

Italian Scientists Speak to the Next Generation

Kayla Pantano (February 23, 2017)



As part of an ongoing series at the Consulate General of Italy, a group of Italian scientists shared their experiences and offered advice to young migrant Italians pursuing a career in the field in the US.

The “[Meet the New Italians of New York](#) [2]” cycle resumed this week at the [Consulate General of Italy](#) [3] with the first event in the series of the year dedicated to the research community. Each different occasion concentrates on a distinct discipline ranging from fashion to finance and facilitates an opportunity for interaction with professionals in the field to those who aspire to obtain such positions. The aim of the project is to involve the new generation of migrant Italians and encourage their participation in the activities of institutions of the Italian system.

Organized in collaboration with the [Italian Scientists and Scholars of North America Foundation](#) [4], “[Meet the New Italian Scientists of New York](#) [5]” consisted of a panel of distinguished guests, who talked about their experiences, difficulties, and how they made it to New York. The audience



was able to intervene and ask questions, providing them with a chance to learn how to establish themselves in such a complex city. [Riccardo Lattanzi](#) [6] (Associate Professor Radiology, Electrical and Computer Engineering, Director of Training, Center for Advanced Imaging Innovation and Research, New York University), who arrived in the US after graduating from the University of Bologna, presented the various speakers and moderated the discussion.

Physicist [Elena Aprile, Ph.D.](#) [7] (Professor, Physics Department, Columbia University) expressed beforehand to i-Italy, "As I walk downed Park Avenue to this Consulate, I just felt proud to be Italian. I'm happy to be here and I hope the public is able to interact with some of us who are doing science in New York, and in my case for a very long time too."

What Science Means to Them

When offering their own definition of the word "science," it was clear that all of the featured panelists are extremely passionate about their chosen career paths.

For example, [Michele Pagano, MD](#) [8] (Chair Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Pharmacology, May Ellen and Gerald Hay Ritter Professor of Oncology, New York University School of Medicine, Investigator, Howard Hughes Medical Institute) does not consider his job as "work" but rather part of his life. Similarly, [Andrea Ventura, MD, Ph.D.](#) [9] (Associate Member, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center), who moved to the US in 2003 and finished his postdoctoral at MIT before coming to NY, described his job as "a dream come true." He wanted to become a scientist since he was a kid living in a small village in Sicily, even though he didn't know much about the industry other than what he gathered from books and television.

Others in attendance are enthusiastic about their work because it supplies endless possibilities for the youth to advance knowledge. [Maurizio Porfiri, Ph.D.](#) [10] (Professor, Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering New York University School of Engineering Tandon), who works in robotics and studies both human-robot and animal-robot interactions, described working in science and engineering as "an exciting creative process that provides opportunities to train younger generations to undertake new endeavors and to push the frontiers of knowledge." [Luca Carloni, Ph.D.](#) [11] (Associate Professor, Department of Computer Science, Columbia University), who has worked in computer engineering for more than 20 years since graduating in Italy, shared, "I'm lucky enough to work in a field that has an increasing impact in society, for which there is a need for the next generation to come with enthusiasm and provide their contribution."

Science in the United States Versus Italy

All of the scientists who spoke at the Consulate lived in Italy before moving to the States to advance their careers. While many studied there and all are very fond of their country, they all encouraged the crowd to work here in the US as opposed to overseas.

Pagano, for one, could not pinpoint the differences within the industry between the countries, as he has not worked in Italy since 1990, but he believes that the US is the place to be. Aprile is of the same mentality. She came to Boston to Harvard University for a postdoctoral with [Carlo Rubbia](#) [12], a Noble Prize winner, and went on to work at Columbia. Though she travels back home every month, she does not think she could work there as well as she does here. However, she is still of the opinion that "there is no better country" than Italy.

Pagano could offer that in the US doctoral students are treated as equal colleagues. He expressed, "It is important to give advice, but especially to let these guys be free to grow, to develop their own ideas and go straight on their way."

Ventura specifically advised those working in Italy to do an experience abroad, reassuring them that they can always come back later. While he's aware that there are incredibly good scientists in Italy, he believes that it's much easier to become independent in the US. He explained, "You will have your own lab and you can do research when you are young and the most creative." In Italy, on the other hand, this takes much longer.



Another difference he pointed out is that it's encouraged in the US to move from one place to another and frowned upon if you don't. The case is the opposite in Italy, which Ventura views as "very dangerous and the wrong thing to do for scientists."

Advice for the Next Generation

Pagano suggests to simply follow your passion "and nothing else." He emphasized, "Don't think too much of what is the best choice. Don't panic." He also encouraged to pursue science from a place of curiosity and to work a lot, especially at the best institutions if able to. Similarly, Ventura advised, "I think the best advice is not to give up and to always try. Send your CV to the best labs in the field. Don't be shy. Don't be afraid."

In regards to Italian students hoping to come to America to pursue a doctorate, Carloni shared, "It worked for me to meet teachers at Italian universities, to work with them and participate in seminars. This was a great channel to become part of a more international reality."

Aprile, the only woman host of the event, spoke specifically to all the women scientists out there. She began, "You can only be successful in this field by having physical and mental strength." She continued, "To have a laboratory, to teach, to be a wife, to be a mother, it is what I managed to do. I think it is important to convey the message to young women that in life you can do anything if only you desire it."

Click [here \[13\]](#) to see our interview with the panelists before the event, aired on [NYC Life \[14\]](#).

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