Danielle

from Tillsonburg

to

Italy

"Mangia bene, Ridi spesso, Ama molto."
(Eat good, Laugh often, Love a lot.)

Italy is known often for its food, but one thing that the world should know is the Italian people. Willing to accept anyone like family and waste hours on end with a coffee and good company. In these past few weeks it has been dawning on me that my life here is quickly coming to an end, and everything I once thought was strange now seem to be the hardest to part from. The normalities of my everyday will soon be memories shared around a campfire or evening meal. I guess I should let you in on my reminiscing journey that is my favourite experiences on my exchange.

The first people I met in Italy was my first host family, and honestly the thought of leaving there brings tears to my eyes. Living in that house I was a daughter and a sister, not a person temporarily living there. From the breath taking view of a sunset on my balcony, to sitting at the island and baking with my host mom Marina, this house was filled with great experiences. Even though I no longer live there I am definitely no stranger to the house, ever Saturday I have lunch there and hang out. This past Saturday I spent the whole afternoon making pizza with Marina and then, for dinner, family and friends came over staying late into the night. A highlight of the night was when the teasing turned into whip cream being thrown across the table in a food fight. She is my therapist, friend, makeshift mother, and reference point and I don't know how I could have gotten through this exchange without her.

The next people that spiced up my exchange were my friends from the Oratorio di San Filippo Nero (the parish centre run with the church). These are the people who not only taught me Italian language, but also the do's and don'ts of Italy. These are the people I can waste hours with and have it feel like minutes, except when hiking. I remember my first week here in Italy they all showed up and told me to get ready to go on a *short* hike. They were taking me to the mountain lake near where I live. Being from the flat part of Canada I thought a short hike was like five ten minutes. When we made it too the base of the mountain, they said "arriviamo" which means we have arrived. I heard this sentence for the next fifty minutes, before we finally saw the lake. I fell onto the ground exhausted and never again trusted Italians with time, because to them the five minutes can be from twenty minutes to an hour.

A large part of exchange it the friends you make who are also exchange students, and these happened to be another group of friends I have. Some people will remain friends but for me one has become more of a sister than a friend. Hannah, the girl from Germany has become one of most cherished friendships. Meeting her the first time was in September but it was in October when we went to Tuscany that we became close. It was the last night and we were getting back to the hotel late, and we started talking about anything and everything. By two am we knew practically each others life stories. Even though we live an hour away by train we still talk everyday and are the first people to know each others problems. Leaving Hannah behind in Europe is going to be a hard task, without our random bits of craziness, like super Canada (inside joke). In our friendship I am referred to as mother duck, and she is my duckling, and leaving her will be as hard as leaving a hole behind. I can't wait to travel and see everyone again because I know I will miss the little things that everyone brings to our group.

In school I was put in the third class of cooking school. My class includes another exchange student Joseph and 15 other students. Spending 6 days a week in the small grey class is lightened with Africa's (a nickname for Loris, based on a religion project) sassy comments, Eleonora's positivity, Poala's sarcasm, and everyone else's antics. I only have a week left with my class before they leave for stage (a compulsory work period to pass school) and though they all promise to eventually visit me in Canada I don't know how to survive a school day without them. I am going to miss Mondays the most, because that is cooking class. For five hours we joke around the schools commercial kitchen preparing a four course lunch for everyone. Even though we all have small groups and our own tasks, an hour before eating we all group where food is being tested. I have learned techniques from them, and they have learned them from me. I will also miss our aggressively competitive games of Uno during break.

Even though I have now finished my competitive swimming in Italy, I have many happy memories there. I will miss Michele trying to convince our coach to

shorten the sets, even though he knew he could easily finish them. Davide was always the one to encourage me to keep going between catching his breath at the wall. Giuseppe or Pepe has a spirit that won't break, even being disabled he smiles through all the pain and brings a smile to everyone's face. Mattia is the jokester of the group and has no shame in trying to annoy me. Siria is my competition and we push each other to keep getting better. I was so glad that I got to bring such a big part of my life to Italy and becoming part of the team here. I can't wait to cheer them on when they make the Olympics. Though I am happy to never have to complete a few of the dreadful test sets we did once a month.

My second host family was not the best part of my exchange but my host sister Carlotta made many memories I will never forget. Evenings after dinner we spent studying English and Italian, or we would lay on the floor playing games on her phone and laughing. Carlotta was the reason I learned to skate, learned Italian, and learned all about Italian fashion. My favourite times though were when it was just us home, and we got to have "girl talk". The one time that sticks in my mind was when she tried to set me up with her cousin. In Italy it is weird not to have dated anyone, and although I said no to her suggestions we spent the afternoon convincing my parents that I was dating her cousin. We were complete opposites that were inseparable like magnets, and I will cherish our many memories.

The last week of my Christmas break was spent in the mountains with a group of high school kids from my church. The theme was forgiveness and that weekend brought everyone much closer. We learned how not to just forgive each other but ourselves, and everyone there was a support system that I will never forget. Even with the heavy topic of the weekend, we had so much fun playing place, thing, VIP (a game where you try to fill each category with things that start with the appropriate letter for the round first) and my personal favourite playing in the snow. The snow was wonderful, even if there were constant boys vs girls snowball fights. The whole weekend I was called crazy for not wearing more than a sweater outside, but then again I am Canadian. That week is something I never knew I would enjoy but I am so glad I went.

The beginning of February was another new start with my third host family. This family was a mix featuring a southern Italian and a southern Spanish and their two kids. Francesco my host father was excited to finally learn English sarcasm, even though he still doesn't quite get it. My mother though was excited to cook, and do girly things. We had many sleepover with my exchange friends where she would join us, and you couldn't tell by how she acted that she wasn't a teenager. Eloisa my host mom taught me a little Spanish, but outlying just the Spanish confidence. It started with getting me to dance like no one was watching, to expressing what I actually wanted instead of saying "whatever you want". I still try to see her one a week and stepping through the door and hearing her excitement from the kitchen makes me feel like I never left. Like she always says, the house will always be mine, and if I don't come back she will come and find me.

Even though I couldn't do the whole week, another highlight of my exchange was la settimana della communita. This translates to the week of the community, and it is a group of high school and first year university students staying in the oratorio for a week, for eating and sleeping. I met many new people and pushed many boundaries. I think the biggest boundary I broke was on the last night. We were playing games when one person brought up a new suggestion. The game starts with every person being giving a random number from one of two lists, girls and boys. The game starts when two numbers from the boys list are called, the first one just stands still and does nothing, and the second must defend the first. A number is then called of a girl, the object of the game for the girl in this round is to kiss the first guy called on the cheek, and the protector wants to kiss the girl on the cheek. If the girl kisses the first boy then the protector is not the person who stands there and another is called to be the protector and another girl to attack. If the boy protector kisses the girl then she is in the middle and another girl is allied to be the protector, and then a boy to be the attacker. The other game I loved, and that I was more comfortable with was called protective. We were split into two groups one group having one more person. A circle is formed with chairs with the seats facing inwards. The smaller group sits on the chairs and the other group behind one person standing behind an empty seat. The person with the empty seat must win at one person in the inner circle and they must try to move seats without the person behind them catching their shoulders.

One of the groups I joined in Italy was ACR, a Catholic program for elementary and middle school kids, I was in the group of the second middle school or for us grade seven and had the amazing opportunity of going to Rome with them. It is a trip organized by the diocese of Brescia and so we also went to the Vatican and had a speech given by the Pope to the 3000 students and leaders from Brescia. The second of three days was tourist destinations. The group from my church decided to do the twenty kilometre hike around Rome on foot in the four hours we had free in the afternoon. Many people thought I had a little too much coffee that day because I kept running up the stairs and doubling back being enthusiastic and getting the back of the group to walk faster.

The truth though was that my group was only doing half the effort I was so I had to double it so we could get everything done. By the end of the day I crashed into bed with sore legs for the next week. I got closer to my group though as we had the ten hours on a bus to talk about anything. I am going to miss seeing them every Saturday and that soon they will be the next ACR leaders.

I have just recently moved into my fourth families house. It is once again a completely different experience. Though I haven't been here long my memories are filled with soccer games of one of my host brothers, and piano recitals of the other. Have also gotten to meet many more classes because my host mother is a teacher and keeps bringing me along on field trips to museums to meet new people and learn new things. This is my last family now until the end of my experience in Italy and it is sad to think that the time is so short. It means I have to make every moment matter with this family and everything else in Italy and will definitely have to return to Italy with my family in the near future.

I think an obvious thing I am going to miss from Italy is the food. Whether it be a coffee or cappuccino to pizza or pasta, food is going to be hard to leave behind. I am going to tell you some of the small things I know I will miss from the Italian food culture. First off hot chocolate, yes we have it in Canada but Italian hot chocolate is thick and is eaten with a spoon instead of sipped. Focaccia has become my favourite type of bread while in Italy and is not done nearly as well in Canada. Gnocchi is not that big in Canada but has become one of my two favourite dishes since being in Italy. Gnocchi are potato dumplings often with butter and sage. One type of food typical of my Valley is Casonelli which is a specific type of ravioli made with ground beef and ricotta. Cantucci or in North America know as biscotti (which translates to cookies) are so much more common and much better in Italy, I will miss having them with my morning coffee. Finally to make the list short enough to fit this report I will end on Americana pizza, which is pizza topped with mozzarella, würstel, and French fries, which is surprisingly an amazing combination.

As this exchange starts rushing to an end, I know there is so much of my life I will leave here, and the end is a sad thought. Even tough it all seems down, if this exchange and changing host families has taught me anything it is that: it is never the end, only a new beginning and that you can always go back and visit. I am now excited to share my exchange, new knowledge, and recipes with Canada and start the next chapter of my life with the new and improved me that has been molded throughout this whole amazing experience. To those who went before me and those who go after will know this is not a part of your life you will forget, you become a new person and that will stay with you forever. For the many blessings and the experiences that will become of this thank you a thousand times Rotary, you have changed my life and so many others.

Danielle