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How Basilicata Culture has Impacted My Life

Having both parents of Basilicata descent - my father having been born there— makes it impossible to deny the countless and incredible ways that the Lucanian culture has impacted my life. The Italian culture in general places importance on things which are extremely valuable to me, such as good food, beautiful art, and the loving bonds of family. The latter of the three, I feel, is especially apparent in the people of Basilicata. Historically, being one of the poorest regions in Italy, Basilicata instills in the blood of its people the value of honest hard work, along with the appreciation of the simple blessing of a life in which love is present. The rich culture of Basilicata has been preserved and celebrated in my family through travel, traditions, art, and faith, as well as within my community through storytelling; these things, in turn, have made up my life experiences and shaped the person I am today.

Recently, I had the wonderful opportunity to travel to Italy on a family vacation, where I got to experience the region of Basilicata and connect deeper with my family roots, visiting my maternal grandparents' town of Palazzo San Gervasio and my father's home town of Craco. While in Palazzo San Gervasio, I visited the abandoned castle in which my Nonna Rosa once lived out her childhood, as her father was a merchant. Whilst in the castle, I was able to step into her old bedroom and visualize what her life would have been like inside those walls so many years ago. Ironically, the view from her window overlooked the farm of her future husband, my Nonno Michele. Seeing the beautiful land where he once spent his days under the relentless sun, toiling away in order to reap the fruits of the earth really made me understand his deep connection to and respect for plants and animals. After seeing this, we went to the Palazzo San Gervasio cemetery to pay our respects to our deceased family members. My mom, Filomena, joked that she had never felt more at home as she saw so many other Filomenas there. On the same trip, I had the privilege of visiting the home where my father spent the first six years of his life. I can only describe his home, having to fit a family of nine, as a small, one-room, cave-like structure protruding from the sloping, mountainous earth of Craco Vecchio. Seeing this for the first time really took me by surprise, as I never truly realized just how different life in 1960s Craco was from my reality living in Woodbridge. Experiencing this 2017 trip to Italy made me understand the importance of traveling to the motherland of Basilicata in order to keep the culture alive. The sights I saw, the people I met, and the history I learned impacted my mindset and allowed me to perceive my culture in a new light. It is especially important for second and third generation Lucanians, like myself and my brother, to visit Basilicata as it gives them a fuller understanding of their culture and ancestors, and why preserving such a rich culture is a beautiful and important thing.

We owe the existence of the rich Lucanian culture to our long past ancestors, as well as to our living relatives, without whom the important traditions of our history would not have been passed on and kept up. One tradition that has been with me since my first day on earth is the sacredness of names. The Lucanian tradition of passing on names from old relatives to young is one my family along with many, have practiced for generations, as evident by the multiple Andreas, Giuseppes, and Filomenas on both sides of my family. My name, Domenica, belonged to my grandmother, and before that belonged to her grandfather; the name spans generations. As a child, I used to dislike my name because I could not find it on keychains or magnets, no matter how hard I searched. I now understand that the uniqueness and origins of my name carry power; every time it is spoken, not only am I called, but so too is the history of my ancestors. Another tradition that is important to most Lucanian families, including mine, is the simple joy of getting together and celebrating. My personal favourite family celebration is Christmas Eve with my father's side of the family, the Rinaldis. My father is the youngest of seven siblings, almost all of whom had multiple children, meaning Christmas Eve is filled with a group of about fifty zias, zios, first, second, and third cousins all yelling over each other in an attempt to have a conversation. Ever since I can remember, I have looked forward to Christmas Eve as the best day of the year. As one can imagine, feeding fifty Italians is no simple feat; the Rinaldi Christmas menu features an abundant spread, always including calamari, shrimp, and baccala. Secret Santa is also an essential part of Christmas Eve, as purchasing forty gifts for forty different cousins is a little excessive. My absolute favourite part of the night is sitting around the Christmas tree all together and watching all the cousins receive their one gift from the Secret Santa exchange, and then watching the newest addition to the family always receive about twenty. Though chaotic and sometimes headache-inducing, I would not trade Christmas Eve with the Rinaldis for anything. It is these family traditions that have made me understand what lays at the foundation of the Basilicata culture: Being proud of the family to which one belongs.

Another aspect of not only the Basilicata culture, but the Italian culture in general that is very personal to me is visual arts. Creativity has always been a key characteristic in my life, but I think my previously mentioned 2017 trip to Italy turned a fascination into a passion I have decided to pursue; next year, I will be attending York University majoring in Visual Arts. While touring Italy, I had the honour of viewing pieces by the Italian masters of the Renaissance and Baroque periods: Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel* and *David*, Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, both Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi's renditions of *Judith Beheading Holifernes*, and so many more. Being from the same culture as so many master artists, it is no wonder that I have taken a liking towards visual arts. After returning home from Italy feeling inspired by its art and culture, I made a painting entitled *Deliver us from Evil* which explores the malocchio superstition. In it, I depicted various symbols with connotations of the Lucanian traditions of protecting

oneself from the wrath of the evil eye. I also painted four portraits, one for each of my grandparents, as I felt a deeper connection to them after visiting their homes. Understanding and embracing my culture has fueled my artistic ideas and has prompted me to explore the theme of heritage in art.

Ancestors of Basilicata have faced countless hardships including world wars, famines, natural disasters, and invasions. Throughout these trying times, their faith in God never faltered. It is precisely this faith that has laid the foundation to the Lucanian culture. When life failed these people, God provided them with courage, trust, and gratitude. It is these qualities that pulse through the veins of modern inhabitants and descendants of Basilicata as they remember the sacrifices of their ancestors and thank God for the truly important things in life: family and faith. This beautiful tradition of praising God has embedded itself in the roots of the culture, and as a result has bred some of the most humble and generous people in Italy. I see these qualities in all of my family members, but in particular, my Nonno Michele Liberatore. His life was simple; he didn't have much of an education and worked pretty much every single day, yet despite this, he was the happiest person I've ever known. The secret to his happiness was faith and gratitude; he understood that he didn't have everything, but what he did have was enough. Though our communication was hindered by the barrier of language, my Nonno Michele always managed to tell me that I was a very rich girl. I didn't completely understand this at a young age as I attributed wealth with things like big mansions and luxurious cars, neither of which my family had. As I grew older I realized he was right. I am extremely rich. I have the basic necessities I need to survive: I have the privilege of receiving an education and most importantly, I have a family that loves me and that I love in return. I thank God for my Nonno Michele and for all the amazing people in my family. Through faith that God would always be with them, the people of Basilicata have allowed such a beautifully wholesome culture to stay alive for so many years.

The preservation of the culture of Basilicata within my community is also apparent through the ancient art of storytelling. Most of our forefathers' lives seem the same: They worked tirelessly while living in Italy, moved to Canada for a life with more opportunity, and then worked tirelessly in the new country they now called home. However, when the people of the Lucanian community participate in the extraordinary art of storytelling, they learn about the sometimes funny, heartbreak, tragic, and always beautiful lives of their friends, neighbours, relatives, and ancestors. Though each of us has lead a different life, it is sharing the stories of our Lucanian lineage that unites us as a people and sparks in us a sense of wonder for our heritage and familial roots. For example, through storytelling, I was able to not only learn about the life of my Nonno Michele, but also about his neighbour who coincidentally, is the father of my elementary school principal. It is essentially through this ancient yet simple art of storytelling that each of

the aforementioned traits of our culture has survived so long and allowed us to celebrate our culture together as a community.

Through travel, traditions, art, faith, and storytelling, both my family and community have preserved and celebrated the Lucanian heritage. Throughout my eighteen years of life, the people making up these groups have taught me how truly important it is to honour the culture that we share. Because of the guidance of fellow Lucanians, I have realized that as the world changes and as people evolve along with it, holding onto the familiarity of culture and tradition is what allows us to understand an important part of who we are and who we will always be. When Lucanians celebrate their culture, not only do they celebrate the beautiful region and traditions of Basilicata, but they also celebrate all the ancestors that have lived their lives so that we may live ours today.