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What Basilicata Means To Me

There comes a time in life where individuals are forced to create an identity for themselves. A lifetime of experiences and moral lessons can be applied to any person in order to produce a sense of self; luckily, growing up in an Italian family, I had both in constant abundance. Though I grew up very close with my nonni, I only had a very primitive sense of my background - for a majority of my life, I was only able to recognize things such as food and language as being inherently Italian. I knew somewhere, over the ocean and a whole new world away, I had an abundance of family I had never met who shared the same ancestors and Lucani bloodline as me. My fascination with the Italian culture was sparked from a young age, and through my own research and school classes I slowly began to piece together my origins. Despite this, the emptiness I felt in my cultural and personal understanding continued to grow until my perception was altered during a life-changing trip to both my nonna and nonno's hometowns.

My nonno is from a small town on the peak of a hill in Potenza, called Palazzo San Gervasio. This was our first stop on our trip, and opened my eyes to the importance of family and generosity in Italian culture. I experienced a massive sense of culture shock as I took in the small town with its narrow roads and expansive views of vast farmland. The rolling hills and lush fields were unlike anything I had ever seen in Canada, and the drive from the airport was marked with many old and abandoned houses standing empty in the expansive countryside. I couldn't help but wonder if any of these houses had belonged to my ancestors as we slowly crawled our way up the hill to reach the town. Arriving in a small Fiat, I was overwhelmed with emotion as I met my numerous zii and cugini, ranging from infants to the elderly. These

strangers, who over the course of our trip welcomed us with open arms and did everything in their power to make us comfortable, displayed the true meaning of generosity.

Gathering in my Zia Silvana's small garage every night at a long table packed full of thirty family members, we were met with vast amounts of simple yet succulent dishes. Though the main dish varied from different types of pasta or carne, fresh mozzarella made that morning from a local latteria, soft bread from the panneteria, and flavourful olive oil from our family's olive grove in the country were staples at every meal. The abundance of food kept us overwhelmingly full through the whole trip, and we needed frequent breaks in order to digest, or as they say in Palazzo, *digerisci*. We were taken out into the campagna in order to see the infinite rows of delicate olive trees in our family grove, and my Zio Vito showed us how to grind and press the olives with century-old tools in order to create the olive oil that my family, including us in Canada, had been using for generations. Learning about this arduous process cemented the value of hard work in my mind indefinitely, and gave me a greater appreciation for life in Italy. Albeit simple, the nature of work in the small town is significantly more tedious and delicate as it adheres to ancient traditional methods that my bisnonni and further ancestors had used generations before I was born. Witnessing the process made me realize how simple school is opposed to the physical work my family had been putting in for years.

After saying goodbye to my family in Palazzo San Gervasio, we moved on to my nonna's town, the small town of Pisticci. Though many of our family members had relocated to a more modern town, called Marconia, just a few minutes away, the beauty of the ancient city was stunning. As in my nonno's hometown, my family opened us with open arms and each member fought for time with us. Here, we did most of our travelling as each family member took us to a different location. My cugina Angelica took us to several beaches around Policoro, where I was

able to take in the soft sand and expansive Mediterranean sea. My cugina Antonella took us to the abandoned town of Craco, where I was able to reflect on the thriving city that was once there and feel thankful for the country and circumstances in which I live. Finally, in an amazing trip with my Zia Teresa, my entire family was taken to Matera in order to see the Sassi. Taking in the vast cavernous dwellings and long staircases, I was again left speechless. The vast amount of work put into the building of the Sassi made me once again reflect on the importance of hard work, and gave me a better sense of appreciation for the work my ancestors had to endure in order to create a better life for their descendants. Though I felt a sense of sadness when saying goodbye and leaving my family behind a continent away, I left feeling fulfilled in learning much more about where I came from and what I appreciated the most as a person.

The connection to my heritage has inspired me to pursue a double major in both Molecular Genetics and Microbiology, and Italian. Reflecting on the state of Italy, as well as personal experience, I hope to become a doctor and publish cancer research in both English and Italian. If I were to receive this scholarship, it would be put towards furthering my education and funding my future research. Though a subsequent trip to Italy will likely have to be sacrificed for summer employment, volunteer, and research opportunities, I will forever be able to cherish my time and experiences in the land of my origins and the chance to form my own sense of Lucani identity.

To me, being Italian is more than being able to say that I speak the language or can cook the food of my ancestors. Rather, it is to be a genuinely loving and caring person with a strong moral compass and desire to make the world a better place. Through meeting my extended family and experiencing the food, language, and historical sites of Basilicata in relation to my own ancestors, I was able to form a stronger sense of identity and understand the concepts of sacrifice and labour as they relate to my family members. One day in the distant future, I hope to

retire in the small town on the hill that taught me so many moral lessons and be able to convey the importance of hard work, family, and generosity to my family in the same way that my family did for me.