

Essay Submission

Basilicata Cultural Society of Canada Scholarship

Anthony Locilento Memorial Scholarship

Submitted By Lisa Bitacola

I am currently entering my third year of university at King's University College at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario. I am an Honours Specialization student of Psychology. After I complete my four year degree I plan to apply to universities in Canada to complete my PhD. There are many programs in psychology in the United States and abroad, but I would like to give back to my country through studying here and doing Canadian research. I have always had a love for working with children and feel called to becoming a Child Psychologist.

There were several experiences that have led me to my decision to become a Child Psychologist.

I started volunteering for my parish when I was twelve years old, taking on many leadership roles at our summer bible camp, confirmation groups, youth groups and church picnics. I was very shy throughout grade school, but these opportunities for leadership helped me grow into the person I am today. I thoroughly enjoyed working with young people, being a role model and learning from them as well. I spent countless time singing camp songs, making arts and crafts, playing games, skits and having long chats with the children. I connected very easily with the youth. At the time I didn't realize that these volunteer years were shaping my future, helping me realize that I have a gift for working with young people.

From a young age I have felt a call to work with the poor. When I was twelve I viewed a video about Haiti, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. It was that day that I realized I wanted to work with people and make a change in this world, no matter how big or small. I started volunteering with the Hearts Together for Haiti group in Windsor, packing bags for mission trips and fundraising to start schools for children who could not afford an education. Six years later the yearning to travel to Haiti was very much present. I had the privilege to travel with a group on an awareness trip there. I was overcome by the poverty, but at the same time inspired by their faith, hope and love. It was this trip, and another one a year later that I went on that got me on my way to working with people. I thought they I would be able to help the Haitians and do good work, but I believe that they did more for me than I could ever do for them. There are many missionaries in Haiti, but I believe they were missionaries to me. Returning home from this trip I had a new perspective on life. I knew I wanted to go into the helping field. I was not sure what I was meant to do, but I knew there would be a plan for me.

Between my first and second year of university I took a year off to volunteer. I wanted to get more experience in order to help direct me towards a degree that I would enjoy. I lived with a community in Altgeld Gardens, a housing project in Chicago, the poorest area in the city. I volunteered as a teacher assistant in a first grade classroom. I also made house visits to families in need, providing food, furniture and a listening ear. I was awakened to the reality of the poverty just five hours from my home town. Living amongst the poor opened my eyes to the violence of the area, the abuse of drugs and the innocence of children ripped away at such a young age. The poverty in this area was in a way more disturbing than that which I saw in Haiti. These people were suffering from

poverty of the soul, breakdown of the family and were caught in what seemed to be a never ending cycle. It was this year that motivated me to become a counsellor. I enjoyed being in the classroom, but it was not enough for me. I saw the individual need of each child. I wanted to listen to them and hear their story. I feel that I personally can make a difference in a child's life by working one on one with them in counselling. I want to help build resilience and capacity starting at a young age to give hope to children that experience hardship. I know a difference is possible. In Chicago I led a camp for thirty inner city children. They were tough kids, but I got through to them. I had some say to me during the camp "Miss Lisa, I have never had anyone say they believed in me before."

I hope to one day open my own practice and work as a university professor. A dream of mine is to start an afterschool program for disadvantaged young people to give them a place to grow in a safe environment. The income I will earn as a psychologist will enable me to put money into this project, as well as do pro bono work.

So today I am studying to be a counsellor. I would absolutely love to visit Basilicata and walk the streets that my dad grew up on, visit relatives that I have heard countless stories about but have not met, experience the beauty of the town and have a taste of wine and cheese from the region. My goal is to complete my degrees and then award myself at the end of it all by travelling to Italy. I would use this scholarship to help fund my tuition, to fulfill my dream of being a psychologist.

My dad was born in Bella, Potenza. When my Nonna was six months pregnant with my dad my Nonno died in a cave in on the farm. My dad, the only child at the time

grew up running the family Cantina with his Uncle Joe. Being from such a poor region, and belonging to a single family house they faced many challenges. Eight years after my dad was born my Nonna remarried and immigrated to Canada. They arrived at the shores of Halifax, Nova Scotia on May 14, 1964.

When I was in grade six my family took a trip to Eastern Canada. We visited the Pier 21 museum in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It tried to help the visitors live the experience of immigrating to Canada. When we first arrived we went through customs and received a passport. We viewed videos about the people from different countries that came over to Canada. I was absolutely moved by the experience because I was able to stand on the grounds that my family once stood on that lead them to where they are today. I have always been proud of my Italian heritage, but it was this museum that enriched my respect for my relatives and for my Basilicata background.

When my dad was twenty six years old he went back to visit his home town. He met some of his dad's friends. He could not believe how well they spoke of his father, telling him stories about how caring he was to everyone that walked through the doors of his Cantina. If someone needed a drink or a sandwich he would extend credit, but would never ask for money. His six week visit was like a part of his history being restored.

I have grown up hearing stories about how Basilicata is a poor region, especially since so many people have emigrated. Among the stories told was the richness of the people that lived there. The people believe that family is very important and being connected to each other is the centre of their life. In Canada it is usual to eat and run. It is nice to sneak away to the Italian tradition of gathering at my Nonna's on a Sunday

evening to not only share a meal with the family, but feast and enjoy each other's company. I especially love the family reunions when the whole family gets together, eats, plays cards and has a bocce ball tournament. I believe that the values I grew up with are because of my Basilicatan heritage.

Occasionally I will get together with my Nonna to cook everything from pasta, to soup. I try to learn as much as I can so I can pass on the traditions and recipes to my own children one day. I love when we make lots of food to send away with me to university, so I can have the comfort of home within seconds. When my parents come to visit me I can always count on my Nonna to stock them up with food to last a long time, that is, unless my roommates get to it.

I have always had a strong connection to being Italian, and a deep sense of pride. It seems that no matter where I go I can find an Italian and feel connected to them in some way. When I was a volunteer at World Youth Day in Germany there were over a million youth from around the world. I was at the subway station and there was a group of Italians there. Their hat said Bella, Italia. I was very excited about seeing them and I asked if they were from the city of Bella and they were. Unfortunately, the train came and they had to rush off. I was thrilled to meet someone from my dad's hometown. Who knows, Bella is a small town so we could have been related.

It has been a joy to write this essay. Having reflected on my heritage I have gained more awareness of my roots.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration. If I receive this bursary it will be so beneficial in helping me fund my education. I will honour Anthony Locilento's name in my actions.