

Bellissimo Dottore Francesco J. Giacobbe

by Carissimo Giudice Sal Martocche

(the author uses the greetings when he and Dr. Giacobbe met)

*My friend, I'll say it clear
I'll state my case, of which I'm certain
I've lived a life that's full
I traveled each and every highway
And more, much more than this
I did it my way.*

When Paul Anka wrote these famous lines for Frank Sinatra in the unforgettable ballad, "My Way," little did he know that he was describing Dr. Francesco Giacobbe. After reflecting on his life and speaking to friends and family, I smiled and thought he indeed did do it his way.

In middle age, Dr. Francesco decided he should have a middle name and chose the name Joseph to honor his brother-in-law and great friend, Dr. Joseph Coppola. No one could argue that was not a wonderful gesture. I wish, however, he had chosen a name beginning with the letter D. It would perfectly represent some of the many strengths he displayed throughout his lifetime. Discipline, determination, daring, delightful - these are some of the "ds" that come to mind when remembering Dr. Giacobbe.

From the age of nine, when he and his family knew that he had the gifts to continue his education beyond the elementary level offered in his village, they realized it would require him to travel from his small Sicilian hamlet, Spadafora, to Messina. And it would require tuition because the school was private. To raise money for his tuition, Francesco negotiated with local fishermen to buy more or less 26 pounds of fish, then carried the fish in a basket on his head numerous times during the year on a 14-mile roundtrip to sell in San Pier Niceto.

At eighteen, he journeyed to the United States alone and saw his father for the first time since shortly after his birth. He later told his daughter Paola that he had to learn to live with and build a relationship with a complete stranger because his father had left poverty-stricken Sicily many years before to go to the United



Studying anatomy as a medical student, 1955

States to support his family. Then World War II broke out and, for a long time, no one on either side of the Atlantic knew who was alive and who was not.

He displayed similar determination when he decided to study at Syracuse University, despite the fact he did not speak much English. Four years later, he returned to Italy to obtain his medical degree at the world-famous University of Naples. The same determination was coupled with a delightful and charming courtship of the woman who became his wife. His fellow student, Joe Coppola, worried about his handsome, hard-working friend who never seemed to have time to pursue a social life. When Joe told his wife Olympia about this, she introduced Francesco to her sister and his future wife, Renata.

It is safe to say he immediately recognized Renata as the love of his life and he pursued her with the same diligence, persistence and skill that marked his life. He told me once that Renata and Naples taught him how to laugh, and that Renata had a way of supporting him and, at the same time, guiding him. He once said, "When I proposed to her, she totally shut me down. She was very independent, as was Olympia. But she didn't realize how stubbornly persevering I could be. And by the time I graduated from medical school, we were engaged."

In 1960, Dr Francesco completed a rotating internship at the distinguished E. J. Meyer Memorial Hospital (now ECMC) in Buffalo. And In 1961, he returned to Naples to marry Renata. She and her parents arrived in Buffalo later that year. Renata, an honors student in Latin and French, immediately began English classes at the University of Buffalo.

Dr. Francesco went on to a long and successful career in Buffalo as a highly-esteemed medical doctor. Renata was a renowned teacher of romance languages for over 40 years at Canisius University, SUNY Buffalo State, and others. And together, they raised a family of four children who have gone on to lead successful and happy lives.

At his memorial service, his beloved niece Luciana Galante reflected on some of the key euphemisms the good doctor used to repeat regularly to friends and family. For him, life was truly beautiful and treating all human beings with respect was essential. “Remember that whatever you plant will not grow unless you water it,” he was fond of saying. “And never leave home without a hug and a kiss.”

Dr. Francesco always loved medicine, and I can attest to the fact. During our many shared meals and coffees, individuals approached him often with a story or two and always with a thank-you for the care they or one of their loved ones received from this devoted medical practitioner. His love for and devotion to the United States led him to join the U.S. Naval Reserve at the age of 47; he served six months active duty during the Gulf War.

Joe Di Leo, the editor of this magazine and the administrator of the Per Niente Fund to help those in need, recalled the many walks he took with Dr. Francesco. Joe said, “I knew him as a man of great character, determination and strength, but I also saw a kindness that he displayed to all who crossed his path. I never once heard him complain or make a negative comment about anyone.”

Renata predeceased Dr. Francesco by too many years. For the last years of her life, she had dreamed of an Italian cultural center in Buffalo. Dr. Francesco was determined to make that a reality as a final and lasting



Renata and Dr. Francisco Giacobbe

honor for his beloved wife. Joe Di Leo’s wife, Toni Marie, an important presence at Centro CuTurale Italiano, recalled Dr. Francesco’s Saturday morning visits to the center, where he greeted everyone with a warm “Buon giorno,” where he could watch the children while they took their Italian lessons while their parents had an espresso in the cafe. He relished every minute. “It’s like a big piazza in Italy,” he told Toni Marie.

When I listened to Dr. Giacobbe talk about his family, he seemed to get taller, his smile wider, his posture straighter. His clear pride in his four children was palpable. They are Andrew, a plastic surgeon; Mario, a New York State judge; Franco, president of Whitmore Capital, and Paola, an associate professor of Spanish and administrator at D’Youville University. Who wouldn’t be proud?

I know that Dr. Giacobbe is saying, “We did it,” to Renata at this very moment and she is smiling and saying, “I am so proud of what you did over these last 10 years to make our dream a reality.” He responds, “I heard everything you were whispering in my ear, and now, Renata, it’s up to others to carry the torch.”

Thank you, Dr. and Mrs. Giacobbe, for your leadership.

I miss you, Bellissimo Dottore.