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Humble Beginnings

The De Lorenzo story begins in 1966, when a recent widower and his two young daughters journeyed across the choppy waters of the Atlantic Ocean to start a new life in Canada. The rocky cobblestone roads of Cirigliano, MT, were a stark contrast to the bustling streets of Toronto. Their home, which was located at the top of a steep street was quiet, other than the chatter of the older generation gossiping in the piazza in the shadow of the *Torre del Barone Formica*. Cirigliano, a small medieval town, found atop a mountain of long winding roads is located approximately 85 km from the capital of Matera. This agricultural town, dominated by the *Castello Feudale*, is typical of so many *paesi* of Southern Italy. Some Ciriglianesi migrated to the North to find work in the thriving industrial factories of Torino and Milano, whereas others made the brave decision to start a new life with their families in the Americas, a common narrative amongst many Italians in the 50s and 60s.

I was fortunate to split my early years between both sets of nonni who emphasized the importance of a second language. Looking back, I am very appreciative that my parents chose to teach me Italian as my first language because it removed the language barrier with my nonni who are not fluent in English. I have always worn my bilingualism as a badge of honour, as Nelson Mandela once said, “ *If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.* ”

My family in Italy reinforced the importance of the Italian language in our home as they would continually send us books, movies and computer games that had been translated into Italian. Even now, my brother and I reflect on the fact that our upbringing was a bit different from our friends, because of how much our homelife revolved around Italian language and culture. To coincide with our life in Canada, it was also essential for my mother and nonni that we returned to Cirigliano to have a first hand experience of our heritage. Our month long trips, three in total, are difficult to emulate into words. I felt at ease during the 8 hour plane ride sitting beside my nonna*, who like me, was too excited to sleep. Touch down in Italy, and it was the opposite of culture shock. We were greeted warmly in the most Italian way possible; with copious amounts of food. When we returned to Canada, my brother and I were excited to tell our friends about the fascinating way our zio would dunk fresh peaches into his homemade red wine. We were amongst family so no one batted an eye when an 8 year old and 6 year old decided to taste this mystifying blood red *vino*; an Italian right of passage. Our summers in Cirigliano still hold some of my fondest memories. In the mornings, I would ride horses, by afternoon we were riding a tractor and in the

evenings we would dine with different family members who greeted us as though no time had passed since our last visit.

My passion for Italian continued well into my teens and university years where I pursued courses in language and attained an Italian minor. These language courses felt like a natural extension of my communication; however, classes which focused on literature revealed the richness of Italian culture. I was fortunate to attend the University of Toronto for my undergraduate degree, whose world renowned Italian department introduced me to Italian linguistics and great literary giants such as Dante Alighieri, Petrarca and Boccaccio. I found it especially interesting to relate the dialect lessons I had learned in my linguistics course to my family's speech. Apart from the divergence from Latin, the meridionale dialect bears specific cadences and nuances that I was able to detect in mine and my family's communication. I continued to broaden my horizons and explore my passion for Italian culture in the summer of 2016 when I was accepted for an exchange program in Siena. During those 6 weeks I traveled to cities in Italy that were new to me, since my previous trips had been confined to our town and family. It was eye-opening to experience Italy outside the borders of the Basilicata region. Previously, I had marveled at the blue waters of Policoro and the brave zip liners at Pietra Pertosa; however, my exchange allowed me to venture past my roots and appreciate the beauty of Italy as a whole.

When I returned from my summer exchange I was desperate to delve further into Italian experiences, so, through the University I applied for an internship and landed a role at the Italian Chamber of Commerce. Not only was it a valuable learning experience, but it was especially significant to walk through the CHIN building, established by media mogul and notable Italian-Canadian from the Basilicata region, Johnny Lombardi. I reminisced of Sunday afternoons at nonna's where the smell of freshly made pasta and *sugo*, that had been cooking all morning, wafted through the room. The melodic Italian music played in the background of our lively conversations, which probably sound like arguments to an untrained ear. As I grow older, I have become more in tune with my roots and my ears perk up when I hear any mention of the Basilicata region. It is inspiring to know that like Johnny Lombardi, other Lucani have achieved success in Canada including the Primucci family who founded Pizza Nova and the Locilento family of VinBon.

The Basilicata culture is a critical part of my identity. I am always so proud to share that I am from Basilicata, a region often overlooked by second generation Italian-Canadians. My family and I try to preserve the culture in every aspect of our lives, even if that includes mistaking a jar of sanguinaccio for nutella and discovering the special ingredient after demolishing most of the contents, or braving the bitter taste of Amaro Lucano. Since my nonna's passing, we try to maintain our family roots and celebrate the

customs she valued. I love listening to stories from my nonno Antonio about his childhood and the struggles and sacrifices he made to ensure a better life for his family. Although he has resorted back to some of his dialect, the message behind his words remains the same, “ *Chi soffre adesso, gode domani .*” An expression he would reiterate often when he saw me studying during late nights and reminds me again as I embark on my final year at Queen’s University in the Master of Public Health program.

When my mother grew up in Italy, she explained to me that *i sassi* were looked down upon because they represented the poverty of the region, yet today the rustic aesthetic is admired and marvelled. When I see the landscape of Matera being used for films or photography, I feel immensely proud that my family’s region is being highlighted for how uniquely it stands out compared to the more classically recognized Italian landscape. In Canada, it is not the physical beauty of the Basilicata that we celebrate in our daily lives, but rather the culture that has been ingrained in us from youth. As I grow older, I recognize that it is my responsibility to maintain a connection with my Italian heritage. For this reason if I am granted this scholarship, I’d like to return to the Basilicata and spend time with my zii absorbing as much knowledge and culture as I can. Knowing that my nonno cannot return due to health risks, it would be a privilege to visit his family farm and bring back a fistful of soil.

I plan to continue advocating for the Basilicata region, whether on a small scale or a large one. Last summer, I was able to convince a research professor at Ryerson University to extend her trip to Italy to include Matera. Upon her arrival she marveled at what she saw, asking me how I could live in Toronto when my family’s hometown was so beautiful. Her words struck an emotional chord in me as I reflected on the bond I feel with Matera and the Basilicata region. When I told her my answer, it was quite simple. I love living in Toronto because the Italian sense of community, culture and authentic cuisine is always around the corner. Thank you in advance to the Basilicata Cultural Society for their generosity and contribution to the Italo-Canadian community.

**N.B My nonno remarried Antonietta Rando, of Matera, in 1968, to me she was nonna*