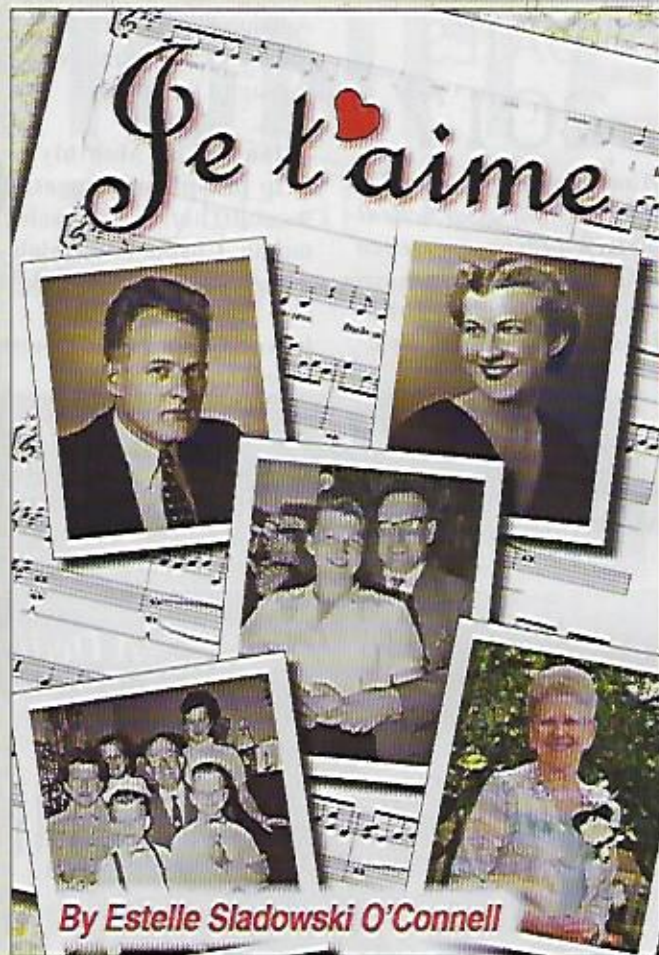




Estelle Sladowski O'Connell



Estelle published her book in 2017.

Christmastime, 1958

A Bayonne native chooses triumph over tragedy

BY KATE ROUNDS

Sometime after 10 p.m. on the evening of Dec. 18, 1958, a Staten Island thug named Dick Biegenwald and his benighted accomplice, a droopy-eyed, full-lipped loser named Jimmy Sparnroft headed to Bayonne by ferry to steal a car and rob a store. They were packing a twelve-gauge sawed-off J.C. Higgins, so they were clearly looking for trouble.

Dick was the ringleader and gunslinger, but it was Jimmy who supplied the buckshot, slugs, disguise, a saw, flashlight, and jumper wires.

They stole a cream-colored 1952 Mercury sedan. Jimmy was the getaway driver.

Eliminating stores that looked too crowded, they decided on 168 Avenue B, where a man was talking to another man in a white apron. The man in the apron was store owner Stephen Sladowski. When he wouldn't give up his money, Dick shot him. Stephen Sladowski died from his wounds.

Peace, Not Pain

Those are the irrefutable facts. That's what happened but not how Estelle Sladowski O'Connor wants to remember her father, and what she wants the world to know. In 2017, she published *Je t'aime, Stephen F. Sladowski: His Life, His Love, His Legacy*.

This volume is her attempt, not to set the record straight, but to give voice to the voice that was silenced. "The light side, the good side was eradicated by a violent act," she tells me in early December. "My goal is to remember him as he lived rather than as he died."

December, it turns out, is an important month for her family. Her father died on the 18th of the month in 1958. Estelle turned 19, just four days earlier, on the 14th. She was living at home at the time and going to school in New York City. A younger sister and two younger brothers were also at home.

As it happens, my chat with Estelle took place on another

Leads 10,000 Holy Name Men in Religious Demonstration



Stephen Sladowski was the Grand Marshall for the Holy Name Societies Parade.



Estelle with her father dressed in authentic Polish costume for the Pulaski Day Parade

December anniversary. Sadly, this is the one-year anniversary of her husband's death. Edward O'Connor died on Dec. 9, 2016.

This very painful moment in Estelle's life helped her to understand on an even deeper level what her mother went through in that shocking instant, when she was left to bring up four children on her own and commit to memory the love of her life.

Love Will Go On

Estelle's memoir is a testament to enduring love. Early on in the book, she describes her parents' 20th wedding anniversary. It reads like a teen's junior prom. "Mom had purchased a cocktail dress ... It cost a small fortune but was gorgeous: midnight blue taffeta, tea length with spaghetti straps and a full skirt and beading." The dress is a sign of the times—very much an artifact of the 1950s. But don't think this was a celebration for middle-aged, mid-century fogies. Stephen also gave his bride a long apricot slipper satin nightgown cut on the bias and trimmed with ecru lace. Estelle describes it as "elegant and sexy," clearly meant to be removed.

As her mother grew older, Estelle relates how her mother would sit in a boat in Bayville where she was living with her daughter, Cathie, and read Danielle Steele novels. "Daddy and I are in those scenes," she tells her daughters.

Minding the Store

Reading the accounts of Stephen's last day—a man in a store at night wearing a white apron—you could be forgiven for thinking that Stephen was a shopkeeper. He was, but by day he was a well-respected attorney and assistant city prosecutor.



Estelle with her father



The gravestone for Estelle's parents

Owning a store was a second career that would serve his family well, offering job opportunities and a revenue source for his wife and sons.

"My father's parents were in the grocery business," Estelle says. "They built up the business and owned three stores. My father worked in the store growing up. Then when he became an attorney he went to school at night and helped in the store during the day."

Estelle says, "Our store was our future. It wasn't the future we anticipated, but our lives were not destroyed. We carried on."

In fact, it was her future husband, Ed O'Connor, who was there for her from the moment the tragedy struck. "He came into my life the night my father was killed," Estelle says. "I knew he was the one for me. I was dating several boys, and Ed was there through it all. We had 56 years of a happy marriage after that."

November 5, a Day That Will Live in Dignity

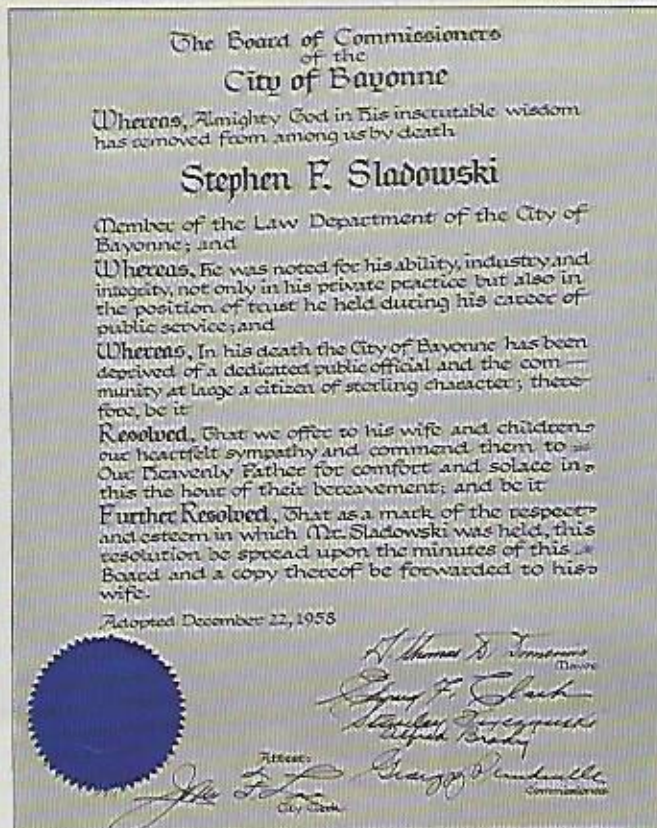
"I grew up in Bayonne," Estelle says. "My whole family was there, in three square miles; we all lived there, cousins, aunts, uncles. Getting together, that was happiness. That's what I remember about Bayonne. I thought everyone had a family like this. That's not the case; I'm blessed."

Estelle has visited a few times since moving out of town. "I was so happy to see changes have been made, but for the good. It looks lovely. The house we lived in has a new porch and landscaping."

Mt. Carmel Church, she says "was gorgeous." The church played a major role in the lives of her family members. Her grandparents were married there on Nov. 5, 1907. Her parents were married there on Nov. 5, 1938. Estelle and Ed were married there on Nov. 5, 1960.

"We have a legacy of marriage in that church on that day," she says.

On Nov. 5, 2017, there was a Mass celebrating her father's



The Mayor of Bayonne and the Board of Commissioners presented a citation.

life. This was during a weekend reunion which featured a dedication of her father's portrait and a citation to the City of Bayonne. "The church looked beautiful and was packed," Estelle says. "People participated. It was a wonderful feeling. This is the way I remember Bayonne."

Many still remembered her father. "He was respected and admired by judges and other attorneys in the system," Estelle says. "It was touching to me to see two former mayors of Bayonne and several members of the law department. They remembered him and actually worked with him. They were filled with glowing things to say about him."

Author! Author!

In 2014, a retired New Jersey State Trooper named John O'Rourke published *The Jersey Shore Thrill Killer*, a true-crime account of the murderer who killed Stephen Sladowski. Estelle has high praise for the book and its author. In writing this story, I, too, learned details about the crime from him. But it was O'Rourke's book that spurred Estelle to tell a different story.

"I always felt that I wanted to do something with my father's story," Estelle says. "When John's book came out, I didn't want my father to be remembered for the way he died but for the way he lived. This was a very worthwhile life, a significant life extinguished by evil."

In the end, she says, "Faith and love prevailed over all that evil."—BLP

