

# “**First** you get married **Then** you go out”

**Rosa Fazio** reflects on her childhood in Italy, her move to Toronto, and then Vancouver ... and how assimilation and family and expectations helped to shape her work as a Principal in Vancouver.



## My Italian Narrative

In September 1974 – when I was six, my sister seven, my mother 32, and my father 36 – we left our life in a small town in Southern Italy, where my parents made a bare living for the family. My father rented land for cattle. Daily, from November to May, he walked two hours to and from the cattle. From June to November, he slept in the pasture and travelled home once every two weeks. My mother took care of the children and made some money sewing, a trade she learned by apprenticing, since she had no money to pay for the course. Mama Maria and Papa Santo decided to leave their homeland in hopes of a job, greater material wealth for the family and a professional future for their children.

Our family immigrated to the highly industrialized and technological urban center of Toronto as my father’s sister was able to sponsor the family. We lived with my aunt, uncle, and their two boys. At the time I didn’t realize what a hardship it must have been for my aunt’s family, sharing a small house with an entire new family. My Uncle Sam was a foreman in construction and therefore found my father a job laying pipe for newly constructed homes. My mother worked as a seamstress, a job my



aunt Chiara found for her. The disorientation was overwhelming for us all. We relied greatly on our immediate and extended family to lessen the disorientation, insecurity, and anxiety of functioning in an alien culture which we feared we would never understand.

Our first four months in Canada were the most difficult. Absolutely everything was alien – the people, the language, and the school. Since I couldn't communicate, I hated everything and everybody so I retaliated by hitting people, including my teachers. I recall my teachers allowing me to spend recess and lunch with them to help settle me. The students saw this as punishment, I saw it as a reprieve from having to further assimilate. I felt as though everything I loved was taken from me, even my sister. Yes, we went to the same school, but we were put in separate classes and not allowed to speak Italian. I cried in the morning, refused to eat, and cried at night. I was angry. Why was ev-

everything so different? Why did I feel so stupid? Why did I have to be here? My memories of when I was six years old tell me that I was the only one experiencing this

pain. However, it was the same for my father, mother and sister, but they experienced it in silence – something I could not do.

After three stressful months in Toronto, my parents wondered whether they had made the best choice for us all. My father was laid off due to the winter weather. We all wanted to return to Italy, badly; but before we did, our relatives from Vancouver – my father's eight siblings and families, insisted we visit. It played out much the same way – a cousin helped my father get a job making sofas for \$4.50 per hour. My mother found a job sewing in a factory for \$2.70 per hour. This time, school was different. I was placed in an ESL classroom with my sister and allowed to speak Italian. I had my older sister by my side, to help me and take care of me. The extended family was of invaluable support to our family. We all began feeling more at home.

Family is the most important aspect of an Italian home (owning a home is likely number two).

The family provides a system of social control which operates to enforce values which are unique to it. It can perpetuate values which are old, traditional, and strict. It is a system which is secure because the patterns of behavior it enforces are stable and accepted by the Italian community. Every member of the family obeys the basic moral code put forth by one's parents. I believe this is vastly different from the North American system where I see control and choice resting mainly with the individual.

As I grew older and began internalizing the North American values and norms, the family relationship became threatened. The generation gap widened by the fact that the two generations were brought up in different countries with different cultures and a different set of values. My parents' main priority was to safeguard their children from the Canadian ways and to improve the economic position of the family. When my parents began to see a degree of alien values in both their children they became terrified of "losing" us. Since their duty was to preserve the Italian ways, it meant a stringent application and enforcement of the values and norms of behaviour which they accepted, but which were not acceptable to me. My mother reflects, "I knew you would change and that you couldn't remain pure Italian, but I didn't want you to become pure Canadian either."

My adolescent years were a struggle. I had no freedom. I was not allowed to participate in

extra-curricular activities. My job was to go home straight away and help with the chores and the meals. I'm told by my friends that I'm a good cook and that's thanks to my mother, but that wasn't my goal when I was young. I was a natural born athlete, and luckily, my gym teacher did not accept that I wasn't allowed to play sports. Thankfully, he put pressure on my parents to allow me to join school teams and they begrudgingly agreed. (Thank you Mr. McGuinness!) I also knew that dating, let alone being seen in the company of a boy, was not up for discussion. Premarital sex was taboo, considered damaging to a girl's reputation, and it was my parent's responsibility to preserve that reputation. When I was of age to question how one can get married without dating, my father clearly replied (over and over I might add), "First you get married, then you go out."

And so conflict persisted ... conflict of expectations, I functioned in two different worlds – my home environment and my peer environment. That which was acceptable to my parents and the idealistic world acceptable to me. So I started to lie – saying what I knew my parents wanted to hear – inventing excuses in order to go out with friends, to play sports, to go to school dances, to travel, and to go on dates.

The generational and cultural differences are also aggravated by the difficulty in communicating. Most immigrant parents do not tend to learn the language quickly because they usually work with fellow immigrants and

speaking in their native tongue. On the other hand, the children are under pressure to acculturate as quickly as possible in order to function entirely in English in school. This communication barrier is very stressful. I often thought my parents couldn't understand me because I couldn't communicate my point in Italian as effectively as I could in English. In retrospect, they did understand what I was saying, but they didn't understand me and who I had become.

I tell this story because our past is telling of our today. I work at a school where we function in learning communities. Before moving to the new school, I explained to the 500 students and families at various events

that the school is made up of nine houses, each house having numerous rooms with multiple adults and children. They would become a part of that home and a part of that family. They, too, would have neighbours with whom they would interact but that their home teachers would be certain to take care of them and their needs. I now realize I was reflecting what I wanted for myself.

And that's what I do daily – try to make students and staff feel comfortable in their surroundings, work to understand people's situations and commit myself to meeting their needs to the best of my ability. In essence, what I wanted for me.

## And now ...

I was challenged to think deeply when asked by Linda Kaser, "Why are you an innovator when you wanted so much to create a *home* for learning." The stories flowed and I landed here ...

My father was one of 11 siblings, all but two lived in Vancouver. Although I had ample love and belonging in my huge Italian extended family, more than anything, I felt a complete sense of security. I knew that day or night, rain or shine, I could call on any one of my uncles or aunts and they would come to my rescue. That's an amazing feeling.

When I was 14, my mother and father decided to build a new house. It became a family affair. My uncles pitched in to help as my dad, in addition to his full-time job, worked tirelessly to build our home. As always, my sister and I were put in charge of anything that required our English language skills. I recall requesting quotes for built-in vacuums, alarm systems and blinds, shopping for chandeliers, tiles, and following up with trade workers who made promises they didn't keep. We issued payments and helped project manage as best we could.


And so my world of education began. Although feeling a sense of love, belonging, security and "home" was the first part of my journey (and such an important one), the next part has proved to be



even more instrumental in defining me. Throughout my life, my parents never saw limits in my ability. Let me be more specific about the word 'ability' – since I had a command of the English language and an education well beyond my parents' Grade 5 level, they expected that I could accomplish anything, no matter the challenge. It's not that they believed I was brilliant in mind, they attributed the key ingredients of ability to *hard work and effort*.

As I recalled this story, I finally had an *ah-ha* moment. Although Carol Dweck's growth mindset philosophy has spoken to me these past years, it didn't dawn on me that my parents, whom I viewed all these years as being tough, strict, unwavering, and old fashioned, *always focused on effort as being the de-*

*terminant to success*. It wasn't ever about how smart I was. The "smart" was in the fact that I spoke English. What mattered

most was how hard working I was prepared to be because that ingredient would help me to accomplish anything. 

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