

Reflecting on an Italian teacher who helped me to 'get it'

By Catherine Wargo

Walking down a path in a remote village perched on the top of the world, in the Himalayas of Nepal, I encountered a girl leading her toddling brother by the hand. Against the backdrop of pristine blue sky, the bright colors of their clothes drew my eye as our mutual approach kicked up the earth's dust. The children made a gesture of prayer in front of their faces, bowing slightly and said "Namaste."

As I walked away from the pair, I thought about how *namaste* means hello. But, I also realized that when people say a word like *namaste* they do not mean hello any more than I say "hello" and mean *namaste*.

In that moment we were both attempting to communicate the idea of a respectful greeting using different words.

Location: Conestoga High School. Year: 1998. There is a distinctive heat in high-school classrooms on balmy spring afternoons that makes students' eyes droop and their shoulders slump. I am stuck to the plastic chair, plodding through one of my last high-school Italian lessons. And

Signor Russo, a fiery and enthusiastic Italian man, who had taken it upon his shoulders to impart the understanding of the Italian language to this classroom of slouching, panting adolescents, is spouting his eternal mantra: "Language is not words; it's the communication of ideas."

Throughout my education in the Tredyffrin/Easttown School District, I studied foreign languages guided by a combination of common sense, curiosity and my parents' wishes. I arrived early some mornings at New Eagle Elementary School to learn French at the optional before-school program; then I chose Spanish, now the most useful language in the Western Hemisphere, instead of French or Latin. Through the next five years and countless classes, I studied Spanish — bullfights, late night tapas, siestas and rolling my "r"s.

Feeling overconfident at the judicious age of 17, I decided that I had mastered Spanish and moved on to Italian; pasta, romance and art appealed to me.

Mr. Anthony Russo proved a diligent instructor in the program's initial year at Conestoga. The assortment of freshman-to-senior students represented cooperative learning in action. Although I don't remember much grammar or sentence structure, verb conjugation or subjunctive tense cases, I did come away from the class with an ear for the Italian language that continued into my further studies.

Through the next year-and-a-

half, I could close my eyes in my college classes and picture Russo talking about "cacophonia and euphonia," words that just plain don't sound right together in Italian, and those words that just plain do: "Language is not words; it's the communication of ideas."

Russo would stand at the front of the classroom and wave his hands as if conducting a grand symphony, our voices responding in bored flats and sharps accompanying his enthusiastic melody. Although repetition is arguably an effective way to memorize, the meaning of the "music" we were making did not come until later.

Since then, I have catapulted myself around the globe in various directions. Comments from high-school friends, family members and neighbors can be summarized as a general "where to next?"

I have heard it said that the third language is the easiest. I suppose the networks in our brains are primed for the acquisition of new languages, because upon arriving in Sweden to study and live for five months in the spring of 2001, I knew one word of Swedish: *Hej*, a greeting that does not mean "hello," but is simply also the communication of the idea of greeting.

I studied at Stockholm University and lived with a wonderful and generous Swedish family. I took a Swedish class and an Italian class in Swedish among others.

The formal Swedish classes were almost no help, but sitting in

the subway with the rush-hour commute around me, trying to read advertisements with the help of my pocket dictionary was invaluable. Other first-time Swedish speakers in my classes were hung up on translating words directly — why is "hurry," one word in English, translated as *skynda pa*, two words?

Teaching Swedish, a difficult language, to a classroom full of rowdy, stubborn Americans would be a challenge for any instructor. I watched myself in dis-

belief as I, suddenly the nerdy overachiever, announced, in Swedish, the catch phrase that I had pirated from Mr. Russo to the whole class, "Language is not words; it's the communication of ideas."

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