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A Newfound Respect

Kimberley Castagnola is the 2009 First Place winner of the IACF Literature Award for Solon High School, co-sponsored with the Italian American Club of Solon. Kim read *Where I Come From*, a collection of poems by Maria Gillen. She will be attending John Carroll University this fall-- Ed.

When judgmental eyes undress me and ask... where are you from? ... Sometimes I'd like to reply Mars. However I am fortunate enough to be able to say I am from America. From a land with one big melting pot of people -- a whole assortment of ethnicities and backgrounds -- and we have come a long way to a universal acceptance with the past hundred years. I look back at the life my grandfather must have had, my mother's father -- Claude Romanini -- who has lived 92 years of his life in America, and I realize he has faced more hardships from his heritage than I can even imagine.



Kim and her grandfather, Claude Romanini

Upon reading the poem "Public School No. 18," I couldn't help but put myself in my grandfather's shoes. What was he doing when he was my age? Did my grandfather ever feel like one of the kids who had to choose silence in school, fearing "the Italian word will sprout from [his] mouth like a rose? Was he ever ashamed to be Italian? It is hard to even imagine a life like that. Coming from Solon High School, a school that not only includes students of Italian, Irish, French, Polish, or English descent, but also African American, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Native American and countless more origins, I feel beyond fortunate to be apart of such a diverse community.

Gillen says in the poem "Growing Up Italian in Patterson, New Jersey", When I was a little girl I thought everyone was Italian, and that was good. I could relate to this immensely. Growing up, I had a very loving and very large family. Everyone was greeted with a kiss, a hug, a handshake, or all three. I didn't know any way of family other than this, until I came into contact with other families. No other family is as close as an Italian family - everyone, and I mean everyone is a cousin, uncle, aunt, or sibling. Homemade was a way of life - I didn't even know you could find pasta sauce in a jar at the supermarket! Similarly, church every Sunday was something that was a given. There was always that one aunt or uncle that could cut your hair better than any salon; or so you believed (until you looked in the mirror and hated it). Being Italian was a way of life, a day to day encounter and I didn't know anything other than that growing up.

Now when I am asked where I come from, my response will no longer just be "America", but I will say with pride that I am an Italian American. I will pronounce my last name the way it should be pronounced - "COS-TAH-NOLA", instead of the Americanized "Castagnola". I will take pleasure in the fact that I can tan well in the summer, that I can make homemade pasta and that I know what capicola is and how delicious it can make a sandwich. Most importantly I can take pride in the importance of family tradition, and the fact that these traditions my grandfather brought to our family will last long after I am gone.

One of the most influential things I took from these selections of poems was that while we all haven't come from the same place, we are all going through the same things. Whether you're white, black, yellow, orange, blue or purple, we are all humans with one common goal - to make the best of what we are given. Maria Gillan is an inspiring person that I have begun to admire, and never again will I take for granted the gift of my beautiful heritage.