

Coral Zarrillo
August 1, 2013
Basilicata Essay Scholarship

In March 2010 my nonna had a stroke. She, along with my nonno, live in Vancouver and the whole family flew there to see her in the hospital. Thankfully her recovery was quick, and the damage was minimal, but my father made a realization that trip; our time with my grandparents would not last forever, and so, that spring, he decided we were moving to the west coast to spend more time with them.

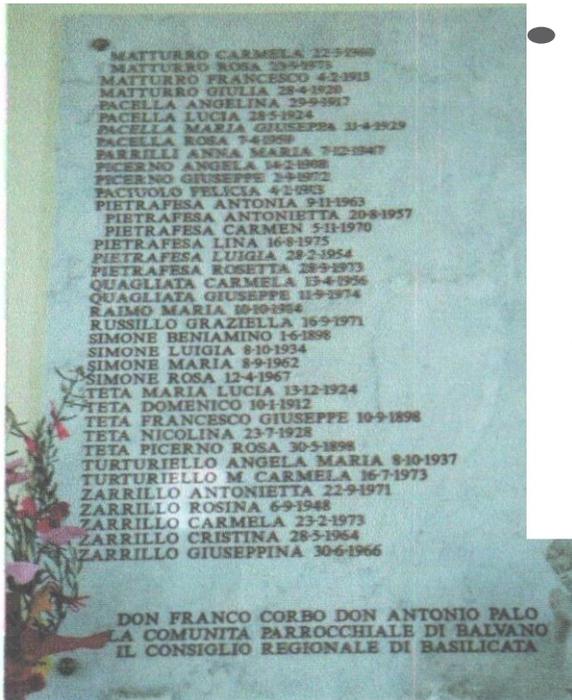


My oldest sister, me, dad, and my youngest sister entering Balvano

I went from seeing nonno and nonna once a year, to dinner every Sunday. Over the last three years I have heard many stories about life in Balvano, the small town in Basilicata, Italy, where both of my grandparents were born. The stories range from life on the farm, sleeping in hay, and walking to town with no shoes, to the communal bread oven, and getting married in the side-aisle of the little church, because they had previously eloped and they were not allowed to get married in the main aisle. That story still upsets my nonno, even after 60 years of marriage. He still feels guilty about it. I also learned about the earthquake of 1980 in Balvano when many of my relatives died while sitting in church. After the devastating earthquake much of the town moved north, never to return, leaving Balvano a shadow of the village it used to be. The stories my nonno tells never stop coming and each one brings me closer to my roots in Basilicata.

Remarkably, when nonno tells the stories (nonna can't tell them anymore because the stroke took her speech), I can picture some of what he is talking about. I can see those stories come to life because in the summer of 2007 I went to Balvano with family and my zia and zio. It was amazing seeing the graves of

my ancestors, and my last name on the memorials around town. I also got to see the fountain where my nonna would wash clothes; unfortunately water no longer runs there. We got pictures in front of the church, and the houses were both my grandfather and grandmother grew up, as well as where 4 of my zias and zios were born. My uncle, who had not been back since he left as a child in 1966, even ran into



one of his childhood friends; he cried. My father cried too that day. Even though he was not born in Italy, he cried when he saw my little sister innocently walking across the graves of his own nonno, and the headstones of Zarrillo's and Petrafessa's. Yet, perhaps the most touching moment was the excitement the town's people showed when they found out we were in town. The town hall opened for us during siesta so we could look through birth records, and even the owners of the local restaurant prepared a special meal for us!

The trip to Balvano made me realize how valuable knowing your heritage is. In the next few years after the trip my father collected all the information necessary to obtain our Italian passports. It was not easy as my grandparents never became Canadian citizens, and had never obtained official permanent resident cards, and their Italian passports were long expired. Yet, with lots of patience and diligence, we were successful. Now I am proud to be an Italian citizen, and fortunate to know the stories and have visited the area my family is from. All of these things together have inspired me to continue to discover more about my heritage.

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When I think about what makes me who I am, my heritage plays a large role in my identity.

My grandparents were born in Balvano, a small town near Potenza in Basilicata, and they lived there for 33 years. It wasn't until 1966 they made the decision to emigrate to Canada. My nonna was five months pregnant at the time and they boarded a boat in Rome, along with their four children, to make the brave journey to Canada. They adapted, yet not without struggle. My nonno was laid off 17 times in the first year of working at CP Rail in Winnipeg. Winters were harsh and money was tight. My nonna and nonno had two more children in Canada, the youngest one being my father. As a child this story, as well as the history of my grandparents, was not a priority. However, as I grow, hearing the stories my grandparents tell about their old home, their way of life in Italy, and the move to Canada, including how far they have come from sleeping on hay, the information has become invaluable to me.

With that in mind, I am writing this essay to honor my grandparents. I strongly value my Italian heritage and their gift of bringing their family here to prosper. My nonno especially, went from poor farmer to a man that worked his way up to a foreman at CP Rail even though he only has a grade 3 education. He owns a home and car, and above all, raised 6 successful children. He, along with my nonna, is the root of an amazing family that I am fortunate to be a part of. They both continue to inspire their kids and grandkids today, myself included.

Their inspiring attitude and work ethic rubbed off on me, and in September I will be leaving home to follow my aspirations to become an archeologist. During my trip to Italy in 2007 we made a stop in Herculaneum outside of Naples. It was a ruin buried under meters of ash from an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. It had been uncovered and opened as a tourist attraction. A visit to this site, along with the family heritage piece of the trip, sparked in me a passion for history and archeology. Much like learning the stories from my grandparents, history can tell me the origin of many other things in life. I have an interest in our past and therefore

applied to an archeology program at the University of Calgary . I have been accepted and so will move into residence at the University in September.I strive to one day use the knowledge gained in the program to explore the Mediterranean area and continue to learn more about my Italian heritage.

I have been working at a retail job and applying for scholarships to save up for University.My family is supportive of my goals and has agreed to pay for half of the tuition, if I fund half as well. The kind opportunity presented by the Basilicata scholarship would help me meet this funding goal, and allow me to follow my passion and explore this career choice. If chosen to receive this scholarship, I will use the bursary money to pay for my tuition.