

15 years ago I was at a wake with my father. My father was sitting there – solemn. And the wake was a very loud, laughing, almost party like atmosphere. I know I am being politically incorrect but I think it was an Irish wake. The priest even had to quiet the people down. My father turned to me and said “Make sure this doesn’t happen at my wake.” I said “You want people crying and moaning and screaming”? And he smiled and said “crying is good enough, good enough.” So, I thank you for making my father’s wake his dream wake. He would have loved to be there. As my cousin Roberto said, “funerals are the Italian Super Bowl of parties. It is clear that my father won this one. The friends from City College, his colleagues, students who had classes with him in the 70’s and then became his Italian instructors, his nieces/nephews traveling from all over the place to come, the family crest my cousins had made out of flowers. I am sure my father is watching this and saying “tremendous.” This was the get together he couldn’t have dreamed of – the only problem was that he wasn’t there to see it. The loss of my father is hard to put into words for all of us. All the messages I receive, talk about “a tremendous loss” and huge blow. And it will be felt for a long time.

While my father is an amazing man, growing up with my father was not easy. He was demanding, not patient and quick to tell you if he was not pleased with you. He had no time for nonsense – and I know that because he actually said that to me “I have no time for nonsense.” While I can spend hours just my father’s parenting – I will just share one story that really sums it up. I was studying for the bar exam and my father was in Italy. I studied a lot in the pool and played music. My father came home after I took the exam and he was talking with his neighbors and they said “we enjoyed the summer – we loved

listening to the music every day that your daughter played while swimming in the pool.” My father sat down with me at the patio table, cutting an apple and said “If you don’t pass this bar exam, I will put cement in that swimming pool.” But as much as he was tough, he loved us fiercely.

While I am sure having 3 daughters wasn’t exactly what he had in mind, he always talks about his girls being gold. We were lucky to know that we were fiercely loved. And as much as he has loved us, he loved his grandchildren even more. Anything they did, he thought was amazing.

And the fierce love extended to my mother, his wife of 51 years. They were a match because my mother was the only one who could deal with his spontaneous parties of 10 people, or more. My dad loved my mother and they were a unified force. And he would always tell me and my sisters how much he loved her. And it is hard to see my mother without him.

As he loved us, he loved his family. The first thing I thought about after hearing about my father’s passing, was my father’s siblings. They were like a street gang – as much as my father hated Italian stereotypes, they were a little Mafia. They fought with each other and complained about each other but kept the fight amongst themselves. If anyone outside the siblings said anything about them, they might find a horse’s head in their bed, or in Mignone style, a chicken head. I know this loss is immense for them. And I don’t have to tell them how much he loved them and how proud he was of them and all of his nieces and nephews and cousins. And his last love for Stony Brook University, was a strong and powerful love. I feel horrible that next year would have been his 50<sup>th</sup> year working at SBU. He loved the school, was its biggest cheerleader. It was so nice to meet all of his colleagues and students who were

inspired by my father. He used to receive letter from SB gently encouraging him to retire. My father would read them, smile and then crumple them up and throw them away.

My father did not like being alone. So we believe that when my father passed, he traveled over to my Uncle Ludo, who was suffering with lung cancer. They were like brothers and my father always had a way of convincing him of doing things: staying for another espresso, having another drink, going for a ride. We are certain my father is with his loved ones, especially his parents and his older brother Enrico. When my uncle died, my father was destroyed. It physically crushed him. He always lamented that they were supposed to grow old together, so I am hoping they finally are together – growing old together. It is just painful they are not here doing it with us. I know the two of them are watching over us, Uncle Enrico has probably handed over a lot of the burden to my father. But please watch over the family, we need you more than ever.

Daddy, you lived the American dream and we are all so glad to have been part of it. You always said, can you believe an Italian farm boy did this – yes we can. We are forever proud of you. Daddy we miss you, we love you. And you will never be forgotten.

Mario  
Mignone

When I think of my father in law the first thing that comes to mind is his origin story. Fellini himself could not have written a more fantastical tale of humble beginnings and dreaming large. The good-looking young protagonist, with the twinkle in his eye and the spark in his step, destined for bigger and better things. When my father would tell me of his life, in bits and pieces, anecdotes that contained magic and his unmistakable poetic flair, I always felt this man could have been a great filmmaker or handsome movie star in his own right if he hadn't decided to put every ounce of his being into lifting others up – first his brothers and sisters and then his own family one by one, then the countless students and colleagues whom he encouraged and pushed forward. Like a scene from one of those great Italian films, I picture him walking down a dusty war torn landscape, pushing a rusty old bicycle past Sophia Loren, and looking back at the camera with a joyful wink, because no one lived a fuller life, with more passion and zest, than Mario Mignone.

I have been honored and lucky to know Mario for 32 years now, the last 24 as his first son in law. I know Phil and AJ feel the same sense of honor as his other adoptive sons. He taught me many things, about honor and duty, about being a man, and valuing the simple things. He taught me about hard work, and taking the long view in life. He taught me about being kind, and about being open minded. How else could he have welcomed a nice Jewish boy into the family? With love and acceptance, he did. My father in law has been an incredible example to my children and all his other grandchildren, even if they were too young to realize yet that he was the embodiment of the adage that hard work pays off, that it nourishes the soul and replenishes the spirit. Just look at his own daughters, each of them a devoted mother and successful career woman. It is his testament that he knew how to empower women and how to imbue a sense of honor and duty in men.

Mario never sat still, living his life @ 1000 rpm, a full throttle pace that even Mario Andretti could never keep up with. This brings to mind the immortal footrace between Super Mario and Jumping Joe Battista at Breakneck – no, make that breakwrist speed? He took on all comers, who can forget his many man versus nature exploits – whether it was giving a trash nabbing racoon a swimming lesson, sling-shotting a flower munching deer, planning a Thanksgiving vacation for the pet turkey, or skinning a goat in his garage with the aforementioned Joe. And at Roberto and Alison's wedding that poor bull never had a chance. bupbuhbuhbupbuhbuh

And did you know anyone who was happier than he was when working? Or anyone who had more successful careers than he did – professor, department chair, international programs leader, Italian cultural society founder, author, editor, father, brother, friend ... he approached every endeavor like it was the most important thing, and we are all the beneficiaries. More than anything he was an architect and builder – he willed this family into existence and built a solid foundation for all of us, an immense multifamily development that rivals any community. Who loved life more than he did, reveling in a grandchild's graduation, sharing a bottle of wine with friends, talking about politics, traveling to Italy and sharing its glories with students and friends and family? He would not have traded the things he holds dear for all the money in the world. Standing with him at the apex of the Gran Potenza was like being on top of the world, to feel a fistful of the dirt from the hillside trickle between his fingers, to breathe in the rarified air of complete and utter contentment that comes from enjoying family on his ancestral land, in the place it all started. That was the magic Mario imparted to me, and to all of us. The lessons from him are innumerable, but none greater than that. His Horatio Alger up from the bootstraps story, immortalized in his incredible love letter to the family that was his magnum opus *The Story of My People*, proves that his spark carried an entire family forward and it is alive in all of us.

He always brought people together. Mah! Over countless parties, dinners, symposia, holidays, he and my tireless mother in law have always welcomed family and outsiders alike into their home, their orbit, their lives. That generosity of spirit pervades the Mignone name, a name that stands for family first. My father in law's love of family extended to mine. No one was happier than he was when we visited Caserta, the Italian castle not far from Benevento, where my own grandfather lived for a time during WW2, stationed in the palace stables. Mario knew that he and my grandfather may have literally passed each other on the street back in 1945, an incredible coincidental connection between our families. My father in law made me call my grandfather on his cell phone – some perspective that in 2001 those calls were not cheap by any means – to share that his grandson was standing where he once was stationed with the father in law he may have crossed paths with. Mario had the greatest look of glee, like he had won the lottery – He didn't win the lottery ... I did -- we all did -- by having him in our lives. Two years later, when Pamela brought Andrew into the world and gave her father his first grandson, Mario was at it again, carefully orchestrating a photo of four generations of men in my family for posterity. Andrew was only 8 days old so getting a photo of him with me, my father and grandfather hardly seemed like a rush, but there was my father in law, gathering us together – it was important, he said. He was right,

four months later my grandfather was gone and that masterpiece of a photo he took of the four of us is now one of my family heirlooms.

Every Christmas Eve we gather together in a real life three act play that is the Mignone Xmas dinner. We are all part of the longest running reality series every year, with the opening hugs and hellos, the reliving of a shared family meal, the suspense of the salad course, the wonder of the carols and Santa visit, and the resolution of the cognac and dessert storytelling and jokes. The star of that family movie is Mario, who always sits there contentedly, taking it all in with a charming smile and a gleam in his eye. No one was more proud – of his own parents, his brother and sisters, his nieces and nephews, his children and grandchildren than him. If we measure a man by his effect on others then Mario Mignone is on the Mount Rushmore of family men. As though it were preordained, my father in law passed away on September 8, 59 years to the day he left Benevento with his family in a rented bus, bound for a new life. He brought us together, and he brings us together now. And in moments like this, you realize how right he always was to put us all first, because in the end, that is all we are and all we have. We are all Mignones today and forever, and for that I am fortunate and grateful. I feel a profound sense of loss that aches in my soul right now, but at the same time I am blessed to be here with all of you, and loving the man I was able to call my father.

Daniel Salzman

## WHAT MY ITALIAN HERITAGE MEANS TO ME

My Nonno Mario was awesome! He was a great husband to my Grandma Lois, father to three daughters, grandfather to eight grandchildren, brother to seven siblings and friend, relative and colleague to so many people. He was the one who taught my brother and me what it means to be Italian. Since my heritage is 100% Italian, all of Nonno's stories and talks are very meaningful to me.

I am very proud of my entire family. Both sides of my father's family are Sicilian. The family of my mother's mother is from Sicily and from Benevento. My Grandma Lois was a college Professor of Italian who always tried to speak to me in Italian and to talk about Italy. She and my Nonno used to bring me beautiful gifts from their trips to Italy.

My Nonno came to the United States in 1960 with his family. He found work right away at a factory but also started English classes to help him in his new country. Nonno had to work extremely hard to help support his family but eventually he was able to leave the factory job and go to college. He graduated from City College of New York and Rutgers University where he received a Ph.D.! He was then hired by Stony Brook University where he taught Italian for almost 50 years. He was also the Director of the Center for Italian Studies and brought students to Italy for Stony Brook's Summer Study Abroad program. He was the authors of several books including one about his family coming to America.

Even though my Nonno became an American citizen, he still kept Italian traditions which we all followed. One of my favorite ones is Christmas Eve dinner with our whole extended family, now almost 100 people. We have traditional fish dishes (My Grandma makes eel) and sing carols in Italian.

Another tradition I learned was making pizza rustica which was always a tradition in my Nonno's family. He wanted me to learn how to make it so that I could continue the tradition as I get older. It was a special dish which his family always had made during the Easter week. He was so happy the first time we made it together. It is a special memory that I will always treasure.

My favorite memories of my Nonno are at breakfast. Almost every school morning my mother dropped us off at my grandparents' house across the street and she would go to teach at her school. Nonno always had breakfast with us and told us stories and spoke to us in Italian. Now that I study Italian in school, I find it easier having learned so much already from Nonno. He always emphasized to us the importance of study and of hard work. He loved to show us the vegetables from his enormous garden which we happily ate. But then I also had a little garden which I started and Nonno was so proud.

Unfortunately my Nonno died in September 2019 and we miss him every day. Nonno Mario was like Superman to us. He was strong, intelligent, loving, proud, important, and religious. He taught us to be good citizens but to also respect and celebrate our Italian heritage. I am very grateful for being able to spend lots of time with my Nonno Mario who taught us who we are – both American and Italian.

*Isabella Armato*

Although I come proudly from a family of mixed heritage, I would like to spotlight my mother's background which is completely Italian. My Italian American grandma Lois, who likes to call me "Luca", is a retired professor of Italian. She has taught me so much about her own Italian family background and about the wonderful history and culture of Italy, the great and beautiful land of my maternal ancestors. The family of my mother's father, my Nonno Mario, are composed of immigrants who came to this country and worked extremely hard to establish themselves as proud American citizens.

However, I would like to focus on my hero, my Nonno Mario, who immigrated to America in 1960 from Benevento, Italy with his mother, three sisters and three brothers. Their father and oldest brother stayed in Italy until years later. He was only twenty year old when he started to work in a factory only two days after he arrived here. For him learning English was necessary to advance in this country so Nonno Mario took English classes at night and worked during the day. Later on he was able to start real college classes at night and with much hard work he graduated in 1967 from the City College of New York, won a fellowship to Rutgers University, received a PH.D. and taught Italian language, literature and culture for almost fifty years at Stony Brook University. Nonno Mario, as a professor, made a great influence on thousands of students. Nonno Mario had the title of Distinguished Service Professor.

My Nonno, although very proud and grateful to live the American dream, never ever forgot his Italian traditions which he passed on to his three daughters and eight grandchildren. My favorite tradition is our Christmas Eve celebration which he and his siblings and their families have celebrated every year since their arrival in America. For



the past fifty years it has taken place at my great aunt's house and is now a huge celebration with three generations. Together with all our relatives, now almost one hundred people, we have a big sit-down dinner where we have traditional pasta and clam sauce and many types of seafood including eel, seafood salad and lots of baccala. For a few years we used to have a priest, a friend of the family, come and say Mass in Italian. This is the one family party that no one would dare miss. My Nonno and all of my great aunts and uncles have always taught the younger generations that, no matter what, family is the most important thing in life and that we support one another.

Although sadly my Nonno passed away in 2019, the memories he left me and my cousins will always stay in our hearts. Besides all the academic books and articles Nonno wrote, his favorite was the book he wrote about his family, "The story of My People, from Southern Italy to Mainstream America" where he talks about the struggles of his family as well as the many other Italian families immigrating all over the world. We can honor and respect his memory by trying our best to carry out in our lives the values that meant so much to him and by which he lived: family, his faith and love of God, hard work and education. When I think of my Italian heritage, my Nonno Mario will always be at the center for me.

*Luke Jakic*