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September 1, 2011

Basilicata Cultural Society of Canada Scholarship Essay

As I sit in my parent's kitchen, cooking *sugo* following my Nonna's beloved family recipe, I can't help but think about how far my family has come from the little town of Matera, Basilicata and the way our Lucano culture has travelled right along with us. My parents recently moved to the States for my mom's job and while I'm here for a short visit, I've spent most of the summer living with my nonni in Newmarket, Ontario. Because I haven't had easy access to a car and all of my friends still live in my old neighbourhood, I've spent a lot of time this summer at home with my Nonno and Nonna... and I've had an amazing time. I've learned so much about my family's history, our roots in Basilicata, and all of the traditions my nonni have brought with them from Italy.

My nonni, Bruna and Emmanuele Moliterni, emigrated from Matera in May of 1957, with their two young boys and my father only three months from birth. Though they came from Italy for a better life, things were never exactly easy for them. They struggled to find a home because nobody wanted to rent to a family with children; when they finally moved in with a relative they had no furniture or beds, just two mattresses for the floor. My nonno struggled to find a secure job because of the language barrier and they had very little to eat. My nonno says he remembers taking chicken skin sandwiches to work because they could only afford a little bit of meat (like the back of a chicken) and that was for dinner. Four years after they arrived though they had enough money to buy their first house and welcomed another baby boy.

My nonni were able to do this through their two main principles of saving and working hard. I see the way they still save their money to this day so that they'll be able to leave some behind for their *figli* and *nipoti*. A chronic saver, my nonna adds water to her dish detergent, cooks (delicious) soups out of leftovers, and makes stale bread even better than it was fresh by adding a 'condite' (as we say) of *l'olio, l'oregano, il formaggio, i capperi*, and whatever else happens to be in the fridge or cantina. My nonna continues to work away each and every day at an amazing pace. At age 90, my nonno isn't exactly busy all day long but after working as hard as he did for his entire life, he's more than earned the time to relax.

My nonno, Emmanuele Moliterni, was only able to finish school up to grade 5 before he was pulled out to work. He was barely ten years old when he joined his brothers and father on their week-long trips away from home to work on a rented piece of farmland, four hours away by wagon. When I asked my Nonno "*Che hai fatto per divertirti? Per ridere?*" he responded with "*Quasi niente...Parlavamo come stiamo parlando adesso.*" He and his brothers used to sit around the campfire and talk or they'd listen to their dad tell stories, many of the same stories my nonno told his own kids. This summer, I've heard some pretty amazing and surreal stories myself about nonno and nonna's lives in Matera. For instance, the time my nonna met a soldier in town who showed up at her windowsill a few nights later to serenade her with a band of musicians (I seriously thought that only ever happened in movies). But my nonni have passed on more than just their stories; they've passed on a whole slew of Lucano traditions.

This summer, I've learned to pick vegetables, like arugula and green onions, from my nonni's garden. I've watched my nonna make her famous sugo enough times to semi-

successfully copy it myself. I've learned more Italian (and some of the Materese dialect) this summer than I could ever speak before, even after years of Italian lessons and practicing with relatives, because we've had to speak and communicate with each other everyday. I've picked up weird phrases like "guaglion'!" and "ba ba ba ba ba," which I'm hoping is Materese, because if not, then I have no idea where my nonni got it from. We've spent a lot of time sitting around the kitchen table over food, talking. I've just enjoyed spending time with them, even doing little things like taking my nonno to the grocery store or the bank (where, according to him, everyone who works there is a friend). My nonni and I have been close my entire life; they were living with us when I first came home from the hospital and practically helped raise me (my nonno taught me to count and to write numbers, among other things; my nonna taught me... to eat), but after this summer I feel closer to them and my Materanno heritage than ever before.

I've been to Matera once before with my parents and brother on a cross-Italy trip and it truly stood out to me as one of my favourite places in the world. My dad's family took us in like they had known us their entire lives. They were so generous, kind, and welcoming that I felt like I was staying with my own family. They threw us a huge party at a restaurant with all of the Moliterni's in Matera, and more food courses than I could count. They brought us to family landmarks like the apartment my Nonno grew up in, the gelato shop my dad's cousin owns, and another cousin's banquet hall. We saw Il Sasso, an amazing ancient city built into the caves and an official UNESCO site (they even filmed *Passion of the Christ* there!). Finally, and most significantly, I met my Nonno's last living brother, Antonio, who seemed at the time to essentially be a taller, skinnier version of my grandfather. When we were there we filmed a video for my Nonno with

special messages from his family and a long speech from his brother. This was the first time my Nonno had seen his brother in years and I know he appreciated it greatly. My dream would be to one day take my nonni back to Matera with me (my nonna is always talking about how much she misses her hometown) but I don't know if it will ever be possible considering their age now. If nothing else, I'd love to return one day to pay tribute to my nonni, and visit the family landmarks with the new perspective I have on the city since hearing more of their stories.

Storytelling has always been an important aspect of my nonni's life and Lucano culture and it's definitely in my blood too. This September I will be starting my second year at Ryerson University, studying Radio and Television Arts. Like many great Italians before me (Fellini, Scorsese, Leone, the list goes on) I hope to one day work as a director and filmmaker who shares the stories of people from all over the world. A story I would love to focus on, perhaps more than any other, would be one based upon my nonni's lives in Basilicata and their immigration to Canada. It will probably only come years from now, long after my nonno and nonna are gone, but it'll be my way to remember them, remember their sacrifices and their lives, and the incredibly different but wonderful time period and place that they came from. But before I can do any of that, I of course have to finish school.

Getting a good education has probably been the idea my nonni have stressed to me more than anything else in my life, coming second only to having faith in God. My nonni always regretted being unable to finish school and wanted better for their kids and grandchildren, so I know it would make them proud to know that their heritage and Lucano culture could help me pay for university. Should I be awarded with the

scholarship, the money would go towards paying for tuition and rent as I'll be moving downtown in September to a student residence since my parents are living in the States. I want to thank the Basilicata Cultural Society of Canada for this opportunity; not only for the scholarship, but for offering me a reason to reflect on and think about my Lucano roots and my nonni's lives. I had never really thought about it before, but to me, Matera represents everything that my nonno and nonna represent: hard work, love of family and life, generosity, modesty, and faith. Through a career in media and film, I hope to one day pass on everything I know and love about my nonni and Basilicata to my own kids and the world as well.