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Basilicata Cultural Society of Canada
Scholarship Application

I made a decision this summer that would leave me standing in front of the wrought iron gates of the Italian consulate on a summer afternoon on my day off work. Still panting from the uphill trek up Drummond Street, my eyes caught glimpse of the back end of what must have been the only Alfa Romeo in the city. I had come to inquire into the process needed to obtain my Italian citizenship. I was looking forward to solidifying my own identity as an Italian and having it on paper, legitimate and tangible. More importantly, becoming an Italian citizen had become a recent fascination due in part to the endless possibilities and potential that it allowed for, as well as for the symbolic sense of belonging and freedom it would bring. The desire to obtain a citizenship was much less a product of need and convenience than it was a want to obtain a physical manifestation of my own connectedness with a place I perceived as a source of serenity and inspiration. My entire family is from Italy, and I was adamant to not fall victim to the cultural dilution that represents the fate of many immigrants to North America. I associated obtaining a citizenship with refuting conformity and as a fierce embrace of the place I had stemmed from. It was only surprising that the notion of becoming a citizen had not occurred to me until my twentieth year.

I was greeted at the entrance of the consulate by the security guard standing watch over the metal detector. He was an older man who promptly inquired as to where my family was from, and instantly became more helpful when he mentioned that members of his own family originated from Basilicata. When informed of the reason for my visit, he warned of how even he, as an employee of the consulate and approaching retirement age, had never been able to obtain his own Italian citizenship by reason of not meeting the eligibility criteria. Unfazed, I walked through the metal detector into the entrance hall of the consulate. I sat down in a sunlight-drenched room, every minute scratch and blemish in the golden hardwood floors clearly visible.

My name was called, and I was soon speaking to an advisor through a narrow hole in a glass divider, an odd security feature that stood out in contrast to the warm, welcoming nature of the rest of the edifice. I was informed of the eligibility criteria needed to obtain the documentation I had set out for. Given that neither of my parents had held a valid Italian citizenship at the time of my birth, I was not a candidate for a citizenship. The security guard gave me a consoling shrug on my way out.

After a few short moments of disappointment, I felt oddly humbled and at peace following this curt, unusual experience. I am an adamant believer that life provides us with the experiences that we need the most in every particular moment, and despite initially failing to see the role of this minor failure in the grand scheme of things, I assured myself that this event would serve a vital purpose. Making my way back around the iron gates and stealing one final glance at the glimmering curves of the Alfa Romeo, I realized that despite not meeting the legal eligibility criteria, I was rendered no less Italian from the experience. I was perhaps even no less Italian than the smiling security officer dutifully guarding the metal detector at the doors of the Italian Consulate. I knew

then that a person's identity as an Italian was not defined by documentation, but by his or her desire to identify him or herself as such.

Having reaffirmed my self-conception as an Italian despite the rejection from the consulate, I spent time over the summer contemplating my identity as an Italian, as well as the impact it had on me growing up. I have always been fascinated by the way my grandparents have done far more than just move to another continent. They integrated seamlessly into a society that initially wanted nothing to do with them. They contributed and aided the development of their community on countless levels, relying on their Italian friends and family for support when necessary. They are exemplary citizens, and have adapted to the circumstances forced upon them without sacrificing who they are as human beings. With two foreign languages thrust upon them, the challenges that lay ahead must have left them frustrated and depleted at times when every aspect of the new life they had chosen seemed to be rooting for them to fail. Despite the challenges they faced, they chose to take action and overcome the structural barriers they had been presented with, doing so with dignity and pride.

I was three years old the last time I set foot in Italy, and, naturally, I have no recollection of the visit. I plan to apply to an exchange program with McGill University that would allow me to study at an Italian school. The bursary funds would allow me to extend my visit, and greatly reduce the burden of travel and living expenses while I am there. Experiencing the culture and practicing the language firsthand would be an immeasurably powerful spiritual and educational experience that I would value for years to come.

Thank you for your consideration.