springsteen's ultimate maturation into an understanding artist with the goal of exploring struggles while expressing hope. Springsteen can only fulfill his goal by using the tools he has gained from his Catholic background. In many ways, Conniff insists, the show is as much a confessional as it is a musical (Conniff 4). Conniff sums up by saying that Springsteen "has emerged from the shadow of St. Rose of Lima as a new kind of minister, of remembrance, repentance, recovery, resolve, and redemption, in a church that serves the people even more profoundly than Father Greeley would have imagined" (Conniff 4).

Even at 70 years of age and after five decades as an artist, Springsteen continues to use spiritual language and imagery in his songs. Most recently in 2020, he released his latest album *Letter to You*, a collaboration with his E-Street Band for his fans in light of the pandemic. Again, Springsteen writes of hope and faith as we endure a catastrophic worldwide crisis. A beautiful song entitled "The Power of Prayer" uses biblical language to recall the memory of a prior romance. When interviewed about this album, Springsteen states that *Letter to You*

is partially a reflection and meditation on time passing and loss of friends. The subject matter led to a natural undercurrent of spirituality derived from his Catholic upbringing....Those little three-minute records and the 180 second character studies that came through pop music were like these little meditations and little prayers for me....And my faith came in and filled those songs, and gave them a spiritual dimension. (qtd. in Lowe)

I must confess, I really did not have an appreciation for the music of Bruce Springsteen when I started this project. As I sit in the study of my home in Freehold, behind me on the wall is a clock we gifted to my parents several years ago. It is a replica of Springsteen's *Born to Run* album with the album cover beneath it. My parents and I obviously share different musical tastes, so I asked my parents to recommend a song that might help me appreciate Springsteen, his message, and how it might be linked to our shared Catholic background at St. Rose of Lima. They recommended the song "Land of Hope and Dreams," so I looked it up and studied the lyrics. The song speaks of optimism and hope as he recites the line "Meet me in a land of hope and dreams." Springsteen sings about sunshine and a better tomorrow, darkness passing and of a train that "carries saints and sinners...losers and winners...and lost souls...into a land of freedom where our faith will be rewarded." He implores, "People, get ready...you don't need a ticket...just get on board...thank the Lord." In analyzing this song, I could not help but feel the religious imagery in the words. I listened to the song with my parents and began to feel uplifted by the musical arrangements and its message of hope to the many who endure hardship in their lives. As a Catholic, I have been taught to sympathize with others in their suffering and take on the challenge of serving my community with a goal of providing hope for better days, just as Bruce Springsteen sings in this song and so many of his other works. I have added this song to my running playlist as it is inspirational and reminds me to always be the best version of myself. I hope, through my Catholic faith, to similarly inspire others and provide hope.

In Springsteen's autobiography, he returns to his origin at St. Rose of Lima and reflects on his past. He states.

Once again in the shadow of the steeple, as I stood feeling the old soul of my tree, of my town, weighing on me, the words and a benediction came back to me. I chanted singsong, unthinkingly, endlessly in the green blazer, ivory shirt, and green tie all of St. Rose's unwilling disciples. Tonight they came to me and flowed differently. Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against

us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver from evil...all of us, forever and ever Amen.  
(505)

Here Springsteen has returned, some seventy years into his life, to the origins of his faith, now with a mature appreciation for the impact St. Rose of Lima Church has had on his life and his career. I feel I am lucky because I also share this appreciation with Mr. Springsteen and am quite grateful. Today I drove by my old school and church. It has not changed much since my elementary and middle school days. In recent years, my family and I joined parish that is closer to our home in Freehold, but occasionally we return to St. Rose of Lima for Mass. At my current Church, in addition to being an altar server, I have played an active role in my youth group and parish, helping others and serving my community. I realize that my time in Freehold Borough at St. Rose of Lima laid the foundation for who I am and what I aspire to be. It is a tradition in my family that whenever we pass a church or cemetery we make the sign of the cross and say a brief prayer. Today I pulled over for a minute to reflect on my time at St. Rose of Lima. I remember my friends, the Sacraments I received, and the time with family we shared in the Church and at school functions. I, too, recited the Our Father prayer, similar to Bruce, and felt a sense of peace. Springsteen concludes in his book that in telling his story his goal was to “know the whole story...understand as much of it as he could...in order to free (himself) of its most damaging influences...and honor its beauty” (505). In this account of his life, Springsteen states he has presented us with a “long and noisy prayer, my magic trick” (505). He hopes that his music, writings, and stories might strengthen and “help make sense” of our own stories and implores us to tell our own stories (505). Much of my story is yet to be written. I look forward to becoming a nurse and helping people in the true Catholic tradition. I look forward to having a family one day and sharing my stories about my Catholic upbringing in New Jersey. I would never have imagined that I could be linked to Bruce Springsteen, but I am. Our stories both began with the New Jersey Catholic experience at St. Rose of Lima. We both recognize challenges in our lives but lean on our faith, our families, and a hope we hold dearly and closely to our hearts. Although I may not be able to inspire others with music, I am confident I can contribute to the lives of others with love, respect, optimism, and hope. I accept Bruce Springsteen’s challenge to tell my story and look forward to writing it for years to come.

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*(This is an excerpt from a paper that Ms. Lombardi wrote for the course The New Jersey Catholic Experience, sponsored by the Catholic Studies Program at Seton Hall University under the directorship of Dr. Ines Angeli Murzaku, and taught by Professor Alan Delozier, D.Litt., at Seton Hall University.)*



1965 — Freehold Borough, New Jersey  
Bruce Springsteen playing baseball in his backyard.  
The building in the distance is Saint Rose of Lima School.



2006 — Freehold Borough, New Jersey  
Daphne Lombardi's first-grade class photo at Saint Rose of Lima School.

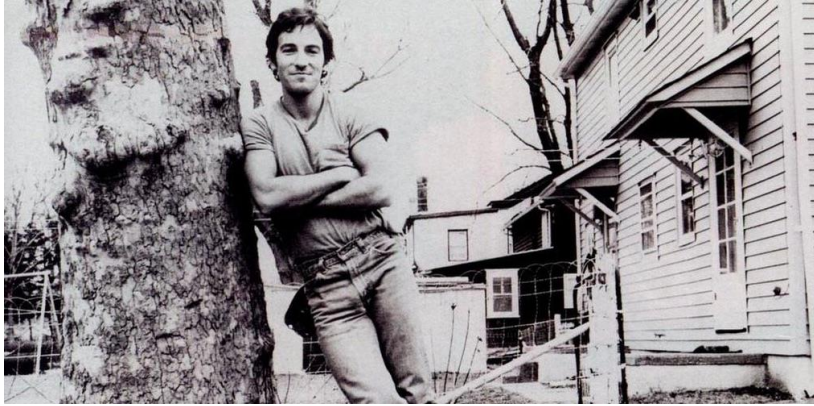




2007 — Freehold Borough, New Jersey  
Daphne Lombardi at Saint Rose of Lima School in the first grade.



2008 — Freehold Borough, New Jersey  
Daphne Lombardi on the cover of Asbury Park Press after her first holy Communion.



*Freehold Borough, New Jersey  
Bruce Springsteen visiting his childhood home located less than four miles from Daphne Lombardi's house.*



*2020 — Freehold Township, New Jersey  
Bruce Springsteen record in Daphne Lombardi's home.*