

Reflections on the World in Which We Live

A. J. Valentini (July 28, 2016)



Reflections after the recent Summer Program in Italy by By A. J. Valentini, Adjunct professor of Italian at Utica College, Director of IACE Summer Program in Italy

Learn from the children

In the small Umbrian city of Narni in central Italy my students in the Italian American Committee on Education Summer Program enjoy two weeks of language instruction, cultural tours and visits to local craftsmen and industry. They experience a total immersion in what Italy is today. While there they stay in the Saint Anna Youth Hostel.

The “Ostello,” as we call it, began its life as a convent over 500 years ago. It later became an orphanage and now serves multiple purposes in its community.

Its ground floor houses handicapped adults. Its first floor functions as a dormitory during the academic year for students of the School of Criminal Justice and Cyber Crime, a satellite campus in Narni of the University of Perugia. When available and in summer those rooms are rented to tourists and musicians who come for the Narnia Arts Festival.

The second floor of the massive building is a group home for young refugees who find themselves in a new country without a family.



Over the five years that our IACE program has been hosted by Narni, I've come to know a few of these remarkable teenagers. Their parents made the gigantic leap of faith to send their children unaccompanied, by boat or on foot, from the strife torn countries of North Africa, the Near East, the Balkans and even as far away as Afghanistan to Italy, their gateway to prosperous, and "relatively" peaceful Europe.

I can't imagine the anguish of a parent or the apprehension a nine to fifteen-year-old might feel in a country whose language is incomprehensible and culture is so different from one's own. Yet, given their options in their homelands, this rupture of the family fabric offers their children horizons impossible to obtain where they live.

Last year, during the 2015 edition of our [IACE](#) [2] program, I was seized by the generosity of these youngsters who have literally nothing. They spontaneously took it upon themselves to have pizza delivered to their American neighbors. Before leaving for Narni this year I contacted the manager of the hostel to ask how many refugees were in residence at the moment.

She said there were ten. One of our favorites had found an Italian foster family. A few others had reached eighteen years of age and were no longer eligible to stay. So while in New York a few weeks ago I purchased New York City baseball caps for the ten that remained.

My first encounter with one of the boys this summer was with Abramo, a young Egyptian I had met two years ago. He immediately sprang from the bench in the piazza where he was talking to some friends. He embraced and kissed me, welcomed me back and asked after my wife and the group of students he had met the year before. I asked him to come meet my new students and said I had something for him and the other boys.

We found the American students playing cards on the hostel's terrace. I retrieved the hats and distributed them among our upstairs neighbors and made introductions. The Americans invited the boys to join them in their card games.

I sat on the other side of the terrace just to observe the interaction evolve. I realized that among them there were at least four native languages, yet, through the use of their learned Italian, they succeeded in communicating with each other. The games went from cards to friendly challenge to those of trust and it was beautiful. My heart swelled.

The next day one of my American children came to me and said, "Prof. (my title and pet name), we were watching the refugees and they were playing soccer without a ball. We felt bad so we went into town and bought a soccer ball for them." I was asked to call down the boys from upstairs and my students made their gift to their new friends in our common room. Abramo was overcome and hugged his benefactors. I swelled with pride and have got to say my eyes welled up a bit.

I found this scene particularly moving because, like most of you readers, I've heard plenty of immigrant bashing during the last few months of the presidential race. I have even heard personal acquaintances be less than gracious towards immigrants, minorities and Muslims in general. If I hadn't heard all of that previous to scene evolving before me, I wouldn't think it existed at all!

I was particularly uncomfortable when one of the Muslim refugee boys asked me about how he would go about coming to the States. I found myself saying that he should wait until our election cycle has come to a close. I couldn't say with certainty that he would be allowed to come into our country, or that if he were, that he would be welcomed by certain people he would find here. I am pretty sure that had he asked one of the American students, he would have gotten a much more optimistic response.

This whole meeting of cultures just underlined for me that prejudice and hate are learned. One is not born with those sentiments. These children approached each other on a human to human level. Race, creed and religion didn't seem to enter the equation. Maybe we all need to step back and remember we are all human beings with the same hopes, dreams and aspirations. Whitney Houston used to sing, "I believe the children are our future." I think they can also be our teachers.



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