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Basilicata Cultural Society of Canada

Scholarship Application

My father's side of the family hails from the Basilicata region of Italy. It is there that our small town of Pisticci sits perched at the top of a hill, the warm lights of homes glinting in the darkness like jewels on a crown. It is from this little town that my *bisnonno* Piaciuto Lazazzera (who went by Donato) and my *bisnonna* great-grandmother Pasqua Lazazzera (nee Sardella) left for Toronto in the 1920's. Piaciuto's father was the owner of an olivetta; Pasqua's father managed the olivetta. Piaciuto and Pasqua fell in love, married and moved to Toronto to start a new life, where they felt the brightest future lay. Pasqua had not wanted to leave her life in Italy, but obviously, she had to go to Canada with her husband. The reason she gave for never returning to her hometown was "If I go back to Pisticci, I will never want to depart from it again." In fact, we learned from our relatives that she had asked her niece, Bianca, on several occasions to travel back with her for a visit. At the time, Bianca was working in a low-paying job and could not afford to go. When she had finally saved up enough money to go, Pasqua felt she was too elderly to travel. This family story is an example of the great love that the people of Lucania have for their homeland, and demonstrates the great sacrifice that many made in leaving it. Many Lucani who emigrated were never able to return to the land of their birth, and so had to teach their children their language, culture and customs in a new land. These endure today.

Neither my father, nor his brothers or sisters had ever been to our town until my family made the voyage in 2005, when I was nine years old. My parents, my two sisters and I took a month long vacation to explore Europe, spending most of our time in different regions of Italy. It was very important to my father that we have the opportunity to see the home of our ancestors so that we could reconnect with family as well as gain some understanding of the beauty and hardships of the Lucania region that my *bisnonni* came from. The highlight of the trip was our visit to the Basilicata region where we

received a very warm welcome from everyone. My father prepared for the trip by brushing up on his Italian in order to communicate with our long-lost relatives. This is an example of how my father embodies the Lucano traits of a strong work ethic and dedication to family. Pisticci opened my eyes to the beautiful life in Italy. We stayed at an *agriturismo* called *Il Calanco*. The owners, Antonietta and Rocco, greeted us with red carpet treatment. They explained that our relative, Umberto, had phoned, alerting them to our visit, and that he wanted to be contacted immediately when we arrived. And then it happened... Rocco gestured to the spacious dining room: "*Venite! Per voi, nessun menu!*" An amazing meal awaited us. Plate after plate was brought in: *pecorino* cheese; "*ricotta fresca, fatta sta mattina*"; fried, sweet banana peppers with a little bite; *melanzane*; scrambled eggs with red and green peppers; bread with a caramelized crust and soft crumb inside; slices of cold cuts and salami. We polished off the food on every plate and thanked the chef, Rocco, profusely. However, we were in for a shock when we realized that we had only eaten the *antipasti*, and that there were *still primo, secondo, contorno* and *dolce* still to come! It is well known that food is a highly celebrated part of Italian culture, but this meal represented something even more to me. Preparing and eating a meal together is a symbol of family and love, a way to express your appreciation of those dining with you. This reminds me of the way my father explained *the* concept of unconditional love to me when I was a young child. He told me to visualize his and my mother's unconditional love for me my sisters and I as a plate of food, which no matter how much was eaten from it, would never be empty, as it was always replenished.

After this wonderful meal, we had the chance to meet the relatives we had never met before. My father's *prozia* Rosa was so emotional upon meeting us that she could hardly speak. We were a link to her *zia*, who had left so many years ago, and whom she had never seen again. My *prozio*, Umberto, gave us a tour of Pisticci, including all the churches, and the houses where my *bisnonni* lived. We visited my *bisnonno's* old house at 2, via d'Azeglio and strolled through the *olivetta* that had belonged to his family. We took a small branch with a few olives on it as a treasured souvenir. We also visited with many Lazazzera's who were living in Pisticci. As for the Sardella side of the family, we found out that *bisnonna's* family had lived at 21, Piazza Plebiscito, beside the *Chiesa di San Rocco*: downstairs was the *macelleria* (now a *fruttivendolo*); upstairs were the

sleeping quarters, accessed by an outside staircase. Since *bisnonna's* departure, the church had extensive renovations done, and now most of her old house is incorporated into it, but the stairs up the side of the building remain. This was very moving and symbolic of the blending of church and family life both in the past and present; my *prozio* Umberto works daily at the *chiesa*; here in Toronto my father volunteers weekly at our church and I have also contributed to the life of the church by being a senior altar server for many years.

In addition to our time in Pisticci, we travelled to other parts of the Basilicata region. In Matera, we walked along the *Via Lazazzera*, named after a famous Lazazzera. Of course we had to pose under the street sign! We were also amazed to see the *Sassi*, and to learn about the history of the area, and the hardships that people had to endure to survive. Everywhere we travelled we were delighted by the warm welcome given to us, and by the wonderful Lucano food we tasted. Our only regret was that we could not stay longer in Basilicata.

My grandfather died just before I was born, so I never had the chance to meet him. However, his legacy lives on with the lifestyle of my family. During our trip to Pisticci I began to see the true roots of my family. One example that struck me was the *siesta*. My father takes his daily nap each afternoon. He remembers that his grandparents always had a rest in the early afternoon - it was absolutely taboo to phone or call on them at this time of day. When we arrived we realized that it is the Pisticci habit to shut everything down between about one and five in the afternoon, in order to retire from the intense, dry heat.

Before we left Pisticci, our host, Antonietta, asked me if I would like to stay for a month sometime and help feed the animals at Il *Calanco*. Sadly, I have not had the chance to return to Basilicata since that summer. As the summer of 2014 comes to a close I am getting ready to begin my education at York University. I am enrolled in Political Science/International Studies courses, along with working on my concurrent education degree at Glendon, York's French language faculty. It is a dream of mine to teach English as a Second Language overseas when I graduate. Should I have the honour of receiving this scholarship, I will use it towards helping fund my education in the hopes that when I

graduate I will be able to teach English in Italy, in addition to learning more Italian. I am proud of my heritage, and I look forward to giving back to the beautiful country to which my family owes our ancestry. Following in the tradition of our Lucano heritage, my family strongly values togetherness. Since we were children, my sisters and I would stand in the kitchen and gaze in wonder as our father prepared delicious Italian meals. He learned from his father, who remembered how his mother cooked the meals from "back home." As we got older, he began to teach us how to make different dishes. Some of the dishes include *marinara* (often using fresh tomatoes and basil from our garden); *ciabatta*; homemade pasta, *orecchiette* with rapini. Many of the dishes use olive oil - this is another link with our homeland. Every time we use olive oil for salad, for dipping, for cooking, I am reminded of walking through the *olivetta* and of the challenging life of my ancestors. It makes me appreciate our food even more. Even though both of my older sisters have moved out of our home, they still come back every weekend for family Sunday dinners. This summer I have especially taken an interest in cooking with my mother and father. Cooking and involvement in the Catholic church are a strong part of my roots and through them I can connect to Basilicata. Just as my sisters return home every Sunday and fill their plates with dinner, I wish one day to return to Basilicata to share my plate of unconditional love with the family that is a continent away from me.