Italian America®

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The Last Word

BY MILES RYAN FISHER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, *ITALIAN AMERICA* MAGAZINE

Many years ago, when my sister was going through a difficult time in her life, she talked about it with our grandfather, who was always a great listener with an even-keeled perspective and a lifetime of first-generation experience. He offered her the following words: "It doesn't get darker than midnight."

One of my midnights occurred in high school on the varsity baseball field. After years of playing second base, earning my position on every school team, I encountered a coach who, for some unknown reason, berated me. Denigrated me. Pushed me to the point that I walked off the high school field, never to return.

I quit the team in early spring of my junior year and spent time after school continuing to take swings in my backyard, hitting my way through midnight. One day, a close friend of mine, Rob, mentioned that he planned to drive to a music store after school because he wanted to buy a guitar. I shrugged and told him I'd go for the ride. After all, spending time with a good friend was important, and so I rode with Rob to the music store, riding my way through midnight.

While Rob was checking out guitars, I roamed the store until a guitar caught my eye—a used black Epiphone SG. Uncharacteristically, I bought it on impulse and brought it home. Rob and I were going to learn guitar together, I decided. With him, I spent many hours learning guitar, playing my way through midnight.

I never stopped playing—guitar *or* baseball—through college or in all the years since I graduated. Then I first saw my future wife in Rome, as she stood on stage and sang pitch-perfect notes to Dolly Parton's "Jolene." Of course, at that moment I didn't think at all about how my guitar could complement her—I simply wanted to meet her. When we met, midnight was quickly upon us, but we stayed together, sitting across from the Borghese Gardens until the sun began to rise.

As we got to know each other, we began playing songs—even writing our own songs—together. And once we started writing our own songs, we realized it was time for us to come up with a band name. So we thought and thought. And we ended up returning to that first night together, sitting across from the Borghese Gardens until the sun began to rise.

We decided to name our band Borghese Sunrise.

And now I smile, thinking about the words of my grandfather, the influence of my dear friend, and the first moment I laid eyes on my beautiful wife. Because of my midnight, I learned to do something—play guitar—that I never would have learned to do. And on the other side of that midnight was a sunrise. A Borghese Sunrise.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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I recently came across some old essays that I'd written for college applications, and it was interesting to read my responses to the prompts and then consider how I'd respond to them today. I never had to answer one of the more common questions: If there was anybody you could meet in history, who would it be and why.

I don't know what my response would have been as a high school student, but I do know what my response would be now. I would choose to meet Amalia DiPalma.

Amalia was born in the town of Terracina, along the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea almost equidistant between Rome and Naples. It was 1878, and according to lore, Amalia was born into a particular social standing, one that held great importance in that day and age.

As she grew older, she began to take notice of a young man—a gardener on the grounds of her family's estate. His name was Salvatore Molella, and he was five years older than Amalia.

Feelings began to grow between the two—feelings that their disparate social standings told Amalia to ignore, for she was above a mere gardener and in lowering herself to Salvatore's level she would have to relinquish her standing in society.

But Amalia chose love.

She eloped with Salvatore, marrying him when she was in her late teens. At 20, she bore their first child, Christina. Then two years later, Bianca. Two years after that, in 1902, she had Ermanna. Two years after that, Elda.

The choice that she made to be with Salvatore took them and their four daughters to America, and it was there that they had five more children—three boys and two girls. Eventually, Amalia would meet her granddaughter, Clara, who was born in 1920 to Ermanna.

Clara was my grandmother.

Amalia died when Clara was 16. Clara must have remembered her grandmother, but I never asked her about the woman who chose love above all. The older I become, the more I find myself in awe of the courage that Amalia must have had to make this decision and the more I yearn to know what made her choose love and, in doing so, shed the skin of her social standing.

But, of course, I will never know her. I will never be able to meet her or speak with her or ask her questions. Still, there is one Amalia that I may be able to meet—one that hasn't even been conceived. Perhaps one day, life will bless me with a daughter who can carry on her great-great-grandmother's name.

And although I will never be able to know the Amalia of the past, I'll have the good fortune of knowing another Amalia. The Amalia of the future.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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When my grandfather died, a decade after my grandmother, I was comforted in knowing that I hadn't left any questions unasked. I'd been blessed with time—many years of adulthood—in which I could ask anything that came to mind. And in return, he'd been blessed with time—many years of old age—in which he could share anything he wanted to about his life and our family history.

And share, he did. Whenever I visited him and it was just the two of us, he would tell me things that he hadn't shared with anyone. Maybe it was because of our close relationship. Maybe it was because I was young enough to be removed from those affected. But with me, he felt comfortable revealing things that could have very well been kept secret—things that exist in the corners of every family's history. Everything he shared would have been lost upon his final breath.

Still, I wondered what he may not have shared—stories or explanations that he didn't feel were important or that he simply forgot. More so, I wondered what it would be that *I* would one day realize I *wished* I'd asked him and didn't.

Then one day, it appeared. I'd found an article online about my great-grandmother—my grandmother's mother—Erma Cicchetti. She'd been a trailblazer of sorts, a female architect back in the 1940s and 50s, when few architects were women. She designed 35 houses in Ithaca, New York, ones that—like my grandparents' house—were known for their unique layout. No two were the same design. She also supervised the construction sites and would even cook Italian dinners for the crews—many of them Italian immigrants like she was.

Then I read the sentence: "Although she was not trained as an architect, Cicchetti had a natural eye for design."

I thought about what my mom once told me—that Erma had only an eighth-grade education. That's when I wondered the obvious: How did she manage to become an *architect* with an *eighth-grade education*? Then I wondered the other obvious: How did it *not* occur to me to ask this?

Now it was too late—I was too late—to ask my grandfather, the last person who would have known the answer.

When I realized this, a sadness sank in for what was lost—answers to questions such as this that would continue to surface. Certainly, there would be more. But then I thought of all my grandfather was able—and willing—to tell me when he was still alive. And amidst the sadness, I felt grateful for all the answers he gave me, especially to questions I would have never known to ask.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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I stood at home plate and hit ground balls to the eleven-year-old shortstop that I coached. He fielded them and tossed them to his father, who stood beside me. It was after our team practice had ended that Grant asked me if I could stay to hit him more grounders, and I was happy to do so. Any player who asked for extra practice was a player I loved to help. One after the other, I hit and he fielded.

"So who do you think gives up first?" I asked his dad. "Me or Grant?"

"To be honest, Miles," he said, "I think you do."

I thought for a moment, then hit another grounder to Grant as dusk set in. "You know," I said, "I think the real answer is the sun."

It wasn't by pure talent or luck that I could unfailingly hit Grant one ground ball after another at just the right speed and in just the right places where he could—and sometimes couldn't—reach them. It was because I shared his passion for baseball and had parents who always encouraged it. They never pressured me or had any specific expectations as to where my ability would lead me. They simply added their energy to the energy I already had.

My dad even recruited his best friend, Jim, a big man with a gentle voice and witty sense of humor, to come over to our house on a ninety-degree day and help him handle the heavy-duty auger we'd rented. In the midday sun, we drilled four-foot holes into the earth so that we could erect sixteen-foot posts that would hold up the net for a batting cage. It was in that batting cage that I spent many evenings hitting until the sun went down and it became too difficult to see the ball.

More than a decade later, after I'd been out of college for some time, Jim was battling cancer in a fight he wasn't going to win. I sent him a letter in which I wrote about the day he helped build the batting cage where I'd taken hundreds of thousands of swings. I told him how much it meant to me that he supported my passion for baseball—a passion I still have to this day.

It wasn't until after Jim passed that I started coaching little guys, hitting just the right infield and outfield practice to them, which isn't an easy thing to do. But I could do it, time after time, without error, only because others like Jim cared about helping me grow.

And there I was, years after he'd passed, using an ability that he'd had a hand in developing to hit one ground ball after another to a determined little ballplayer—until the sun finally gave up.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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A few years ago, when I was back home in Horsham, Pennsylvania, my parents wanted me to go through some old U.S. Savings Bonds, ones that were given to me for various occasions in my life—my birth, my first communion, my high school graduation. They were old paper bonds stuffed in a purple money-holder envelope that said "A Gift For You … A Share in America."

As I opened the flap of the envelope, I saw written on the inside "A United States Savings Bond for _Miles Ryan Fisher_ from _Albert Cicchetti_." The second name took me a moment to recognize because it wasn't a name I expected to see.

My great-grandfather.

I removed the bonds from the envelope and examined each one. Sure enough, there was a bond with Dwight D. Eisenhower's picture on it dated August 11, 1981, from Tompkins County Trust Co. in Ithaca, New York.

My great-grandfather must have given me this bond when I was born, I thought.

While I'd always known that Albert, or "Papa with the Hat" as he was called, was the only great-grandparent who met me—he passed when I was one—I didn't know that something like this existed. Now, here in my hand, was a U.S. Savings Bond that he'd given me when I was born. And it being several decades later, the bond had long surpassed its maturity date and no longer earned interest.

I thought about how my great-grandfather had handed my parents the bond for me, knowing that he'd never see the day of that bond's maturity. Yet, he knew that one day, it would be a hand that helped me in the future. His hand.

Then it occurred to me: Redeeming it would mean surrendering the paper bond, handing it over to a bank that would honor it on behalf of the U.S. Treasury and give me the amount it was now worth.

But, I thought, *what if the paper bond itself is worth more to me than the money I'd receive for it?*

It was certainly something that wouldn't have crossed the mind of a man who'd left L'Aquila, Abruzzo, with nothing more than a suitcase and crossed the Atlantic never to see his family again. Every penny would matter to a man who'd experienced that, and he certainly wouldn't have left a matured bond sit unredeemed.

Then I considered that maybe there was an even greater meaning that he may not have imagined. Maybe his wish for my future would be realized if I'm fortunate enough to *never* have to redeem the bond. Maybe his wish should continue into a future that outlives me as well. Maybe the bond can pass from generation to generation, with the hope that it never has to be redeemed.

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"Well *that's* a stupid title," a lady said as she looked at an article that was standing upright in a hard plastic holder on a table.

Like me, the lady was at the Blood Donor Center in Children's National Hospital in Washington, D.C., to donate a pint of blood. The article she began reading was about how much that pint could be worth—as much as $1,200. It also described the process behind the buying and selling of donated blood. At Children's Hospital, donated blood goes directly to the children. When they experience a shortage, they have to purchase pints from outside suppliers.

I let the lady read the article without telling her that I, too, didn't care for the title. I didn't care for the article's ending, either. The publication's editor had changed the article, which I had written, in ways I'd wished he hadn't, but I shrugged it off because I knew the information in it was more important than the title or the ending.

After the article was published, I received an email that is one of the most rewarding responses I've ever received to something I've written. It simply said, "Thank you for your article. I don't live in D.C. but visit frequently and have spent much time at Children's. Sadly, my baby granddaughter has needed to be there often. You have given me a way that I can directly return the favor."

With such a response as this, I understood exactly why Peter Prudente—our *High Profile* for this issue—was so enthusiastic about sharing his story. It isn't for personal recognition. It's to spur positive action. Reading stories like his naturally inspires us all to be just a little bit better by doing just a little bit more. And like he said, it doesn't require a donating kidney to do so.

As I wrote Peter's story, I told my wife, Evelyn, about it, and we started discussing ways in which we could do more. Together, we came up with an idea—instead of giving each other Christmas gifts, we would donate the money we would've spent on them to others in dire need.

So we started formulating our Christmas plans. We bought a few used records (The Grass Roots, Herman's Hermits, The Stranglers). We bought ingredients to make mulled wine (Merlot, cloves, cinnamon sticks, oranges). And, while listening to records and drinking warm wine, we searched online for others in need of help. This was how we spent our first Christmas as a married couple.

By sharing his story, Peter inspired us to spend our Christmas evening giving to others. It didn't require us to donate a kidney—or even compromise the title of an article. And in return, we created a Christmas memory that will give back to us for the rest of our lives.

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A couple of months ago, a teammate of mine from my adult baseball league sent me an old article about the Italian groundskeeper who grew tomatoes at the Baltimore Orioles' old Memorial Stadium. The story got us talking about our hobbies beyond baseball. He mentioned how he'd seemed to inherit the gardening gene from his late Italian grandfather, which prompted me to tell him that it wasn't until years after I'd left home—and the homecooked meals my mom made—that I grew interested in cooking.

It took many cans of pasta through my college and post-college years before I began learning some very basic recipes. Then I graduated to more involved recipes, and I started asking my mom for advice. I can still hear the surprise in her voice when I began asking questions about cooking and her recipes. "But you never cared about this before," she said.

And it was true. All of the homecooked meals I grew up eating, and I never once stood in the kitchen to learn how they were actually made. I speculated to my teammate that there may be a gene—either inherited at birth or imparted when you're young—that stays planted inside of you until you're old enough for it to sprout. Fortunately for me, my mom, who baked professionally when I was young, has her recipes written down so they would never be lost to her children.

Much to my dad's surprise, she sent me a few of those recipes—secret ones that she never shared with anyone. Through many trials in the kitchen, I finally managed to perfect the recipes. I began attempting all sorts of recipes, and with the ones that I thought were worth making again, I began compiling a recipe file of my own.

Then, a few years ago, I was invited to a private dinner event that raised money for Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind. So I decided, for the event, I would make one of my mom's secret dessert recipes—the one I liked best: her peach torte. At the dinner, the owner of a well-known Italian restaurant simply couldn't get enough of the dessert and wanted to know the recipe.

"The joy of cooking is sharing the recipes," the owner said.

Of course, I politely declined. I knew that I could never share one of my mom's secret recipes with anyone other than my wife.

But I also know that somewhere, hidden from the outside world, I'll keep the recipe written down for our children to have when their own cooking gene surfaces. Between my wife and me and our love for homecooked meals, cooking will certainly be in our children's blood. And awaiting them will be some secret recipes that are meant to stay in the family.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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The Last Word

BY MILES RYAN FISHER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, *ITALIAN AMERICA* MAGAZINE

When I walked into the reception after my grandfather's funeral, I saw an old friend of his that I hadn't seen in perhaps two decades: Benny Campagnolo. He was in his early 90s, and I was told that his mind was to the point where he wasn't always lucid.

I remembered Benny from the times my grandparents would take me to his restaurant—*Roma Pizzeria*—for dinner when I was young. But of course, their story went back much further than that, long before I was born. Benny had emigrated from Italy in his twenties during the post-World War II years and started as a dishwasher at my grandfather's restaurant, the Lehigh Valley House. As my grandfather did with all the Italian immigrants he hired, he helped Benny work his way up. He even eventually helped Benny start his own restaurant, the very one my grandparents always took me to.

I introduced myself to Benny, and it wasn't clear that he remembered me. Perhaps he remembered *of* me, that I was Joe and Clara Daino's grandson. He began talking to me, his Italian accent still so strong that I had to listen intently to understand him. As I did, I realized he was telling me something about my grandfather that I didn't know—something that nobody in my whole family knew.

In the middle of the day, Benny said, my grandfather would steal him away from work and take him to the local airfield, where he and my grandfather would climb into a plane. Apparently, my grandfather missed flying the P-47s he'd flown during World War II so much that he would sneak off during the workday to take to the air—and made Benny accompany him.

"I was so scared!" Benny exclaimed. After all, he'd traveled from Italy by boat and had never before been on a plane.

"He was an older brother to me," Benny said. Then he started to cry. The older biological brother he once had, he told me, had died in the war.

I always knew that my grandfather had taken his fellow *paesani* under his wing. It was something that many Italians did for those who immigrated after they did. What I hadn't known was that, with Benny, my grandfather assumed the role of the older brother that Benny had lost.

Yet what struck me more than this revelation was the image of my grandfather slipping off to the airfield with Benny, flying high above the town of Ithaca without my grandmother ever finding out. It was this—a hidden memory preserved by an aging mind—that was the greatest comfort someone could have given me on the day my grandfather was laid to rest.

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My grandmother had all her father's affairs in order. She'd helped him get a passport, booked him a plane ticket, and contacted relatives in Italy—the country he'd left by himself with nothing more than a suitcase when he was just 16 years old. Now it was 1967 and he was 70 years old, making his first trip back to L'Aquila, the town where he was raised. The very day he was to leave, he told my grandmother that he wasn't going. Perhaps it was because the land he'd come from felt so foreign to him now, or maybe he was nervous about flying or reuniting with relatives he wouldn't recognize. Whatever the reason, my great-grandfather was firm about it. He was never going to return.

My grandmother and grandfather—who were both born in Ithaca, New York—never traveled to Italy, either. It wasn't until their daughter—my mother—went to Venice, Florence, and Rome on her honeymoon that someone in our family returned to the land we'd come from. Forty-seven years after my parents' honeymoon, I met my future wife, Evelyn, in Rome and then proposed to her in Calabria two years later.

Of course, my travels to Italy don't carry the gravity that my great-grandfather felt in preparation for the trip he didn't take. I'm not returning to the land where I was born—I'm returning to the land where *he* was born. That's significant to me. After all, he was the only great-grandparent who held me as a baby. But with each new generation, the distance between them and our ancestors who came from Italy will continue to widen.

But now, having met my wife in Rome and, more so, having proposed to her at her olive tree that we'll keep for the rest of our lives, I've created a new connection to Italy that our future children will always have and hold close. One day, we'll take them to their mom's olive tree, and they'll get to stand in the same spot where their dad proposed and their mom said *yes*. They'll be able to see their mom's name still on that tree, which will become a symbol not just of their parents' love, but also of their own existence.

Maybe one day, our children will take their own children there, who will, in turn, take their own children there. Maybe one day, our great-grandchildren will stand at Evelyn's olive tree and hear the words: "This is where your great-grandfather proposed to your great-grandmother."

And when that day comes, our great-grandchildren will feel a connection to Italy that goes back much further than Evelyn and me.

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The story of Monongah does not stand alone. It does, however, stand as one of the most horrific tragedies to befall blue collar workers before labor laws were established to protect them. Many of these blue collar workers were immigrants. Many of these immigrants were Italian. Many of these Italians were our ancestors. They worked in industries before safety and health regulations were developed, before companies were made to care about their workers, before our government and society valued lives over production.

They died not just in coal mines, but also in factories and on railroads and docks and construction sites. Perhaps one of the most poignant pieces about how workers like our ancestors were treated was *Christ in Concrete* by Pietro di Donato, an Italian immigrant bricklayer who managed to write a penetrating novel about the construction industry despite having no more than a seventh grade education.

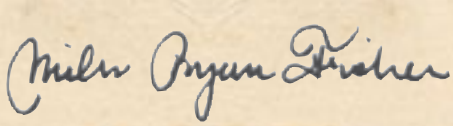
Stories like his and that of Monongah must be told to all future generations so they can understand the sacrifices that were made in order to give us the opportunities—and *laws*—that we have today. Of course, it's with this sentiment that we keep our ancestors' spirit alive, by learning about and appreciating the sacrifices they made to give us—and society at large—the laws and protection that we are afforded. But many lives were lost in this process.

Though Monongah led to what is considered the first Father's Day in our country, remembering these workers, and workers from all industries during the time of early industrialization, makes me reflect on another holiday: Labor Day.

While the origin of Labor Day, and to a certain extent the reason we celebrate it, has grown hazy, what remains clear are the working conditions—and the holidays it includes—that we now enjoy. Perhaps it is time for our Labor Day to be more focused on honoring the workers who brought us these conditions that we, to a certain degree, take for granted.

Maybe this day should shine a more luminous annual light on the workers who didn't have holidays or sick days, worker's compensation or unemployment benefits, proper safety equipment or safety precautions, fair wages or reasonable workdays. Maybe Labor Day should pay homage to the workers—ones like our ancestors—whose perseverance brought us the working conditions we enjoy today.

After all, if it weren't for them, we wouldn't even know what a weekend is.



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Envelopes flooded the doorstep of OSDIA's National Headquarters. It was Monday morning, August 31, 2016, and the post office had delivered the weekend's mail, a pile that appeared more like a full week's worth of letters. Through the weeks that followed, the stacks of mail didn't subside. Day after day, our postman, Troy, arrived with a mountain of mail so high that he had to carry it with two hands. We were inundated with support.

The support wasn't for us, however. In fact, we didn't know exactly who the support was for or what specific project it would eventually go toward. All we knew was that the Central Italy earthquake had struck, and the land of our ancestors needed help. Now, three years later, we can see the concrete product of that support: a brand new school that will play a critical role in the future of the children who attend it.

It brings to mind the teachers I've had through my lifetime of many classrooms. Mrs. Snarr, Mrs. Reynolds, Mrs. Bryan, Miss Coulton, Mr. Bryan, and Mrs. Cottrill through kindergarten and elementary school. Every one of them worked to lay the foundation that future teachers would build on. Mr. LaGrotte, Mrs. Goffman, and Mrs. Lang through middle school. They taught me more complex sentence structures and helped expand my writing ability. And if it weren't for them, then Ms. Farr couldn't have invoked my passion for writing in high school. Professor Viramontes couldn't have patiently mentored me in her writing courses in college. Elly Williams couldn't have brought depth to my understanding of the craft and challenged me to make my writing as polished as it could be in grad school.

As I look back on the effort it took—all the hours of instruction, all the care that those hours required—for these men and women to help me continually build upon what I'd learned, it reminds me of the proverb, *It takes a village to raise a child*. And judging by my own life, I can say that yes, it certainly does take a village.

So in looking at pictures of the colorful classrooms at Muccia's brand new school and envisioning all the young students who will sit there eager to learn, I imagine the tremendous amount of effort that will go into raising each one of them. And while that work will be on the shoulders of several teachers, I smile at the pride I feel in the fact that I—along with so many other sons and daughters of Italy who contributed to the mountain of those donations—had a hand in building that school.

While it certainly takes a village to raise a child, it also takes many hands to build a school. And this school was built with the helping hands of many sons and many daughters of Italian immigrants.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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I was fairly old—in my twenties—the first time my mom began telling me about the discrimination she faced while she was growing up in upstate New York during the post-World War II years. She spoke about a time in seventh grade when her classmates openly mocked her for being Italian. As my mom told the story, she grew shaken to the point that she couldn't finish. Reliving the memory was too painful for her.

It wasn't until I'd been in this job for a couple of years that she finally revisited that day in the classroom and finished telling me about it. During French class, when her teacher indicated Italy on a map, her classmates started pointing at her and laughing. The ridicule was so blatant that it prompted the teacher to pull my mom from class. She tried to defuse the hurtful words by explaining that—from Michelangelo to Leonardo da Vinci—Italians had contributed much to the world. Still, this could only do so much to combat the insults and instill pride in a vulnerable twelve-year-old girl.

Sixty years later, my mom still couldn't relate the story without it bringing her to tears—the experience remaining that vivid in her memory. As she finished recounting it, I wrapped her in a hug.

"It's fine," my mom said. "It's fine."

"No," I said as I continued holding her, "it's not." My own reaction took me aback, as it's never been part of my nature to deny reassurance that everything is and will be fine.

This is the lasting power that prejudice has—that, after sixty years of experiencing it, my mom couldn't talk about it without becoming emotional; that, though I'd never experienced anything like it myself, watching my mom relive it affected me enough to refuse that everything was now fine. That any experience like hers was, is, and will ever be fine.

This is why the memorial statue that will be constructed and placed in New Orleans to recognize the lynching of eleven Italian immigrants is much larger than a single event. It educates younger generations about the prejudice that Italians experienced upon immigrating to the United States. And in recognizing one of the most brutal moments of prejudice against Italians, it represents *every* prejudice—no matter how seemingly small—that Italians faced.

It represents the time when a young girl was disparaged by her classmates simply for having an Italian last name.

So, as I make my donation toward the memorial statue, I do so for my mom, who endured prejudice for being Italian and continues to hold her head high with Italian pride.

Miles Ryan Fisher

See page 10 for more information about how you donate to the New Orleans memorial statue.

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I've always been a light eater, the kind of person who grazes his way through the day. When I was little, this habit exasperated my grandmother, Clara, a diminutive *nonna* who would make sure you saw things her way. But she couldn't reason with a little boy who left half his dinner on his plate. That wasn't what exasperated her, though. What exasperated her was when she would find me in the kitchen less than an hour after the large meal she'd cooked, nibbling on something—maybe even the fresh leftovers stored in the refrigerator.

As I've grown older, these eating habits have followed me. I've opted for smaller portions and lighter foods over larger, heavier ones. Quite naturally, I've gravitated toward a more Mediterranean diet—one focused more on pasta and vegetables, fish and cheese, leaner types of meat and olive oil … lots and lots of olive oil.

When I visited Italy for the first time, I was surprised to discover just how much smaller and lighter their portions are compared to those served in the United States. For me, however, they were perfect. I'd finally found a place that suited my eating habits—and it just so happened to be in the land where my grandmother's Abruzzese father and Campanian mother were born.

When I returned from Italy, I felt emboldened. Smaller portions, lighter foods—this was how *Italy* eats! The more I read about their eating habits, the more I learned just how healthy these habits are. Then recently, the US News and World Report declared the Mediterranean diet to be 2019's best overall diet. So it's no surprise that many of the world's centenarians live in Italy and consume a Mediterranean diet.

Armed with this knowledge, I wish my grandmother were still alive so that I could make her see things *my* way. I imagine myself back in Ithaca, New York, where I went to college. I imagine sitting in my grandparents' kitchen as she served me a plate of her chicken Marsala. I imagine saying, "You see, Mom-Mom? How I ate as a little boy is a *healthier* way of eating." And then with gusto I would declare that our country needs to do a better job of what it does well—taking the best of what every culture has to offer and adopting it as its own. "We need to eat more like Italy!"

I'm sure she'd listen while making sure that I finished an entire plate of her chicken Marsala. She'd make a few subtle noises, indicating that maybe she didn't *entirely* agree with my perspective while formulating her response.

Then, once I was finished talking and clearly full from her cooking, she'd get a concerned look on her face and say, "But don't you want dessert?"

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The story of how a trip to Italy gave Carrie Bennett her life back is a remarkable testament to why Italy's healthcare system is ranked second in the world and the strides it makes to treat even the least known conditions. After all, who has heard of Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS)? Unfortunately, the very reason I noticed this story is one that is all too familiar to me.

My best friend has suffered from CRPS for more than a decade. He has been bedridden for most of those years, the pain having spread throughout his body and rendered him immobile. Over the years, he's undergone many radical treatments, including a ketamine-induced coma in Monter-rey, Mexico. Life has been so unbearable for him that, like Carrie, he's willing to try anything to get better.

I've witnessed his pain and how it has affected his life and that of his family. I've watched as time passes him by. I've watched as some of his friendships do, too. Life continues, and friends embark on new jour-neys—ones that don't include him. A few of his old friends remain, and of these old friends, I am the constant. The friend he can always count on. The friend who will always be there for him.

After all, he and I have known each other since our first day of nursery school when we were three years old. As he puts it, we've known each other since before we knew ourselves. And he's right. We've known each other since before our earliest memories. To abandon him would be to abandon where I come from, and with that, lose someone who cared about me for as long as I can remember.

I've noticed that it's this same sort of mindset that draws us to learn about our ancestors. We seek out our family history to discover where we came from and show us those who cared about us before we were even born, those who endured hardship and struggle to bring us more opportunity in life.

Understanding the value of this is something that comes with age. When we're young, we're not as concerned with where we come from. After all, it's hard to appreciate where we come from if we ourselves haven't been here that long. But as we age, we begin to value history—which naturally beckons us to learn about our ancestors—in a way that we couldn't when we were young. Because as we age, our own history develops.

This comes out every time I talk about spending time with Justin, and others tend to say something that I casually brush aside.

"You're a really great friend for visiting him," they say.

To which I always reply, "Of course I visit him. He's my best friend."

But what I'm really saying is: I value our history.

Miles Ryan Fisher

Italian America®

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The Last Word

BY MILES RYAN FISHER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, *ITALIAN AMERICA* MAGAZINE

The first time you drive through Italy, there's nothing quite like it. Climbing behind the wheel of a tiny Fiat, shifting the car into gear, and piloting from one calendar photo-worthy city to the next. In just three hours, you go from the stone roads of ancient Rome to the cliffs overlooking Sorrento. Over the ten days that you're driving through the big cities and small towns of Italy, you learn a lot of lessons that you weren't taught in Driver's Ed.

You learn not to trust the GPS navigation. Sure, you'll need it to get from one city to another, but once you're already inside a city, you realize that you and the GPS in your Fiat don't have the same definition of what a road is. You peel in the side view mirrors because you decided to take the dubious left that the GPS told you to take, and as it turns out, the road is akin to a narrow corridor more suitable for Vespas and bicycles. After you scrape one of the mirrors, and hope that it'll go unnoticed when you return the rental car, you decide: no more corridors. You stay on main roads and let your GPS reconfigure itself when you don't take the dubious left that it tells you to take.

You learn that Italians don't drive as maniacal on the highways as you were told they do. You pass several speed cameras along the highway and you and the Italian drivers around you abide. Once you return stateside, you find yourself trying to educate others about this—that Italians don't drive as if they're driving a Maserati in an action film.

You learn to be more grateful that your dad taught you to drive manual. Unlike in the United States, in Italy having a stick shift in your car isn't a natural anti-theft device. Everyone drives manual. And so you drive manual, too—up winding roads, through tiny villages, navigating Italy's many terrains. You feel fortunate that your dad not only taught you to drive manual, but that he also directed you onto the most bustling road the moment you knew the basics (where you eventually stopped for pizza).

You learn that the Italian authorities have a whole year to send you a ticket in the mail. It arrives two months before the year is up. You look at the $120 ticket and consider putting it through the shredder. But then you reminisce about what it felt like to drive through Italy, through its varied landscapes that transform in such short amounts of time. You imagine how it'd feel to experience driving through regions of Italy you hadn't visited—over the hills of Tuscany, through the greenery of Umbria, past the olive groves of Calabria. So you decide to pay the ticket. Because …

You learn that Italy isn't simply a country you go to—it's a country you go *back* to.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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I recently went on a trip with a couple friends to Nashville, and when we went out for lunch one day, one of my friends complained about how tight his shorts had become. Apparently he'd gained a little weight since getting married. I suggested that we go back to our house so that he could put on something more comfortable. He said no, he'd simply buy a new pair while we were out. "That's why I have a job," he said. I found that particular remark disconcerting, and as I thought about why, a story I'd once read came to mind.

It was a story about a man who'd lived through the Great Depression. He was in his nineties and lived a life of daily routines. Every day, he woke up at dawn, went to the same diner down the street, ate a modest breakfast and had his cup of coffee. He wore clothes that were worn but not tattered and had conversations with other regulars about current events.

That was how he lived his elderly years until he passed away. After he died, whoever cleaned out his house discovered a safe that held a stack of old stock certificates—so old they were actual certificates—of companies that had since grown into industrial giants. Those certificates had appreciated so much in value that they amounted to millions of dollars by the time the man died.

What I particularly remember about the story, though, was that the writer of the article remarked that it was silly for the man to leave so much wealth behind. There was nobody to inherit it, and, after all, he couldn't spend it now. I remember reading those words and having the same disconcerted feeling. I felt the writer didn't appreciate how much the man had been affected by living through the Great Depression. He experienced such destitution that he didn't spend more than what was necessary—no matter how much he had.

That harkens a sentiment shared not only by those who lived through the Depression but also by those like my great-grandparents who arrived from Italy with little in their pocket. Because they didn't have much, they took great care not to waste anything. They made stews using leftover food. They mended clothing that was torn. They saved pennies that were unnecessary to spend.

This makes me realize that, with the comforts that many of us are afforded today—comforts that past generations gave us—we still have much to learn from those generations. Simply because we live in more prosperous times does not mean that we should cast aside their way of life. I'm sure many of them would be the first to stress the importance of preserving what we have no matter how fortunate we are.

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The Last Word

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Part II of II
(Continued from the Winter 2018 issue)

A member of the East Hill Flying Club, a local flying club in Ithaca, read this article and contacted my grandfather about honoring him at their Fall Harvest Breakfast. At the breakfast, they made him an honorary member and offered to take him for a ride-along in one of their planes. When they were airborne, they asked if he'd like to man the controls.

At the age of 95, Captain Joseph F. Daino took control of a plane. For the first time in 50 years, he was doing what he loved most: flying.

So for Christmas, my mom and my uncle got him a gift certificate for an hour-long flight with an instructor.

"Let me know when you decide to use it," I told him. "I want to be there for it."

My grandfather, ever-practical, replied, "But you won't be able to see much from the ground."

"I don't care," I said. "I just want to be there."

He called me a couple of weeks before take-off to tell me that the plane he'd be flying was a four-seater Cessna. If I wanted to, I could ride along.

Captain Joseph F. Daino flies one last time, bringing his grandson along for the ride.

"But don't tell my mom," I said. I'd let her know that I was in the plane after we returned—safely—on the ground.

The day we took off was a sunny, cloudless June morning. I climbed into the back, as my grandfather settled in the cockpit alongside Ryan, the instructor. With my grandfather manning the controls, we flew over Cayuga Lake, circled Cornell University's campus (where I'd gone for undergrad), and returned to Ithaca Airport. While we were in the air, the instructor leaned back, enjoying the flight in a way that he couldn't with the novice pilots he taught.

After we landed, I asked my grandfather how the experience was for him.

"It wasn't like flying a P-47," he said.

Still, I knew it returned him to what he'd loved most in his life. It was through his passion for flying that led to the opportunity I have with my passion for writing—which then, half a century later, took him back to his. It placed him back in the pilot's seat, returning him to the skies. He flew once more.

Less than a year later, he passed away.

Yet our lives remain intertwined. Though he is gone, he is still very much alive. In every issue of this magazine—and in anything I write as my writing continues to grow—he is there, a part of my journey.

In me, he lives.

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The Last Word

BY MILES RYAN FISHER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, *ITALIAN AMERICA* MAGAZINE

Part I of II

Last fall, the Antonio Gatto Lodge #2459 of Laurel, Maryland, invited me to be a guest speaker at their monthly meeting. They asked me to speak about *Italian America* magazine, and rather than talking about the basic process of the magazine, I decided to tell the story of how I came to be its Editor-in-Chief. The story has, in many ways, lived—and continues to live—a life of its own. A story of heritage. A story of individual passions that interlocked. A story that shows how a grandfather's past can lead to a grandson's future.

Back when I was enrolled in Johns Hopkins University's Masters in Writing program, my professor gave us an assignment to interview and write a profile on any individual of our choice. At first, I didn't know whom to choose—the assignment being so open-ended. Then I thought, '*Of course.*'


Captain Joseph F. Daino

My grandfather had flown 73 missions, including "flying the hump" in the Himalayas during World War II. He'd enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps prior to Pearl Harbor, and he left with stories I'd listened to since I was very young. Many of them I'd heard more than once, and each time he told them, it was as if he were still sitting in the cockpit of his P-47 fighter plane. As if he was not only my grandfather telling me a story—he was Captain Joseph Francis Daino reliving them.

While writing the profile for this assignment, I saw that *Italian America* magazine was searching for a new editor as the current editor, Dona De Sanctis, was retiring after a decade of overseeing the magazine. In researching the position, I noticed that the magazine also accepted freelance submissions. So I submitted the first few paragraphs of the profile to Dona and also told her that I'd applied for the position. She enjoyed the beginning of the profile so much that she told me to forward my cover letter and resume. She was then instrumental in having me succeed her as the magazine's editor.

During my first two months in the position, I shadowed Dona as she oversaw her final issue: *Italian America*'s Spring 2015 issue, which featured my grandfather's story as its cover story. When it ran, a writer of a local newspaper called Prime Times in Ithaca, New York, (where my grandfather lived since he was a child) read it. Discovering that Ithaca had a decorated World War II pilot in its own backyard, the writer then profiled him in a story that gained such local popularity, his newspaper had to run a reprint!

(To be continued in Spring 2018 issue)

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The Last Word

BY MILES RYAN FISHER
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The story of Elena Ferrante's anonymity reminds me of the reason I'd chosen my Confirmation name: Nicholas. When I was young, I'd heard a tale of Saint Nicholas, and it stayed with me enough that I remembered it when it was time to decide on a name for my Confirmation.

The story I'd heard was about three young sisters who came from an impoverished family that didn't have enough wealth to pay their dowries. So it was decided that the sisters would draw straws and that the sister who ended up with the shortest straw would sell herself into slavery to raise what was necessary to pay the dowries of the other two sisters. The youngest sister drew the shortest straw.

On the night before she was to sell herself into slavery, legend has it that Saint Nicholas climbed onto the roof of the family's home and dropped three bags of gold coins down their chimney. When the family awoke in the morning, they found the bags sitting there—each one filled with enough gold to cover each sister's dowry. No note accompanied the bags to let the family know who they were from.

I remember that what resonated with me about this story was the idea of anonymity—someone doing something without desiring credit in return. There was something magical about Saint Nicholas's act, as magical as Santa Claus is to kids. It wasn't until I grew older that I started considering whether or not the story was actually true. Perhaps it was a cynicism that came with age, but I decided to search for the story and couldn't manage to find a single account of it.

During my search, it occurred to me that the reason I chose my Confirmation name wasn't based on the story's truth—it was based on what the story *represents*. It represents the pureness of goodwill, a pureness that anonymity can produce.

Saint Nicholas's anonymity in the story allows his role to be played by anyone—by you, by me, by a stranger we pass on the street. I remember it was *that* element of the story that resonated with me.

So in the end, my Confirmation name wasn't about a name at all. It was about imagining that one day each one of us could be do something generous for another—without so much as leaving a note.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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The Last Word

BY MILES RYAN FISHER
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I've heard from many readers about how much they enjoy reading the Last Word (*That's the first page I turn to!*). Truth be told, it's my favorite part of the magazine to write. But there's another Last Word that I enjoy even more than this one: the last words I offer at the end of a baseball season to the team I coach.

This past spring I had a group of nine and ten-year-olds called the Sluggers. We played some really close games and experienced some blowouts. By the end of the season, we had a .500 record and entered the playoffs as a middle-of-the-pack team. We won the first game against the defending-champion Bombers in a huge upset, then lost later that same day in the semifinals to the first-place Launchers.

In between those games, the kids went to lunch. They filled their stomachs in an air-conditioned restaurant, and when they showed up for the second game, they were sluggish (the sluggish Sluggers). I should've made them run, do jumping jacks, push-ups, any physical exertion that would lift them from their lethargy. I didn't, and we started the game by giving up several runs. Once the kids warmed up, we made a comeback and lost by just one run.

We had one make-up game after the playoffs, and when it was over it was time to give the kids some last words. I explained to them the mistake that I, their *coach*, had made in between those playoff games. I told them that while I was dwelling on the mistake, I realized something. I realized that if someone had predicted that we'd eliminate the defending champions in our first playoff game, then take the first-place team to the very last inning, I would've looked forward to a successful day of baseball.

I told them that like their coach, they'll make mistakes in every game—but they'll also experience successes in every game as well. "You can't let your mistakes take away from your successes," I said. As easy as it is to feel let down by a mistake, it should be (and often times isn't) just as easy to feel bolstered by a success.

The next day, I got an email from the parent of our scrappy, hard-hitting catcher. He'd overheard his son talking to his grandfather. "Not my best day at the plate," the catcher said to his grandfather, "but I'm so psyched about my pitching and catching . . . yeah, that's right, that's how you really win, anyway."

Reading that email made me smile. Because it helped me see that true last words are never final. True last words are lasting.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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The Last Word

BY MILES RYAN FISHER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, *ITALIAN AMERICA* MAGAZINE

One of the earliest memories I have is that of reading to my mom in the car while she was driving. We even still have the very books I read, the main one being *The Adventures of Reddy Fox* by Thornton Burgess followed by several of the other children's books he wrote. In his stories, Burgess brought animals to life, personifying them while conveying to readers the importance of nature. But the lesson I was learning wasn't just what the book was teaching—it was the importance of reading *itself*.

I've come to understand—and love—that *Italian America*'s readers share this importance. Simply put, this magazine's readers are *readers*. Individuals who read every word of every story. Individuals who are eager to learn new things and gain new perspectives. Individuals who were taught the importance of reading at a young age.

Coming from a home where books were stacked on coffee tables, on nightstands, on shelves, where they were sitting gift-wrapped beneath the Christmas tree (many by Lisa Scottoline and David Baldacci), I grew up around books, perceiving them to be as essential as fruit in the refrigerator or winter jackets in the closet. They represented experiences, lessons, possibilities. They told the past and shaped the future. Simply having them around fostered an environment that encouraged learning.

That's why, for my nieces' birthdays, I'm the uncle who gives them a book. Just a book with a personal note written inside about why the book and its message are meaningful. Some books fare better than others, of course. Most recently, I hit the mark with Kate DiCamillo's *Because of Winn-Dixie*, a Newbery-honored novel about a little girl and a stray dog she rescues (who then, in a different way, rescues her). It was such a hit with my niece that she had her father read it, she had me read it, and the next time we were together, we shared our thoughts about the story. We talked about what we learned and what we experienced while reading it.

But the beautiful part about the whole experience was realizing that this is what will become *normal* for her. It will be *normal* to read a book. It will be *normal* to discuss it with others. And the work it takes to read a book, to think about and learn from its messages, will be normal—and won't seem like work at all.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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The story about Lena Russo, the nonna who came to a shipwrecked crew's rescue, made me think of the many times I'd been stranded (by a broken-down car, not a shipwreck). And I'm sure that many readers know the feeling of car failure at a time before cell phones existed.

Her story reminded me of one time in particular while I was driving on an early frigid February morning in upstate New York. I had dropped off a bus rental check in Elmira and was returning to Ithaca, where I was a sophomore at Cornell. At the start of the trip, the clutch began slipping, and I knew right away that I was in trouble. I felt the shifter give way but I had enough speed to coast down a side road that had a mere handful of houses on it.

I spotted a house a hundred yards away with smoke rising from its chimney, so I walked to it and knocked on the door. A man answered the door who looked rugged, with unshorn hair and calloused hands, wearing stonewash jeans and a flannel shirt—the type who worked hard for a living. I asked if I could use the phone to call my grandparents, who lived in Ithaca. Of course, he said.

I walked in and saw another man sitting at the kitchen table who looked every bit as rugged. Two open beer cans sat on the kitchen table. I dialed my grandparents and, sure enough, my grandfather said he was on his way.

While I waited, I chatted with the two men (half-expecting they'd offer me a beer—they didn't). What they offered me instead was a lesson. When my grandfather arrived, I thanked the men, saying I didn't know what I would've done if they hadn't helped me.

"It was nothin' to us," the man who'd answered the door said and shrugged. "It's what anyone should do."

I never saw those men again, and they probably never realized that this lesson, conveyed by those simple words, would have a lasting impact on me. They understood that helping me cost them very little—an inconvenience at most—while for me, it meant a great deal. Because had they turned me away, I would have been cast into the cold with nowhere to go.

Since that day, I've changed several flat tires and jump-started countless cars—even gone on excursions for gas and pushed vehicles off the highway. Every time I help someone who is stranded just as I was, I think of those simple words. I think of the lesson those men taught me. And I think about how they'll never know just how many times it's been paid forward.

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After reading President Longo's column for this issue, I mentioned to him that referring to Mother Teresa as Saint Teresa would take some getting used to. Part of me feels that she should be called Mother Teresa the Saint because everybody knew a long time ago that she'd be canonized. It wasn't so much the miracles attributed to her that made this so—in this day and age, miracles have become more difficult to find convincing. Rather, it was the life that she led, as someone wholly devoted to serving others in need, that made this so.

Father Capodanno was this same kind of individual. He gave all of himself—including his last minutes on Earth—to serve soldiers in Vietnam, men who were not necessarily there of their own accord, but who suffered beyond understanding. Like Saint Teresa, he was, above all, human. Someone who questioned and wept and bled as we all do. Someone who was as frail and as vulnerable as we all are. It's through this that he represents the highest point of humanity, someone who willingly took twenty-seven bullets in order to console a dying man.

It's difficult for any of us to fully comprehend the strength an act like that requires. It's even led some to criticize this act as being reckless, even foolish. But much like Saint Teresa, Father Capodanno reached a place in which goodness in the face of suffering was of absolute, uncompromising importance. And ultimately, that's something we can all—to some degree—understand and strive for.

It's not so much that we're expected to live the life of a saint. The purpose of their lives is to inspire us to do a little bit more, to be a little bit better. Because I believe they can envision kind of world we would live in if all of us offered a little more of ourselves.

This is something we do see from time to time. With the earthquake that recently devastated central Italy, support was immediate and overflowing—support that came in a variety of ways. Whether pulling survivors from the rubble or sending a donation across the sea, so many individuals lent a hand to heal tragedy, to undo destruction.

And that's what Father Capodanno, Saint Teresa, and all who have lived a life deserving of canonization teach us. They teach us not that suffering will cease to exist, but that we can create a world that alleviates it rather than causes it. While the saints are few, they teach us the power of many—and that if every one of us reaches out to help those in need, together we can lift the world to where the saints sit.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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The Last Word

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With a name like mine, it's common for others to be surprised when they discover that I'm half-Italian. Many times, I hear the customary, "But your name doesn't *sound* Italian."

My reply? "I have a mother!" (and, of course, I use my hands when I say it). But until I became editor of this magazine, my Italian side often went undetected unless I made a point to bring it up.

Now, however, it gets a lot of attention, especially whenever anyone asks what I do for a living. When I reply that I'm the editor of *Italian America* magazine, nobody sees it coming—not only because my name isn't Italian, but also because it's a rather unusual occupation to have.

Naturally, those of Italian heritage react with a lot of enthusiasm. But when it comes to non-Italians, I get a variety of reactions. Some are jokes about the mafia or meatballs. Some are imitations of an accent. Though these reactions are meant to be comedic, I find them rather inconsiderate. Yet, I take them in stride. If anything, I am thankful that I don't bear these remarks the way my mom and my grandparents had to in their time when such remarks were *meant* to be unkind.

Not all reactions are like this, however. Many have a great amount of substance and sincerity in them. One that particularly stands out—and will always resonate with me—was when a young lady said, "It must be amazing to do something that honors your ancestors." She said this without hesitation, every bit as natural as when Italians react with excitement.

I've experienced similar reactions, really heartfelt ones, and what's intriguing is a common thread running through these responses. I've noticed that many who respond this way are immigrants, or children of immigrants. The young lady who spoke those earnest words? Her parents emigrated from India.

I've considered just why this might be, what accounts for this common thread and why some respond in a meaningful way while others respond thoughtlessly. I believe that it's a matter of being in touch with one's roots and the struggles that were endured, which would be the case especially for immigrants and their children. I believe that in this day and age, the more you identify with your heritage, the more inclined you are to respect the heritage of others.

To that end, I can say that being a member of the Sons of Italy and editing *Italian America* magazine has done much more than bring me closer to where I come from—it has brought me greater appreciation for where others come from as well.

And I consider that a pretty wonderful way to honor my ancestors.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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A little more than a year into this position, one thing has become quite clear to me: Italian Americans are mighty *proud* of their heritage. This may go without saying because, of course, there's the exquisite cuisine and full-bodied wine, the high fashion and fine art, the classical music and extraordinary architecture—all this and more which makes Italy's culture second to none.

But I've noticed that the pride comes from something that extends far deeper, something that reaches a place that is much more personal. I've noticed that so many of us are very in touch with our individual roots—still very connected with the ones who came before, the ones who struggled in order to give each of us the opportunities we are afforded.

Many of our ancestors came from nothing. That's not an exaggeration. The more one reads about the conditions in Italy just a century or two ago, the more one learns of the conditions in early twentieth century America for those who emigrated, the more you find hardship. Not simply a hardship that tests strength, but the hardship that tests *survival.*

Of my great-grandparents who came over in the early 1900s, there's one that always stands out to me: *Grandpa with the hat.* That's what he was called because he always donned a fedora. In 1913, he left Abruzzo and crossed the Atlantic when he was just fifteen years old, holding one suitcase and speaking not a word of English. When he arrived, he started working in a factory that manufactured chain systems for automobiles. He married a young woman from Terracina, had two children (one of them my grandmother), and worked in that same factory for more than four decades. He never again saw his family back in Italy.

When he was 84 years old, just a year before he died, he met me as a newborn—the only great-grandparent to do so. And I always wondered what he thought when he set eyes on me. Did he think of all he'd gone through in his life? Did he think of the struggles he'd endured—ones he'd never get to tell me about—ones that would give me opportunities?

But maybe what's more important is that *I* think about these things. I think about the opportunities that I've been given all because, like so many of us, someone came before me who didn't have those opportunities—and then lived a life that created them for those who would follow.

And I can't think of anything that makes me more proud.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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Yogi Berra. Maybe everything there is to say has already been said about the extraordinary life he lived. Though no matter how many times a story's been told, there's always a slightly new way of telling it. As perhaps Yogi himself might have said, *Say it again for the first time.*

Everyone knows that he stuck up for his Italian heritage and his fellow Italian Americans. Everyone knows that he also stuck up for African-Americans and Latino ballplayers. Toward the end of his life, he stuck up for LGBT rights, too. For the 90 years that he lived, Yogi managed to stay ahead of his time.

But he stuck up for more than these groups of people. During his career, Yogi was ridiculed for how he looked, which was about as far from resembling a ballplayer as possible. He was mocked for his short height and his stubby stature. He was mocked for his "ugly" face. He was mocked for his awkward, often clumsy-looking style of play.

And how did he endure these insults? Through humor. He laughed it off and befriended those around him. Yet that doesn't mean he never felt those insults or that those insults ever truly bounced off of him as easily as he made it seem. What's probably more the reality is that he absorbed those insults without retaliating. And in doing so, he stuck up for people who don't identify with any group—people who face insults of all kinds for many different reasons.

In a sense, Yogi stuck up for everybody. He stuck up for you, he stuck up for me. He stuck up for anyone—everyone—who faces ridicule. He took that ridicule, and he disarmed it with his jokes, with his personality, with his smile. And through that reaction, he became one of the most beloved baseball players in all of history.

Following his recent passing, a flood of articles and personal memories paying tribute to him appeared everywhere. Many of these were no doubt written by some of the 100,000 individuals who petitioned the President to award him the Medal of Freedom. And perhaps this was Yogi's greatest feat of all:

He stuck up for everyone to the point that, in the end, everyone stuck up for him.

Miles Ryan Fisher

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I think we can all agree that there's a particular story in this issue that carries great significance—one that I'm sure will move some readers to tears. It represents an important place in our culture and in our hearts because it's about the strength, the resilience, of a mother.

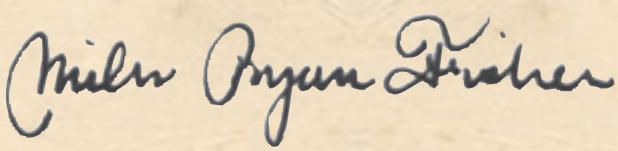
While mothers are held high in every culture, it would be difficult to say that any culture holds mothers higher than that of Italians. For so many generations, Italian and Italian-American mothers have served as the backbone of their families. They make sure our stomachs are never empty. They make sure our wounds are always dressed. They make sure our troubles are never borne alone.

In "A Knock at Midnight" and "A Mother's Christmas Day," Virginia Romano is this mother. The amount of strength she exhibits in the face of intimidation and the face of hardship she does for her family, not for herself. And we are all very fortunate that her son, John Romano, was willing to share such personal stories.

It's my hope that in his stories, you see reflections of your own mother, grandmother, or great-grandmother. I hope that his story stands for Italian-American mothers everywhere. Their steadfast strength, their hard-working nature, their impenetrable desire to put their family first—these are the qualities that so many of us grew up with and were probably too young to recognize as our mothers quietly imparted them to us.

I know that this is my experience, and the older I get, the more appreciation I have for what my own mother did for me. To some degree, I understand that I can't ever fully recognize the amount of selflessness she put into our family. I'm sure a lot of readers—whether you are a Son of Italy or a Daughter of Italy—feel this same way.

Far too often, and maybe this is due to the humility with which they go about their role, mothers do not get the recognition they deserve. But behind the Sons and Daughters of Italy, behind any goals we achieve and any praise we receive, there are mothers who go unsung. And yet, those mothers feel more pride than anyone in the lives that their sons and daughters lead.



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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, *ITALIAN AMERICA*™ MAGAZINE

Though these are "last words," they are actually my first to you, the readers. And I think it's only fitting for me to start by letting you know how incredibly honored I am and for-tunate I feel to be in the position of bringing you stories that pay homage to our heritage. I'm excited for all the words that lie ahead and all the wonderful things we'll learn together.

My goal is to bring you well-written stories that make you think your time was well spent reading them. This can be for various reasons—maybe you learn something new, maybe you enjoy the story, maybe you simply feel proud about something that represents Italian Americans. I want the articles to satisfy the many different purposes for reading, and it's my hope that in doing so, this magazine will continue to be as full as possible.

As I continue in this position—learning and growing (I coach young baseball players and they've shown me that you're sometimes a teacher, but always a student)—I'm looking forward to the relationships that will form along the way. I can already see that this position isn't like a lot of other editor positions. It's far more visible. There's a lot more community to it, which is no surprise. I've already had so many interesting, enjoyable conversations, and I know there are many more to come. Besides, as much as I love writing, sometimes I need a break from it—so all the conversations I get to have, either over the phone or through email, are a wonderful respite.

This magazine isn't the typical magazine, the kind that brings stories to your mailbox that you read and then move on from. This magazine is much more special than that because it is a *shared experience*. The stories feature our own. The stories are often times written by our own. And the stories come to me from our own. This is a magazine that its readers can feel more a part of, knowing that many of their own help make it happen.

This, to me, is the most important aspect of the magazine and the organization it represents. It is founded on community—the very community whose history and culture and traditions it honors. And so it is with that in mind that I hope to bring you many stories that illustrate many things, but ultimately show that relationships are the most important things we have.

Miles Ryan Fisher