

Liam Andrea Zarrillo

For as long as I can remember, a special photograph has sat on a shelf in my father's living room. It is a grainy, black and white portrait of a family, with two young girls and two young boys poised in front of their young parents. They stand among the olive trees in the field behind their home in Santa Maria, a neighborhood within Balvano in the Italian province of Potenza. The eyes of my Nonno, Nonna, Zia Concetta, Zia Giuseppina, Zio Antonio and my father squint into the sun. This was the last photograph taken before they would travel across the ocean and immigrate to Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

While the photograph itself is colourless I have always found it to be beautiful. Regardless of that saturation, their faces are full of life. They each offer a glimpse into what life in Basilicata is like. Behind their squinting eyes you can see the love and the sacrifice, the bliss and the struggle, as well as the immense pain felt and the tremendous bravery required when you leave the only place you've ever called home.

In 1966 they boarded a ship that would eventually take them to their new home. They carried traditions and customs conceived in Basilicata. Especially my Nonna, who was pregnant and carrying a 6 month old baby at the time. All they had known was packed up safe and tight, stored in their memories, waiting to make it to Canada and be set free.

In the Zarrillo family, the stories of the Basilicata are told in many ways. What I know of my family's history has been shared with me from the lips of my father, in the wise and gentle eyes of my Nonno, through the cooking of my Nonna and from many other places in between. Tales of eating sardines and fish pastries to celebrate Easter on Good Friday, of stripping down to white underpants to make teams for games of soccer, of stealing pears from the neighbor's tree and being chased until their legs and lungs gave out. Memories passed along the grape vine, details shifting ever so slightly as they are transferred from mouths to ears. Through storytelling, we have been fortunate to keep the culture and traditions of our heritage alive.

My upbringing was spent surrounded by relatives. We would come together every Sunday for a traditional "Pasta Sunday" dinner. We would indulge in homemade penne, spaghetti, ravioli, gnocchi or tortellini, always covered in a sauce made from scratch. I recall

seeing homemade ravioli covering every single surface of the house, or enjoying homemade zeppole and pizza frita for dessert. These days, our Pasta Sunday cohort is slightly smaller, with my Nonno, Nonna and some aunts and uncles having moved to Vancouver, Toronto and other parts of Canada. But the Zarrillo family cannot stay apart for too long, and every year over the July long weekend we reunite here in Winnipeg. For five straight days our culture comes to life through telling stories, drinking wine made from fresh grapes and indulging in more food than you can imagine. The main event is always a big ravioli dinner, dressed with a homemade sauce made from fresh garden tomatoes, as Nonno and Nonna had always done it.

I know that I am fortunate to have been raised in such a busy and vibrant family, where your cousins are your best friends and all the parents are your teachers. We'd spend hours playing briscola, pari e dispari, cribbage and scopa. I can still remember the summer I was determined to learn all the pictures on each scopa card, not giving up until I had committed their meanings to memory.

That kind of unrelenting dedication is something I have inherited from my family. Sacrifice, strength and determination were the things that transformed them from a poor, working-class family in Balvano, into future generations of professional athletes, business executives and educators. The success of my family has always been something I've admired and respected.

It is this admiration and respect that have fueled my return to university to tackle a second degree as well as fund it myself. The example of my family's resilience drives me to reach this goal. This resilience was born and bred in a small town in Italy, with my Nonno making the sacrifice of leaving his family to work in Germany for several months at a time or my Nonna taking on the maintenance of their rented homes. It manifested itself in their courage to start a new life in Canada, even though they were both illiterate in Italian and English. While immigration at that time often led to the loss of one's culture, their pride persevered.

All of this has inspired a desperate desire to visit where I come from. In 2007, my dad returned to Balvano with my Zia Connie and Zio Carlo, for the first time in 41 years. They came into town near the end of siesta. In a town that small, new faces will always spark intrigue, and as people slowly awoke, the news of their arrival traveled throughout the town. They were

taken to see the fountain where they played as children and found that the old cobblestone roads had been repaved. They visited the cemetery where many of our Zarrillo, Turturiello and Pietrafesa relatives have been laid to rest. As they were entering the mausoleum, the cemetery's groundskeeper approached, watching them curiously, as if he recognized them. They said hello and soon discovered that he was Donato, a friend of my father's when they were young boys. The power of being recognized in his hometown brought my dad to tears. After so much time has passed, you don't think people will remember you, but where we come from it is the contrary. That bond is unbreakable.

This past summer, the strength of that kind of bond was proven to me. If you were to know me before 2014, you would know me by a different name. I was born Lia Andrea Zarrillo. A strong woman who eventually found the courage to take control of her life and become the man she was destined to be. Coming out as transgender was a process. It would have been easy to buy into the assumption that a traditional Italian family would oppose this change. However, my family took no time in proving those nasty stereotypes wrong. Since opening up about my gender identity and transition, I have had nothing but acceptance and support from each member of my family. Their devotion to me has demonstrated something that could only be taught in Basilicata: that love for your family is the highest priority, no matter what.

This past July, I sat down with my Nonno for the first time since beginning my transition. I was nervous of what he might think or say and it took encouragement from my Zia Connie for me to break the ice. But the second I joined him at the kitchen table, it was like no time had passed. He asked me about work, school and my friends. I told him how I've begun to make wine and grow vegetables, just like my father and just like him. We chatted for ages, making up for lost time. While we were discussing my recent acceptance into the University of Winnipeg's Faculty of Education, and my future career plans, he stopped me to share some wisdom. He reminded me that money and work are not the most important in life. A pile of *i soldi* is nice, but you can't take it with you. What is truly important in life is to surround yourself with good people. If you can look around and see love, family and friends, you will have achieved success. I looked into the kind eyes of my Nonno and saw a snapshot of a young man with no money or education, who was determined to build for himself something of which to be proud. Sitting

there that day, 83 years old and in the company of his wife, children, grand children and great-grandchildren, he was the happiest man on earth.

Our history is so rich that if each memory were a photograph, there would not be enough photo albums in the world to contain them all. Flipping through them in my head inspires me to build a life of similar success; one of passion and purpose that never takes anything for granted. I will use all that I have learned and channel it into my future as an educator and father, encouraging young people to see diverse backgrounds as a strength, and to always respect the value in each person's story.