

PINO NANO

WOMEN OF THE SOUTH

English edition

Associazione I Sud del Mondo ETS



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President Association I Sud del Mondo ETS

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POMPEO TORCHIA

President of the Association “I Sud del Mondo ETS”

There are books that are born to tell. And there are others that are born also to return dignity, memory, awareness, and future to a community. “Donne del Sud” belongs without any doubt to the latter category.

As President of the Association I Sud del Mondo ETS, I immediately felt the moral duty, even before its cultural value, to welcome and sponsor this work, recognizing its deep human, civil, and formative value. It is not only a collection of well-written stories, nor simply a tribute to the female leading figures of Calabria. This book represents much more: a living, strong, and necessary testimony. It’s a work that invites us to look at this land from a different perspective, more just, broader, more true.

For too long, Calabria, and with it much of the Mezzogiorno, has been told almost exclusively through its delays, its wounds, its contradictions, its shadows. It is a narrative that exists, and that no one can or must deny. But it is not the only possibility. In addition to the chronicle of pain, there exists in fact, another story, often more silent but not less powerful: the history of merit, sacrifice, intelligence, determination and moral beauty. The story of women who, starting from difficult, peripheral and marginal contexts, have been able to build extraordinary paths of emancipation, affirmation and responsibility.

This is precisely the book’s evocative power: bringing to light concrete, credible, deeply human examples being able to speak to consciences and awaken hope. The protagonists of these pages are not distant or unattainable figures. They are true women, with their roots, their labors, their departures, their renouncements, their conquests. Women who have crossed geographical, cultural and professional boundaries, without ever breaking that intimate and visceral bond with the land from which they come from.

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In each of them there is Calabria that resists, thinks, creates, studies, cures, innovates, serves institutions, defends the legality, produces culture, and opens new paths. As an Association, we have recognized in this collection a full consonance with our social and cultural mission. I Sud del Mondo ETS comes from the idea that the “souths” are not places to sympathize with, but instead to understand, to enhance and connect complex places, often wounded, but rich in human, intellectual and spiritual extraordinary resources. In this perspective, sponsoring South women meant for us to support a generative narrative, capable of transforming the individual example into collective heritage.

This book, in fact, does not celebrate success as an exhibition, but as a responsibility. It does not stage abstract models, but lives that can become reference, encouragement, possibility. And that is why it takes on a particular value, especially for the new generations, and in a special way for the girls of the South, for the young Calabrians, for all those who today struggle for their place in the world, often having to fight against stereotypes, social limits, educational inequalities, economic fragility and solitude interiors.

In a time like ours, in which too often women continue to be discriminated against, humiliated, violated, impeded in their full human and professional development, the testimony of these female figures acquires an even deeper meaning. Their strength does not erase the pain of the present, but challenges it. Their authoritativeness is not an exception to be admired passively, but an omen to make more and more normal, increasingly widespread, increasingly accessible.

The women told in this book give us a simple and very powerful truth: the future can be built. Even when everything seems to row against you. Even when you start from places considered marginal. Even when the weight of history, conventions, or fears seems too big.

They remind us that female freedom is a daily conquest, that emancipation is not a privilege but a right, that talent needs opportunity, trust and recognition.

For this reason, I hope that this publication will become a positive sign, a fertile seed, a tool for reflection and growth.

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I hope that it will be read not only as a book of testimonies, but as a small map of possibilities, and that it will be able to enter schools, places of formation, contexts and families. May it speak to young people, educators, institutions, to those who have public responsibilities and to those who simply seek reasons to believe in the strength of well-reported stories.

Women of the South is, in the end, also a universal message. It speaks of women of Southern Italy, of course, and in particular, in this first publication, of Calabrian women, but its breath goes beyond every regional border. He speaks ideally to all the women of the “South of the world”, to all those who live in marginalized territories, in difficult contexts, in geographies of absence and distance, and who nevertheless guard within themselves the will to build a different destiny. In this sense, the South becomes not only a geographical place, but a condition of soul and history; and these women represent the highest ransom.

In Pino Nano, our sincere thanks for having collected, guarded and returned with sensitivity and passion these exemplary existences. In his writing, it must be recognized the merit of having been able to combine the rigor of the chronicler with the delicacy of listening, offering each protagonist a space of truth, respect and memory.

All of us, finally, have the most important task: do not let these pages remain just a good reading, but make it an opportunity for awareness, commitment and change.

With this spirit, and with deep conviction, the Association I Sud del Mondo ETS has wanted to sponsor this meritorious work, certain that the voice, courage and example of its protagonists can contribute to making the society that we wish to build more free, more just and more human.

Pompeo Torchia President Association “I Sud del Mondo ETS”



PINO NANO

I have asked myself this for years, but without ever finding an answer that is truly worth telling to those who today want to know more about this land which, in some ways, is still a “disinherited”, “distant”, “betrayed”, “disappointed” land, a “land of immense solitude and endless emigration”? Even, fatally worse, a “land of ‘ndrangheta”?

There is no corner of the world I haven't been to and where I haven't heard the usual stock phrase repeated to me over all these years: “Calabria? Land of the Mafia?”

So I decided to go in search of personal stories that could somehow portray this land differently from the traditional patterns of news reporting. Not, in short, the usual investigations into wrongdoing and violence, but the Calabria of Excellence: the stories of illustrious sons and daughters of this land who became famous elsewhere, here in particular successful women, who today govern the future, who have an international vision of life and the world, who speak multiple languages, and who every day face the great issues of the moment, from medicine to scientific research, from institutional commitment to volunteer work, from music to art, from politics to philosophy, from the real life of their new metropolises to the major questions weighing on the use of Artificial Intelligence, in short, everything that modern philosophers now call the “New Humanism”.

That is how this challenge began.

When I first proposed an alternative format to the director of the newspaper *Calabria Live*, Santo Strati, for his Sunday Special supplement, he gave me carte blanche; and that is how, week after week, month after month, year after year, the list of “Calabrians to tell stories about” kept growing, filling not only my travel notebook, but above all, my life too, and the deafening silence of our cities in these recent years of Covid.

What emerged from this was a kind of travel journal: a reporter putting back on his most comfortable, worn-out shoes to go in search of what has never been told before with such a wealth of details and particulars, driven by the intimate desire to understand:

How does one get born as a woman in the most remote place in Calabria and then reach the top of today's major industrial companies, or the summit of this country's highest political institutions?

I think of the personal story of Wanda Ferro, today Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of the Interior, a woman who has dedicated her entire life to civil commitment and the fight against organized crime; but I also think of Maria Tripodi, Undersecretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Farnesina, who travels the world every day representing our country's causes with the traditional pride of her Locride region.

Today, Mara Panajia is at the helm of Henkel, president of one of the giants of the Italian chemical industry; Sandra Savaglio is the woman who taught the world to love the “stars”; Carla Morogallo in Milan leads the Triennale, which is a sort of Mecca of modern knowledge; Anna Maria De Luca leaves Fuscaldo to land in Moscow as head of the Italian

School; Elena Sodano created out of nowhere, from nothing, a therapeutic reality for Alzheimer's patients that has become legendary in Cicala.

But equally beautiful is the story of Franca Melfi, whom the world envies us for today because of the way only she knows how to use the da Vinci robot, and who for this very reason is invited to every corner of the world to explain what a mechanical robot can do today in the operating room against the most unreachable tumors in the human body.

Or again, the story of Marilena Greco, who at eighteen left Cariati to pursue her dreams, and today lives in Norway where she teaches the secrets of the oceans to scientists from all over the world, who consider her a true icon of scientific research.

As queen of the world of show we chose Elisabetta Gregoraci, with all that was her life next to Briatore or next to her old grandmother of Soverato; as writer Giusy Staropoli Calafati and her almost obsessive passion for Corrado Alvaro and Catia Acquesta professional communicator that also spends much of her time, with its association, against gender violence; but beautiful are also the stories of two magistrate women, Annamaria Frustaci and Marisa Manzini, brave and tenacious, who for years have been under guard and who have found in writing for young people their new existential dimension. Many of these personal stories are today marked and crossed by new facts and new goals, perhaps even by new successes, which only increase the added value of these successful women.

I met women who told me their life as if I knew them forever, who blindly trusted what I would write about them, who entrusted me with the most particular secrets of their childhood, sometimes even stolen, who serenely confided their dreams and their initial difficulties, female doctors, scientists, entrepreneurs, journalists, and even women of the Republic.

In the end, I fell in love with their lives, and sometimes felt so close to them to tell their stories with great respect and admiration. It is as if I had really shared with all of them an important part of the path traveled by each of them, and this is a very beautiful feeling that I will cherish forever, and of which I will never end to say to each of them thanks for this absolutely dispassionate and serene encounter.

In each of these stories you will find a single guiding thread, which was not desired, but which is real, and it is this visceral and ancestral relationship that still binds every protagonist of my journey to their own land of origin, to their memories, to the emotions of their childhood, to their first loves in the country, to their first important meetings, and then to their first train journey towards the infinite.

I think of the journalist Giada Fazzalari, director of the Avanti, to Simona Lo Bianco, the dresser of the FAI to guard the Giants of the Sila, to the paraolimpic champion Enza Petrilli wonderful aspromontana history, to the new Rector of the University of Salento Maria Antonetta Aiello, to the international researchers Roberta Migale, Sandra Misale and Francesca Caccuri, to the "pasionaria" of Maria Ubertone until you arrive to Maria Teresa Fragomeni, mayor of Maria di Gioiosa Ionica who becomes face and image of the antimafia for the calendar of the Antimafia Investigative Direction.

Who in Italy, who in Europe, who in America, who in Saudi Arabia, or who in Japan, each of these women tells me about their native land, their dearest friends, their old ones who are no longer there, especially the grandparents, and this visionary dream of wanting

to leave a sign, a dream that eventually has driven them away and has taken them away forever from Calabria.

Women of the South is above all this. It is the personal and intimate story of some of the many Calabrian excellences that today live in the most remote corners of the planet and that they still have many things to explain, tell and teach others.

A story that does not end here naturally, and that, as far as I am concerned, will go on until I have this desire to tell the stories of my people and the most beautiful emotions of the people of Calabria.

The desire, but also the time that goes more and more reducing, and the strength to do so.

WOMEN OF THE SOUTH



CATIA ACQUESTA

Unfortunately, I too was a victim of violence and stalking. In life, when something bad happens to us we have two options: lock the problem in a drawer and throw away the key, or face the pain, overcome it, and make it a life mission for yourself and for those who, like you, suffer and have suffered. I chose the second option because life led me to meet people who needed me and my painful past. That is how I found a way to transform suffering into a gift, which I have long put at the service of others.”

This story of Catia Acquesta is dedicated to violent loves, to the solitude of women, to the violence of which thousands of women every year, and not only in Italy, are victims, whether unaware or aware makes little difference. A story of great emotional depth, dedicated to the many family tragedies that are often hidden behind a femicide, and to the thousand contributing factors that determine the vulnerability of the female universe, increasingly threatened and attacked by violent, irrational men. A story dedicated to the isolation in which thousands of women, victims of aggression every day, take refuge out of shame or fear of being judged harshly. A story dedicated to a young reporter from Fagnano Castello, Catia Acquesta, today a highly successful journalist recognized from Trento to Marsala, who, in a book of great media impact, full of details and unpublished accounts, tells her own story and the violence suffered on her own skin, while all around her “her” world kept turning without realizing it, and above all pitiless toward her silence and her infinite melancholy. Alone with herself. Tragically alone with herself.

Mia o di nessun altro, il lato impervio dell'amore is in fact nothing other than a public denunciation of the far too many femicides of recent months in Italy, entering the unknown meanders of violence against women, something Catia Acquesta does with such grace and composure of judgment as to deserve the great critical acclaim that the book has already achieved in Italy. A true public manifesto in favor of women, against every form of oppression and violence, which this time, not by chance, begins right from a story rooted entirely in Calabria: that of Sonia Lattari.

“The stories told by Catia Acquesta,” writes the unforgettable journalist Maurizio Costanzo in his preface, “could be defined as love stories like any other: they begin with a chance first meeting, romantic dinners, gifts; but for many of them, the ending is sadly different. Demonstrations of affection gradually become morbid and transform the woman one should love into hunted prey. It would seem like the most natural thing in the world to walk away from someone who promised that everything would be perfect and instead becomes a tormentor to defend oneself against, but it is not that easy: women often take years to find the courage to free themselves from the oppression of predators.”

One name for them all: Sonia Lattari, yet another victim of madness and silence. Surviving is possible, but we all have the right to live! But how do you recognize when you are in a toxic relationship, and how do you learn to face it better to save your life?

To answer this deeply distressing question, Catia chose her hometown, Fagnano Castello, a sort of community gathering: the town assembled around a table to discuss these issues, almost a cultural challenge to herself and to the brilliance that has always accompanied her.

But in the end, she confesses, «it was a beautiful evening, engaging in every sense», and one that the community of Fagnano Castello will hardly ever forget.

«Inside *Mia o di nessun altro*,» she says, «there is also a part of my Calabrian life and the most intimate history of my hometown.

«This event in Fagnano Castello was a painful and deeply felt moment for me because of the brutal femicide that, in recent days, struck Sonia Lattari, stabbed to death by her husband during an argument. There are so many stories that over all these years I have followed firsthand and given voice to, like the ones I chose to tell in my book, but on this occasion I feel particularly involved. I am sad, bitter, directly touched by the pain of women who every day, anywhere in the world, suffer unbelievable violence. Sonia Lattari lived about 700 meters from my summer house, and her story devastated me! »

In Fagnano, Catia tells her story in the first person, unmasked, without shame, almost with pride, and she does so in her official role as speaker for the “Mede@ Association against Gender-Based Violence.

“For years I fought a long journalistic battle to have a law on stalking: today that law finally exists, and there are also the associations and the *Codice Rosso*, but it still doesn't seem to be enough. This issue of violence against women is actually a wound that has never fully healed, and one that reopens painfully and punctually on the occasion of cases like this one in Fagnano. These are stories of femicide that unfortunately continue to repeat themselves in a thousand other parts of Italy.”

Catia could not have found a better advocate for this occasion than him: the indestructible and untiring Maurizio Costanzo, a rock in every sense, an established historical icon of modern journalism, a master for many of us, and above all a faithful and strict witness to his era, the 20th century.

For Maurizio Costanzo, “Catia’s book opens up new hope, because it does not limit itself to telling stories that really happened, but through interviews and opinions from figures in the political, social, and medical worlds, it points out a path for every woman that can be taken and where it is possible to make it.”

“It is difficult to accept that a dream as big as love can be shattered so violently: people don't see it, they don't want to see it, because it hurts too much to accept the idea of having been deceived, betrayed, and outraged in soul, even before the body, by the man who claimed to love them. Any woman, Maurizio Costanzo further writes in his preface, feels lost, and submissiveness takes over: she convinces herself that by avoiding defending herself, by hiding the violence suffered, it will subside over time. She hopes that ‘he’ will change sooner or later. But violence can only change for the worse, because it is in the woman's fear, in her sense of guilt, and in the lack of self-esteem of the victim that the stupidity of man finds its greatest strength.”

Yes, because even courage, at times, is punished with further violence, and the realization that will lead her to want to separate from a violent man is often, Maurizio Costanzo reflects again, only the beginning of a new ordeal.

“Many would like to report it, but are afraid of being left alone on their path.”

Catia’s professional story is one of success and achievements earned in the field.

Graduating with highest honors in Law from "La Sapienza" University in Rome, she specialized in Criminal Law and Procedure, but ever since she was a child her true passion was journalism. She pursued it after graduation, doing so with excellent results. She became a professional journalist and began covering crime news and court reporting. But this was not enough for her. Her true dream was to be a correspondent, and she would only have to wait a few years. Today she has significant experience as a war correspondent thanks to a Master's training program by the Defense General Staff in collaboration with the National Press Federation of Italy. She collaborates and works with major national news outlets, TG5 and Studio Aperto. Then on July 1, 2019, she became Editor-in-Chief of the Radio-TV and Print News Outlets for the Roma Servizi per la Mobilità Agency of the Municipality of Roma Capitale. A fine professional milestone and a great achievement. But at the same time, she became head of the editorial platform "www.muoversiaroma.it". From March 2017 to June 2019, she managed External Relations, Strategy, Technical Coordination, and Operational Control for the Roma Servizi per la Mobilità Agency. From December 2011 to 2017, she handled Transport & Mobility. As a journalist at the Roma Servizi per la Mobilità Agency, the Editorial Platform saw her engaged daily for a long time in producing TV news broadcasts, radio news, and hundreds of articles and investigations for the portal. In the daily newspapers *Leggo* and *Metro*, the two pages dedicated to the transport and mobility of Roma Capitale were written by her.

"Today I decided to open a listening and prevention support desk for violence against women right in my hometown of Fagnano Castello. I will do it by the end of the year. It will be a gift I give to all the local women. I want to make them feel less alone. And I want to dedicate it to poor Sonia Lattari, victim of yet another femicide right behind my house."

– Catia, where exactly were you born and where did you grow up?

"I was born in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, but I grew up in Calabria. When I was one month old, my parents returned to Fagnano Castello, in the province of Cosenza, after a long honeymoon that lasted a few years, and where I then stayed until I was 18".

"I lost my father tragically in 2007, he had just turned 60 years. We weren't prepared for such a shock because he was in excellent health, always full of energy and a desire to do things, but sometimes life plays nasty tricks. However, once the initial pain had passed, I managed to establish a relationship with him that was finally peaceful. I don't argue with him anymore, but whenever I manage to dream of him, he always smiles at me. Now that he is gone, he has finally become my ally and accomplice in everything."

– Who replaced him at home?

"Now it is my older brother David, who also represents a bit of a father figure to me. I have an excellent relationship with him. We talk a lot, we discuss everything, we face the rest of our shared life together. It is a relationship that is never boring, but constructive and enveloping. Then there is my mother, with red hair like mine, and therefore the definition of 'formidable'. Above all, she has always been my closest friend. My truest supporter. She was especially so during my childhood."

– But what kind of childhood was yours in Fagnano Castello?

“A very difficult childhood. Above all, very complicated.”

– In what sense?

“I lived in a context that I never fully accepted. It was suffocating for me. Everything was limited. Closed minds, everyone ready only to judge. Ways of acting and expressing oneself that I never accepted. I had so many ideas in my head, but unfortunately they were nipped in the bud by a very jealous and possessive father. It was a source of great suffering for me! My only stroke of luck, I repeat, was my mother at the time.”

– Why?

“The most fun things I did were with her. And only with her. But also the most important things.”

– For example?

“Mom was always my best ally. She would always ‘cover’ for me, especially to allow me to take the classic little stroll down the town’s main street on Sundays. But she also let me go to singing or acting rehearsals, since, as a young girl, I had those two great passions. But invariably, as soon as my father found out, I had to cut everything short. I had to return home immediately and end what my ideal world was. To him, these were not ‘serious’ things. And it was like that for everything else. I was already driving a car at 16 with my mom beside me, a motor scooter at 9 years old; in short, let’s say I wasn’t the classic child who stayed put wherever you placed her.

“An amusing chapter of my childhood was my religious ‘vocation’. At 16, everyone around me saw me as the ideal girl to become a nun. Back then, I constantly spent time with the Salesian Sisters in my town; I was a youth leader, I played volleyball, and Don Bosco was my saint who always listened to me with a smile. My mother, convinced that I was so caught up in the vocation of becoming a nun, sent me on a retreat in Taranto. In the convent, it was a terrible experience, if only for the wake-up call at 5:40 in the morning...

“After a week, I called my mother in tears and told her that, apart from the breakfast carts loaded with all the delicacies in the world, being a nun was not my life’s mission. I had more ambitious and less gloomy plans. Fortunately, she smiled, and I immediately returned home.

“Fagnano, however, was too small for me. I graduated high school with excellent grades. I remember with great affection my Italian teacher in high school, Professor Giuseppina Aprigliano; she came from Cosenza every morning, and I am still in touch with her today. She loved watching me act. And her lessons magically turned into plays for me, which every year we would then bring to the theater. Everyone had a very specific role. I was always assigned the lead role. In Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, I was Caterina, and in Salvatore Di Giacomo’s *Assunta Spina*, the role of Assunta. I was so happy. Also because finally my father couldn’t say no anymore: the theater work I did was part of the school curriculum for the year. What wonderful years. Just think that even today my teacher writes to me saying that she saw a different light and talent in me, and that she is proud of everything I have become and everything I do. It touches me deeply.

“May I say it? Out of nothing and on my own, I made my life a masterpiece that I will never stop building upon.”

– Catia, do you still have a relationship with your hometown?

“In Fagnano I still have my whole family. Just think, I even have a wonderful niece who is now in her twenties, grown up so quickly without me even realizing it. When I look at photos of her as a little girl, I think of all the things I missed by living in Rome.

“In Fagnano, my mother remained, whom I slowly watched 'grow'. I don't use the word 'age' simply because to me she is still young, the girl of back then who helped me so much to move forward... I think of time passing inexorably... and me, running, running...”

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“Then at some point I stop, I turn, I look back, I think from where I come, and I see all the difficulties that I have overcome, and all the pains that could have destroyed me, and that instead I have turned into beautiful things for me and for others.”

– Do you feel comfortable giving us an example?

“Of course, today I am also ready to talk about this and give my testimony. I say 'give', because it is a gift to be able to tell others about a painful and traumatic experience. For me it was not easy at all. I have always given voice to others, finding myself in their stories. I deal with femicide, stalking, and violence against women because I was a victim myself. I also wrote a 'life-saving' decalogue, which then became the bookmark for this latest work of mine. These are ten rules for not ending up killed when your persecutor is looking for you. When you end a relationship and the other person doesn't accept your decision. And these are all things I put into practice to be able to be here today and tell the story.”

– What do Fagnano and Calabria mean to you today?

“Fagnano means a lot. Everything. It is my strength. It is my past, my present, my future. And so is Calabria!

“And from my past in Calabria I have beautiful and fun memories: my classmates whom I see in the summer, my family, my nearest and dearest, the places where I find peace; but I also have bad memories. Fagnano was the place where I met the person who then became my persecutor for so many years...”

– How did the choice of your first university major come about?

“I chose Law because I thought of a degree that could give me more possibilities: lawyer, journalist, law teacher, I don't know what else. I chose a path that I knew would be difficult, but I was certain that this choice would pay off in full in the future. And so it did, even though my persecutor tried in every way to destroy every small step I took, and every small step I built. He did it with a criminal, detailed design, repeated over time, without pause and without respite, and with a single final goal: to destroy me!

“Living in anonymity for many years saved me in the end, but it also took a lot away from me.”

– Catia, if today they offered you a steady, secure job like the one you have in Rome, would you move back to Calabria today?

“My home has become my life. I could live anywhere, but it would really have to be worth it.”

As a radio presenter, today Catia broadcasts almost daily, delivering radio news bulletins every half hour for Roma Radio (the subway radio station) and live broadcasts on Radio Rai and Radio Vatican news. Her background also includes institutional roles, the most prestigious being in the Press Office of the Chamber of Deputies; Transport Committee. But she is also Deputy Secretary of the Calabria Journalists' Union, National Councillor of the Italian National Press Federation (FNSI), and Member of the Equal Opportunities Committee. As a leading expert on stalking and women's protection, Catia is also Head of Communication and Spokesperson for the association “Mede@ contro la violenza”, www.progettomedea.org. Furthermore, she serves as Spokesperson for the “Brutium Calabresi nel mondo” association in Rome, www.brutium.it, and since 2010, president of “Italia incontra”, an association dedicated to the research and promotion of Italian excellence.

In short, a professional story like hers is that of a top-of-the-class achiever in every sense, making Catia Acquesta today, especially on the topic of violence against women, one of the most interesting and compelling authors at a national level.

– Catia, has it ever happened to you while traveling around the world to feel “ashamed” of being a daughter of Calabria?

“Never! I have always been proud to be a daughter of Calabria. I have always told everyone everywhere that I am Calabrian and happy to be so. And besides, I am so in love with our typical dishes that it makes me an even more devoted Calabrian.”

– What advice would you give to a young woman today who wanted to follow in your footsteps?

“To do it, to never get discouraged, and to pursue her dream with all her heart. Because dreams are made to be realized. I am proof of that. Despite the difficulties each of us may face in life, in the end you get where you want to go. Nothing is impossible!”

– Which investigation as a journalist do you care about the most?

“It is the story of Maria Antonietta Multari. Killed at age 33 with 42 stab wounds in broad daylight in the city center by Luca Delfino, her ex-boyfriend. To this day, I am still in touch with her family and her lawyer. In my book there are also two exclusive notes linked to this case.”

– What, instead, was the weapon behind your success? The keystone to achieving recognition so early on?

“My motto is this: “insist, resist, reach, and conquer”

“When you fall, or someone makes you fall, then heal the wounds you have, but get back up immediately.

“You see, I have to make up for 15 years of my life that were taken from me because I lived a non-life, but I did it only to save myself from certain death. Otherwise, I would have been one of the many victims who ended up killed by an ex who never accepted the end of a love story. Perhaps only now have I received, and am receiving, the proper reward for the time that was taken from me. And today, for me, every day is a lucky day; it is the right day to do something beautiful, to live with a smile, to rediscover the serenity I thought I had lost

forever, to believe in the beauty of human beings, to rediscover the light inside me, and around me.”

– May I wish you “In bocca al lupo” [Good luck]?

“Of course you can. In fact, you must! And I reply: ‘evviva il lupo’ [long life to the wolf]. Also because I still have so much to do, and I need it. I need people like you who are attentive to certain issues. Sensitive, positive, and profound.”



MARIA ANTONIETTA AIELLO

Rector of the University of Salento

I would first of all like to thank the academic community, the male and female students, for the support and trust they have placed in me: I feel strongly the responsibility to honor the commitment they have entrusted to me, accompanying with renewed strength and determination UniSalento's path toward a new horizon of progress that always puts people, their problems, and their dreams at the center. On the seventieth anniversary of its founding, it is a source of pride for me to become the first female rector of this university: I have no doubt there will be others, because there is no alternative to a future of genuine equal opportunity if we want, together, to nourish research, the economy, and keep alive and vibrant this House of Knowledge that is the University of Salento. A house where everyone must feel welcome."

On July 8, 2025, Maria Antonietta Aiello, Professor of Structural Engineering and Deputy Pro-Rector of the Campus, was elected Rector of the University of Salento. She will remain in office for the next six years, 2025–2031. On November 1st, she succeeded the outgoing rector Fabio Pollice.

She is the first woman in these parts to hold this role. Her election—an official note from the university itself specifies—came after the other two candidates, Luigi Melica, Full Professor of Comparative Public Law, and Salvatore Rizzello, Director of ISUFI, had withdrawn in the preceding days.

"I was born and raised in a small town in Calabria in the province of Cosenza, Marzi," she relates, "where I learned the value of work, simplicity, and resilience, and where I immediately understood how much education can be a powerful tool for empowerment."

The story of Maria Antonietta Aiello is the classic story of a woman, a university researcher born to be top of the class always and in any case, first overall above everyone else.

Graduating *cum laude* in Civil Engineering, specializing in Structures, at the University of Calabria, in 1992 Maria Antonietta Aiello won an annual scholarship for advanced study abroad at the University of Guildford, Surrey, U.K. In 1998, she obtained her PhD in "Composite Materials for Civil Construction" from the University of Lecce. In 1996, she took up her post as University Researcher in the Scientific-Disciplinary Sector ICAR/09 - Structural Engineering at the University of Salento, where since April 15, 2011, she has held the rank of Full Professor in that same field. She has been Deputy Pro-Rector of the University of Salento since September 2021 and the Rector's Delegate for Building Heritage and Safety since 2019.

– But who is this young Calabrian woman and scholar, really?

"During my high school years in Cosenza, I developed a passion for science and technology, but choosing engineering was a true challenge in a context and era marked by rather limiting gender prejudices and stereotypes. However, those very difficulties tempered my resilience, fueled my determination, and nourished the enthusiasm that then

accompanied my path of study at the University of Calabria, where I graduated in Civil Engineering.”

Maria Antonietta Aiello thus arrived in Salento in 1993, coming to Lecce after a period of study at the University of Guildford (UK) thanks to an advanced study grant abroad.

“As soon as I arrived in Lecce, the creative and inspiring atmosphere I breathed won me over. The launch of the Faculty of Engineering, a forward-looking and strategic project of the late Rector Rizzo, conveyed great enthusiasm and dynamism to the entire academic community; a new page was being written for the University, one that would lead to the creation of an important hub of innovation, research, and education. On the other hand, it was an open construction site!”

– In what sense?

“Facilities and laboratories were lacking, and the educational program, still in its infancy, was entirely to be defined. I remember my first practical classes at Principe Umberto, the move to the 'Stecca' building, and the joy when the first laboratory equipment arrived, the first thesis students, the first research projects, the launch of the first PhD in Engineering (Composite Materials for Civil Construction).”

I was among the first female students of that PhD program, which ignited my passion for the themes that remain priorities in my research activities today.”

Lecce thus became her new true home. Her account of it is rich with intimate and personal reflections.

“I always relive with emotion my decision to move permanently to Lecce, where my two children were later born. It was a difficult decision, long pondered, filled with anxieties and hopes, but one I am proud of today. It was a challenging journey, with several moments of discouragement, but the stimulating environment, the extraordinary people I met, the beauty of this land, and the warmth of its people, combined with my determination, allowed me to face this new challenge, seizing those opportunities that enabled me to grow professionally and personally and to achieve my dreams.”

– Thirty years are enough to build a fascinating academic career like yours.

“That is true; in more than thirty years, there have been numerous experiences that have enriched me. For eight years, I served as Chair of the Teaching Council for Civil Engineering, member of the Department Board, member of SOFT, the Orientation, Training, and Tutoring Service, as well as a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I then coordinated several research projects, national and international study committees, and established various collaborations within the University, with research bodies and national and foreign universities, with industry and non-industry associations, and with local and national institutions and companies. I also had the opportunity to serve the community in other spheres: as a board member of the Association of Engineers of Lecce, member of the Superior Council of Public Works, Board Member of the Academy of Fine Arts of Lecce, and associate member at the CNR Institute for Construction Technologies.”

– But what lies behind this scholar's background? What are the topics and fields to which the new Rector of Salento has dedicated all her academic commitment over all these years?

“Today, my teaching commitment,” clarifies Maria Antonietta Aiello, “remains in the field of Structural Engineering. My research activity focuses on issues related to the safety and sustainability of structures and infrastructure, with more than 350 scientific publications. I direct the Structural Engineering Laboratory, which since its inception has also functioned as a public utility service, and the new SEERS (Structural and Earthquake Engineering for Resilient and Sustainable Constructions) laboratory. I confess to being proud to lead a research team that, through constant commitment and passion, manages to fuel my enthusiasm and achieve excellent results in the scientific field. With a touch of pride, I would also like to recall that in the latest VQR (2015–2019), the University of Salento ranked as the top university in Italy for research quality in my field out of 37 evaluated institutions.”

– But what kind of University do you dream of building and creating for the years to come?

“Italian public universities are going through a phase of profound transformation, driven by social, economic, and technological changes that redefine their role and functions. In this context of change, our University is called to strongly reaffirm its identity and mission, courageously responding to contemporary challenges without relinquishing the values that have shaped its history. The first pillar of my program is the centrality of the person. Female and male students, professors, female and male researchers, and all staff represent the beating heart of the university. Every strategic decision must be oriented toward the well-being of the academic community and the appreciation of the individuals who compose it.”

– Solemn and categorical is the oath that Maria Antonietta Aiello makes to her university world.

“To the future of this University of mine, I offer no easy solutions, but my personal commitment to work with dedication, transparency, and a spirit of service for the common good.”

A Calabrian woman, then, at the helm of the Apulian University of Salento, a milestone of great personal prestige, but above all a public, formal, and explicit recognition of how crucial women of the South can be in lifting up the country's Mezzogiorno. In this case, moreover, it is the solemn recognition of a Calabrian woman who, far from her home in Marzi, has built over all these years a story of excellence that brings honor to her land and to the Calabrians who remained.

– Rector, let us start with where you were born and where you grew up?

“I was born and raised in Marzi, a small and welcoming town in the province of Cosenza, a place that deeply influenced my upbringing and personality, teaching me the essence of the small things and the importance of a sense of community. To me, Marzi is a collection of memories, scents, familiar faces, and lessons that laid the foundation for who I am today.”

– What kind of family background do you come from?

“I was fortunate enough to grow up in a simple family, with an upbringing based on discipline and respect. Education was considered a priority, an opportunity to play an active role in society. This approach instilled in me a strong sense of duty and the awareness that education is the key to a path of growth.”

– What about your grandparents?

“Unfortunately, I never knew my paternal grandparents because they had already passed away when I was born. On the other hand, I was fortunate enough to know my maternal grandparents, who lived in another town just a few kilometers away from mine.”

– What was your relationship with them like?

“Even though I didn't see them often, every time I went to visit them was a joy. I have wonderful memories of those moments, such as picking fresh fruit straight from the trees and listening to their life stories. These are important moments that I always carry with me.”

– What was your childhood like in Marzi?

“Mine was a happy childhood, marked by the joy of simple things. I remember the pleasure of playing with my classmates and cherishing vacation times with my family. There was a strong sense of community; chats with neighbors, with whom we lived as if we were one big family, were a daily occurrence. During that time, I was fortunate to have one of my sisters, Velia, who looked after me with great affection. My other sister, Franca, already had a family of her own when I was born. Velia, who was older, took care of me and helped me both with my studies and with getting a few extra little concessions from my parents. She was a point of reference for me.”

– Do you have any particular memory from that time of your life?

“Certainly. A memory I hold with great nostalgia is the town festivals, which I eagerly looked forward to all year long. They were the only occasions when the town came alive: there was the cheerfulness of the stalls with sweets and peanuts, but above all the evenings with singers who were famous at the time. For us, it was an extraordinary and unique opportunity. Besides that, I also fondly remember other moments, like the gifts the school gave us for the Epiphany and attending the parish. Our parish priest was a very affectionate figure and a reference point for the whole town.”

– What schools did you attend and where?

“I attended elementary and middle school in Marzi. For scientific high school, on the other hand, I went to Rogliano, which is located a couple of kilometers away from Marzi.”

– From middle school, which teachers do you still remember?

“I remember fondly my Italian and Latin teacher, who unfortunately passed away a long time ago. He clearly expressed his trust in my abilities, and for me this was a source of great pride, an initial major motivation that made a deep impression on me. I also remember him because he used to ask me to help him fill out the class registers, a gesture that made me feel valued and responsible.”

– And from high school, which teachers are worth remembering?

“There were two teachers who were truly special to me and whose guidance was decisive in my human and professional journey: my Italian teacher, Gina Guarasci, and my French teacher, Edvige Costanzo.”

– How did your choice of university degree come about?

“The choice to study Engineering arose from my passion for scientific subjects, which I cultivated especially during my high school years. But there was one aspect in particular that fascinated me: the idea that engineering was not just theory, but a discipline capable of translating scientific knowledge into concrete, real-world applications. To me, engineering was the bridge between theory and practice, the opportunity to see what I was studying take shape and have a tangible impact on everyday life.”

– What were your university years like for you?

“Overall, my university years were among the best of my life, above all because I had the opportunity to live them inside the campus of the University of Calabria. Living there meant sharing not just a journey of knowledge, but an entire life experience, an opportunity for great personal growth. Of course, there was no shortage of moments of discouragement, due to the difficulties of the course of study, the weight of a few stereotypes or prejudices against women, and, above all, the loss of my father. That moment was a major crisis for me, to the point that I thought about dropping out. However, the affection and support of my mother, my boyfriend (now my husband), and some very dear female friends and colleagues gave me the strength to overcome that difficult moment. Even today I feel the desire to say thank you to them, because their support was essential.”

– How heavy was it for you not to be able to return to Calabria anymore?

“I cannot deny that the weight of distance made itself felt, especially during important moments in my life. It is a nostalgia that never completely disappears, a bond with my roots and my loved ones that I always feel present. However, I have learned not to view it as a burden, but rather as a part of my story. Calabria and my childhood memories remain a compass, a reference point that gave me the strength and determination to build my life here, in a place I now consider home. The warmth of my land accompanied me and made me the person I am today.”

– Yours has been a successful life in every sense: to whom do you dedicate it today?

“I dedicate this success above all to my mother, who unfortunately is no longer with us, but who was my guide and my constant reference point. I owe everything to her. And I dedicate it to my family, to my husband who has always been by my side, and to my children, who are the greatest reason and joy of my life.”

– If I were to ask you who your true teachers were, what would you answer?

“My true teachers were not only those sitting at the professor's desk. Besides a few teachers who were essential, I also give this title to my parents, who taught me honesty, seriousness, a sense of duty, and courage. And then, my teachers were also simple people, those who face the difficulties of everyday life and confront them with dignity and pride, every one of them left me a precious lesson.”

– I imagine that along the way you also encountered difficulties and obstacles of every kind?

“Of course, the road was not without obstacles. I encountered difficulties related to my professional journey, but also a certain skepticism and some prejudice as a woman in a world, like engineering, that was still predominantly male. However, I always believed that the true challenge was to prove, through work and results, that competence has no gender.

The difficulties taught me to believe in myself even more and to transform every obstacle into an opportunity for growth.”

– Who was your point of reference at Unical back then, and why?

“For me, the true reference point at the university was my female and male colleagues. With them I shared the difficulties and joys of that path, creating a bond that even today, with some of them, remains very strong. Later, in recent years, another important figure was Prof. Luciano Ombres. The relationship with professors back then was not as informal as it can be today, but his competence and availability were of great help to me.”

– How much weight did your family have on your choice?

“In reality, my family did not interfere in my decisions; my choice, therefore, was completely autonomous. That being said, I was driven by a strong sense of gratitude and responsibility, especially toward my mother. After my father passed away, she had to face many difficulties, and over the years I always wanted to repay her sacrifices. The same goes for my husband, who supported me at every step of my journey.”

– How do you remember your Graduation day?

“I remember my graduation day with great joy and emotion. It was the culmination of years of study and sacrifice, a success I felt was not mine alone. The greatest emotion was seeing the faces of the people who had supported me, in particular my mother. She was there, and in her eyes I read the pride and happiness for the milestone we had reached together.”

– Your first major academic appointment?

“The first appointment that I felt was truly important was holding a professorship. For the first time, I felt the responsibility and the excitement of training future engineers. I had to independently organize the methodology, the topics, and the exam management. For me, it was essential that the students were engaged and that the knowledge I imparted became a solid foundation they would remember and use in their profession.”

– Your first real and major experience?

“My first real major experience was definitely the period in Guildford on a scholarship. Not only was it the first time I went away for a long period from Italy, but it was also an era when there were no cell phones or internet. It was a crucial moment in which I had to prove my worth not only to myself, but also to those who had placed their trust in me. This experience opened my mind and prepared me to face the challenges of the academic and professional world with greater confidence and determination.”

– Has it ever happened to you while traveling around Italy to feel “ashamed” of being a daughter of Calabria?

“I have never been ashamed. Calabria was never a burden, but an added value. I am proud of my origins and of who I am today, and this is also thanks to the land I come from.”

– One day you left Calabria; how much did that weigh on you?

“Leaving my land was one of the most difficult decisions of my life. The separation from my family, my friends, and everything I knew was a weight that stayed with me for a long time, but I always faced that sacrifice with the conviction that it was necessary for my professional growth. In this journey, I found in Lecce a welcoming environment and warm

people who immediately made me feel at home. Over these years, I have also felt deeply attached to Salento, which has become my second home. Today, my Calabrian roots have never weakened, and I continue to carry my land, its values, and its loved ones with me. But my true strength is this dual bond, which unites my origins with the place that welcomed me.”

– What relationship do you still have with Marzi?

“My relationship with Marzi is strong, but it is a bond that is mainly affectionate and nostalgic. With time and distance, in fact, the bonds with people have naturally faded, but this has never affected my deep feelings for the land I come from. I would love to return to Marzi more often and stay longer, a dream I hope will come true sooner or later.”

– The last book you read from start to finish?

“Of course, we are referring to non-technical books. *Scienziате. Storie di vita e di ricerca* by Elena Cattaneo.”

– The last movie seen at the cinema?

“*C'è ancora domani.*”

– Do you have a favorite song or a song of a lifetime?

“I don't have one particular favorite song, because I love many. In general, I have always had a great passion for Italian singer-songwriters. Furthermore, ever since I was a young girl, I felt very attached to the songs of Fiorella Mannoia, whose voice and lyrics have always conveyed deep emotions to me and, on many occasions, I felt gave voice to my way of being and my most intimate thoughts.”

– Who is waiting for you when you return home in the evening?

“When I come home in the evening, my husband is waiting for me. Our children, now grown up, live outside Lecce, so the house is a place of peace and tranquility that the two of us share.”

– What was the most important day or event, let's say, of your life?

“It is difficult to choose just one day, because life is made of many moments that, in their own way, were all important. From a family point of view, if I have to think of the moments of greatest joy, I undoubtedly choose the day I married my husband and the birth of my children. These were events that marked the beginning of a new chapter, and their happiness has always been mine. From a professional standpoint, my graduation day was a fundamental milestone. It was not just an endpoint, but also the starting point for everything that came afterward.”

– And, on the other hand, the worst day?

“The worst day of my life, without a doubt, was when I lost my father while I was still studying. It was a profound pain that overwhelmed me right at a time when I still greatly needed a reference point. From that day on, I had to face an absence that changed much of my life. Initially, his absence called my choices into question, but thanks to the support of loved ones, I found the strength to move forward, carrying with even greater determination the lessons he had imparted to me.”

– Your biggest defeat?

“I don't like to talk about defeats, because I tend to view every failure as a valuable lesson. If I think about it, what I consider my defeats are those that touch the most personal sphere. I feel defeated when the people I care about, including friends, fail to fully understand my feelings or my attempts to help. Seeing your outstretched hand ignored or misunderstood is a defeat for me.”

– What advice would you give to a young woman who wanted to pursue your career path today?

“My advice is based on the experience I lived myself. First of all, I would tell her not to be influenced by those who say a path is too difficult or not suitable for her; passion is the most important engine: if you choose a path you love, you will be able to overcome any obstacle. Another piece of advice is not to think you have to do everything alone; it is important to have reference points, whether they are professors, colleagues, or mentors. You should never be afraid to ask for help or advice. And, above all, you must not overlook the importance of the support of the people you love: family and friends are an anchor that will give you the strength to move forward.”

– What was the true weapon behind your success?

“I believe my true weapon for success was not just one thing, but a combination of at least two factors. On one hand, there was determination. It was the force that allowed me to overcome difficulties and not give up, especially during the hardest moments of my life. On the other hand, there is the support of the people I love. Without my mother's sacrifices, my husband's trust, and the support of my colleagues and friends, every milestone would have been harder to achieve.”

– What kind of future do you imagine for your life?

“The future I desire is the continuation of what has made me happy so far: the people I love and the opportunity to do what I am passionate about.”



FRANCESCA CACCURI

Born in 1984, under the zodiac sign of Taurus which for enthusiasts means people endowed with intelligence, charm and powerful imagination. Young at heart, with the ability to touch the hearts and minds of all those who are lucky enough to cross their path. What makes those born on May 15 under the sign of Taurus so special is their creativity. They are the ones with the most brilliant solutions or magical ideas, and when they travel around the world, every place they visit always seems fresher and more colorful.”

In fact, Francesca Caccuri is all of this, and even more besides.

With due allowances for differences in age and scientific fields, distinct from one another, this young Calabrian researcher reminds me very closely of Rita Levi Montalcini, and especially brings to mind one of her finest articles written in 2000 for *Science*, in which Professor Montalcini described herself in this way: “The absence of psychological complexes, the tenacity in following the path I believed to be right, the habit of underestimating obstacles, a trait I inherited from my father, helped me enormously in facing life’s difficulties. To my parents I also owe the tendency to look at others with sympathy and without mistrust.”

This is practically what Francesca Caccuri confesses to us when she talks about her father, who died of cancer, and about the research she started immediately after his death because «I wanted to be able to dedicate something from my work to him, something that would bring comfort and hope to the many patients like him».

Hers too is a story of excellence, not only because, through what she does and achieves in advanced research, she is today an accredited ambassador of a Calabria completely different from the one depicted for years by major international newspapers, but above all because of the record-breaking figures that animate and characterize her private and professional life.

At 37 years old this young woman from Trebisacce is already an Associate Professor in Microbiology and Clinical Microbiology at the University of Brescia, where they speak of her as the spearhead of the university's Department of Molecular and Translational Medicine. A public recognition given to her by the fathers of modern medicine and which she, with extraordinary modesty, rejects “regardless of everything.” Yet at the Animal Models and Retroviral Vaccines Section of the National Institutes of Health/National Cancer Institute (NIH/NCI) in Bethesda (USA), there are still those who remember her as top of the class in a course designed to advance studies focused on HIV vaccine development.

Her career began at the University of Calabria, where Francesca graduated in July 2008 in Pharmacy with a thesis on “Metapneumovirus Infection in Children with Acute Respiratory Tract Symptoms: Virological and Clinical Characteristics.” Her advisor was Professor Arnaldo Caruso, and co-advisor Dr. Rosalinda Bruno. In that same year, she obtained her professional license as a pharmacist, but the new graduate would do everything in her future life except work as a pharmacist.

Indeed, she left Calabria immediately after graduating and moved to Brescia, where in 2012 she obtained her PhD in Microbiology with a cutting-edge and highly experimental thesis. The title of the thesis was “HHV-6 U94 Protein Blocks Migration and Invasiveness of Tumor Cells by Inhibiting the SRC-Dependent Signaling Pathway.” Here in Brescia, Francesca again found Prof. Arnaldo Caruso, with whom she had graduated in Arcavacata, as her advisor, and Professor Simona Fiorentini as co-advisor. We are at the heart of the Department of Molecular and Translational Medicine at the University of Brescia, which today is considered one of the finest microbiological research centers in the world, itself led by a “shining star of research,” Prof. Arnaldo Caruso, himself a Calabrian from Cosenza, who continues to return to Cosenza every spare moment of his intense career as a scientist. His is a story that deserves a cover of its own.

For Francesca Caccuri, these were years of intense research and demanding study. Twelve hours of work a day were sometimes not even enough. She went home only to sleep and then start over the next day in the laboratory. There were neither Sundays nor official holidays, only her microscope and the desire to understand what moves beyond that magical magnifying glass.

These are rhythms of work and daily commitment that only a single young woman with no family, eager to reach her goal, can afford within the University.

And in the end, she wins. At just 33 years old, in July 2017, while the national news reported on an Italy submerged in African heat, the young Calabrian researcher obtained her National Scientific Qualification for the position of Associate Professor in the competition sector of Microbiology and Clinical Microbiology, and just a year later, in 2018, she obtained her Specialization diploma in Microbiology and Virology with a thesis that would spark much debate in the scientific world at the time: “The p17 protein of avian reovirus: a new molecule with potential anti-tumor activity.” Hers has been a career full of important encounters, diverse international experiences, and high-level scientific exchanges, a back-and-forth among major research laboratories to understand, study, analyze, and above all put her own research into practice alongside that of others, a method that in Francesca Caccuri's life would prove decisive for her future growth.

Incredible, but true. In July of this year, 2021, news agencies around the world echoed the story picked up in Italy by the AdnKronos news agency: “Not just the lungs. Covid-19, in its most severe forms, can attack various organs and potentially the entire body by 'latching onto' proteins expressed by all human cells. They are called integrins and function as 'universal switches' that the Sars-CoV-2 coronavirus can 'open' to carry out its invasion. This was discovered by an Italian study published in *Microorganisms* and presented at the 5th National Congress of the Italian Society of Virology (Siv-Isv) led by Arnaldo Caruso, full professor of microbiology and clinical microbiology at the University of Brescia and director of the Microbiology Laboratory at the Asst Spedali Civili.”

Signing this extraordinary discovery linked to the terrible pandemic of these recent years is none other than Professor Francesca Caccuri, who for months and months studied and staged the Covid virus like perhaps no one else in the world ever had before.

“The work of Francesca Caccuri's group,” Professor Arnaldo Caruso began before the Congress audience—90 speakers and 600 virologists present—“demonstrated how pulmonary microvascular endothelial cells are susceptible to Sars-CoV-2 infection, and are

also at the root of the inflammatory and angiogenic processes that contribute to the development of severe Covid. The importance of the study,” the scientist highlighted, “is in particular the demonstration of the interaction pathway between the virus and endothelial cells. A mechanism that points precisely to integrins as new potential therapeutic targets against Covid-19.”

To the average person, the news says very little, but for the scientific world it is instead the keystone to imagining a better way to eradicate the pandemic of the new century. If nothing else, someone finally managed to understand the real relationship between Covid infection and the human body.

– Professor, why are you smiling?

“Because for you journalists, everything is always so sensational. But for us, it is everyday life, it is advanced research work, it is a passion for one's professional life. It all becomes sensational if one of our discoveries actually succeeds in helping people not get sick so easily, or in getting better treatment if they have been hit by an infection.”

– Professor Caccuri, what was the weapon behind your success? The keystone to obtaining a professorship so early on?

“Many things together, I believe. First of all, the love for research. But then great perseverance, so much willpower. A lot of tenacity.”

– What do you mean?

“I am talking about hours and hours in the laboratory, even on holidays. I am talking about a willingness to engage in dialogue and to be constantly moving. In recent years, my life has been a continuous thought about my work, almost as if it were an obsession, never allowing myself any moment of downtime. Which is not easy, and believe me, all this involves great sacrifices.”

– When you talk about sacrifices, what do you think of in particular?

“I think of giving up important things, such as starting a family of my own.”

– It's never too late, don't you think?

“Frankly, I am thinking about it, and that could be one of my next goals.”

– What advice would you give to a young person who wanted to follow in your footsteps today?

“It will sound obvious to you, but without a great love for research, without a high degree of perseverance, and without being accustomed to availability and sacrifice, in this world of research of mine you really get nowhere.”

– Professor, may I ask if there is a scientific research project that you hold most dear?

“The research projects I have carried out were all important, and every project completed gave me great satisfaction.”

– For at least one of these, I must say that you and your working group will go down in history...

“If you are referring to the most recent ones, those concerning the SARS-CoV-2 virus, it's true, they were fundamental—I would even say essential in a moment of severe pandemic crisis—because they finally opened hearts to hope.”

– But you must have a laboratory research project that you are truly proud of?

“The research I hold most dear is the one concerning the study of molecules of viral origin with antitumor activity that have the ability to prevent tumor growth and metastasis.”

– Tough subject. Why this preference?

“It all originated from my father's illness. Everything stems from the death of my poor dad. It was then that I thought, if it were possible, I should do something and make my contribution to help such gravely ill patients.”

– Did you do everything on your own?

“I couldn't have done anything without the help of Professor Arnaldo Caruso, with whom I have the privilege of working. It was he who gave me the opportunity to carry forward precisely the research I had hoped for and to which I have dedicated my all. I only hope that humanity can reap the benefits of this result, which, for my part, I dedicate today to my father.”

Here is how the journal summarizes the Calabrian researcher's work: *“It was discovered that U94, the latency gene of human herpesvirus 6, inhibits the migration, invasion, and proliferation of vascular endothelial cells (ECs). Because of its potent anti-migratory activity on ECs, we tested the ability of U94 to interfere with individual steps of the metastatic cascade...”*

It is the head of the department to which Francesca Caccuri belongs, Professor Arnaldo Caruso, the guru of the University of Brescia, who explains to us more clearly the revolutionary effects of this research:

“Today there are many drugs useful in fighting cancer aimed at damaging the tumor cell or blocking substances needed for its growth and spread in the body. The extraordinary and unique effect of U94 is its ability to act on 'two compartments,' simultaneously exerting a blocking action on proliferation and metastatic spread, acting both directly on the tumor cell and indirectly on its vascular microenvironment. Thus, on one hand, the malignant tumor cell is transformed into a more benign and less invasive element; on the other hand, blood vessels do not form to support the tumor's nourishment and metastatic escape. This dual activity is something that even we did not expect as a result, and we were initially astonished by it until we understood the mechanism of action of this extraordinary viral protein. Watching a highly aggressive tumor, such as undifferentiated breast cancer, turn into a small nodule without metastatic capacity is something incredible. The power of nature!”

– Professor Caccuri, yours may have been a life full of sacrifices, but perhaps such an important research project was worth all the rest, don't you think?

“I have learned in all these years of research that it is time that ultimately gives value to our work and our research. One must know how to wait patiently and verify the data, which, cross-referenced with other data, will tell us if we were right. In the meantime, however, please write down that other researchers also participated in the research; they are my friends and lab colleagues who helped me tremendously to reach important

conclusions. And they are, besides our guide Arnaldo Caruso: Roberto Ronca, Andrea S. Laimbacher, Angiola Berenzi, Nathalie Steimberg, Federica Campilongo, Pietro Mazzuca, Arianna Giacomini, Giovanna Mazzoleni, Anna Benetti, Elisabetta Caselli, Marco Presta, Dario Di Luca, and Cornel Fraefel. It matters very much to me that you record their names.”

– Professor, what do you still carry inside you today of Calabria?

“My life begins in Cosenza, where I was born and where I lived my first years of life, my childhood, my adolescence. Inside, I carry all of this. I carry the memory of my youth, which I spent in Trebisacce, where my family resided and still resides, my father, my mother, my brother, my sister, and my paternal grandparents. Today, my original family is missing an important, essential piece, which is my father, whom I have already mentioned to you. My grandparents are gone as well, and I miss their affection, their sweetness, and that protective nature to the point of exasperation”.

– What kind of childhood did you have?

“Beautiful, warm, almost romantic. My childhood spent in Trebisacce is filled with and rich in so many different memories all at once.”

– Your fondest memory?

“Perhaps it is the memory of my Christmas tree that my father would set up while holding me in his arms, as multicolored lights and ornaments created a magical, joyful, and festive atmosphere. But I also remember, one by one, my little childhood friends who often came over to my house, warmly welcomed by my family. I had so much fun playing with them, carefree times, we were all together in a big room. And then, the image of my family, happy to pamper me, is also indelible. I was the youngest in the house, born thirteen years after my sister. They instilled so much peace in me and were a safe haven. But among my fondest memories is also my sea, the Ionian, beautiful and inviting in summer, enchanting even in winter.”

– Which teachers do you still remember from your high school years?

“After compulsory school, I attended classical high school (*liceo classico*). My middle school teachers left a significant mark on my cultural, social, and human education, which then grew even stronger over time. The high school teachers were equally attentive to developing and completing my knowledge across various disciplines. Above all, I offer my moved and grateful remembrance to my late mathematics teacher, Giovanni Micalizzi, who helped me master the subject and passed down important values to me.”

– Do you still have a physical connection to your hometown?

“My hometown is always in my heart, and as soon as I have the opportunity, I do everything I can to go back. I love Cosenza, where I was born, where I attended university, and where I graduated. I love Trebisacce, its beautiful sea, its traditions, and I love my family members who still live down there.”

– I imagine you also left old friends behind in Cosenza?

“In fact, I left many friends behind in Calabria, but many of them settled elsewhere and no longer live in Cosenza or Calabria, so when I can, I only meet those who manage to return

to Calabria for the holidays. In any case, whenever possible, it is truly wonderful to get together and reminisce about the old times.”

– And what about your schoolmates?

“As for my schoolmates, relationships with them grew distant over time. Time, but also space, because many of them now live in different places far away from each other. It rarely happens that we speak on the phone or meet up, but when we do, it is always an explosion of joy.”

– How do you remember your university years?

“With deep nostalgia. They were years of intense commitment and serious, responsible study, but also of great friendships and endless lightheartedness.”

– How much did your experience abroad count toward your academic life?

“Experience abroad is an essential step. Believe me, to refine oneself, to go deeper, to gain awareness of research, to improve and reach the top of the goal you imagined, you cannot and must not be static, let alone arrogant. Let me explain better. You need to set out, travel, move around to engage in discussions and exchange experiences with colleagues from other institutes and other nations. I did just that, traveling and moving through different countries, with great sacrifices and immense compromises. My most thrilling experience was perhaps in America, where I worked at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda. But the American experience wasn't my only one outside Italy. I also spent an important period in Switzerland, at the University of Zurich, and in England, at Manchester Metropolitan University. And each time, I enriched myself professionally, culturally, and socially. In short, I gained an inner drive that later allowed me to pass on my experience to others.”

– Professor, if you were offered a chair, would you return to Calabria today?

“Let's start from a premise that is not at all irrelevant. Today I feel fully fulfilled, absolutely satisfied with the work I do here at the University of Brescia, in the Microbiology section directed by Prof. Arnaldo Caruso, and happy with the relationships I have both with my colleagues and with the environment around me.”

– You didn't answer my question...

“So let's put it this way: if they were to offer me a chair in Cosenza, I would accept very gladly.”

– May I also ask under what conditions you would do so?

“Absolutely. The only rule and condition I would set for anyone offering me this opportunity is to be able to continue my research in Calabria with adequate equipment and laboratories. Nothing else.”

– Each of us has had a master in life: who was yours?

“My Master and Mentor was, is, and will always be Professor Arnaldo Caruso. A person I consider exceptional from both a human and professional standpoint. He is the one who passed on to me the love for scientific research. He is the one who guided me in achieving the goals I reached, and for this I will always be grateful to him.”

– One final question. Has it ever happened to you while traveling around the world to feel “ashamed” of being a daughter of Calabria?

“Are you kidding? And why on earth should I have been or be ashamed of being a daughter of Calabria? I have always proudly displayed my origins. How can I put it? ‘Honored to be Calabrian’, a beautiful, charming, hospitable land that boasts illustrious figures and so many brilliant minds; one need only think of Nobel laureate Renato Dulbecco.”

– So, Calabria Forever?

“Thank you Calabria, yes. But also thank you Brescia, thank you Italy, thank you to the world of research.”



ANNA MARIA DE LUCA

Sent to Moscow by the Farnesina to coordinate the work of the Italian school... behind the Kremlin. But let's take things in order.

A wonderfully well-preserved 47 years old, born in 1978, zodiac sign Sagittarius. Experts speak of a "sign that has a greater propensity to explore what is different, or distant from oneself," a sign endowed with an unmatched optimism, harboring a very strong desire to achieve, "which leads it to reach goals that perhaps do not interest others, but are highly exclusive." Anna Maria De Luca is above all this, and much more besides.

Anna Maria was born in Paola on December 18, 1978, and has lived much of her life traveling around the world. Passionate about reportage, photography, a painter, researcher, journalist, and author of dozens of essays against *ecomafie* [environmental organized crime], tenured in the ranks of the Ministry of Education since September 1, 2001, she is one of the youngest school principals in Italy.

She was the youngest school principal abroad, sent to Moscow in the middle of a war, having won a public competition, to direct the Italian Education Office for the entire immense Russian Federation, in the dead of December. While Italy was funding Ukraine, she had to oversee the Italian school in Moscow and the Italian language courses in Russian schools—a true cultural diplomacy operation in a time of crisis. But when she left, in the dead of December, for the coldest capital in the world, she already had two other records to her credit: at 19, she was the youngest tenured teacher in Italy, and at 32, already a principal. After returning from Moscow, she took over the leadership of six major high schools in the capital, in Villa Borghese, before resuming her doctoral studies abroad, this time in Spain.

– Sent to Moscow by the Farnesina to coordinate the work of the Italian school in the coldest capital in the world. How to put it? Ambassador of Italian education behind the Kremlin.

“It was a very complex and important experience from several points of view. Not least, the climate. That winter we reached minus 50 degrees. The first landing in Moscow was crazy: at night, on the icy runway, the plane circled in the sky for a long time, unable to touch down. I will never forget that first image of Russia in the dark, all that ice seen from above. For me, a woman from the south going to Moscow alone, it was quite disorienting.”

– A diplomatic assignment for a “non-diplomat,” and in any case a high-profile institutional role on behalf of the Italian Government?

“In Italy there are about eight thousand principals, and only 8 percent manage to go abroad if they win the interministerial competition held by MAECI [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation] and MIM [Ministry of Education and Merit]. I participated for the French language—you cannot choose the country or even the continent, only the language area—and certainly I never thought I would end up in

Moscow in the middle of a war. I imagined France or North Africa, Canada perhaps... Besides, that position had always been held by men, even now. So far I have been the only woman to direct the Italian school in Russia, the only pink interlude. After my return to Italy, a female ambassador arrived in Moscow, and that too was a revolution, a first for a woman, but unfortunately we didn't happen to work during the same period because I had already returned. Now they are all men again, both the ambassador and the school principal."

– A young school principal of Calabrian origins who won one of the most complex and difficult competitions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A life leap partly planned and sought, linked to your desire to know the world and to travel?

"I have always felt like a woman of the State, both when I worked as a journalist, which was the dream I pursued for many years, the one that prompted me to leave Calabria and my family, and at school. Today more than ever, school represents children's and young people's first encounter with the State, the outpost that must teach a love for legality, civic duties that go hand in hand with rights, and, naturally, the correct use of the Italian language, which is so loved abroad yet so mistreated in Italy. Minister Valditara is right to focus heavily on Italian: it is the main key to the future of our country."

With degrees in "Communication Sciences" and "Psychological Theories and Techniques," she worked first for many local newspapers, *Gazzetta del Sud*, *Provincia cosentina*, *Quotidiano della Calabria*, *Il Quotidiano della Sera*, and spent nine months as an intern in the Rai newsroom in Cosenza before completing journalism school in Rome. Later, as a freelancer for major national outlets such as *La Repubblica* and *Il Sole 24 Ore* (*Sud* insert), she authored courageous investigative reports on organized crime cartels that dumped tons of waste, including radioactive material, into Southern lands. In particular, she investigated and wrote dozens of unpublished pages on the "poison ships," authoring several front-page stories for *Repubblica*, including one on the *Jolly Rosso*, which ran aground on the coast near her home along the Cosenza Tyrrhenian coast. She runs her own travel publication, highly respected among tourism boards in many countries, www.classtravel.it. For *Repubblica.it*, she covered the hearings of the ESMA trial (later collected in the book *Mai Più*, published by Castelvocchi) and reported extensively on the families of innocent victims of organized crime. Among her most important investigative pieces on human rights violations in Italy was the tragic story of the "clinic of horrors" in Serra d'Aiello, which won First Prize at the Pordenone International Journalism Festival and the 2004 Calabria Award for Journalism and Literature.

From 2008 to 2012, she was called to the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR) to serve on the "Interministerial Working Group for the Development of Scientific and Technological Culture," while also becoming an operational arm of the "National Committee for the Practical Learning of Music," chaired by Luigi Berlinguer. At the same time, she followed the birth of the ITS—the new higher technical institutes for the revival of Made in Italy—receiving two solemn commendations from the Ministry of Education.

Nor was that all. She served on the ministerial working group for Media Education and authored dozens of analyses for *Rassegna dell'Istruzione*. She joined Cantiere I, the working

group that drafted the Renzi-Giannini reform “La Buona Scuola,” and in 2014 worked with “Avviso Pubblico,” the network of local administrators fighting organized crime, overseeing direct training for schools. Today, she is the secretary general of the Guccione Foundation for road traffic victims, is part of “24marzo.it,” translates pedagogy books from French for the Anicia publishing house, and coordinates *dotnews*, a biweekly publication focusing on work, innovation, and training.

– From the Collegio Romano, the heart of Rome, to Red Square: quite a leap, don't you think?

“Many told me it was madness to accept the assignment at the Consulate General in Moscow at that particular moment in history, and that I would have done better to stay at the Ministry of Culture. I saw it instead as a challenge, at a time when there was a desperate need for peace and for rebuilding cultural ties between the two countries. To be sure, being assigned to Moscow was unimaginable for me when I decided to sit for the competition. I remember when I called the union to ask for advice, they described it as a “killer office”, that is, a location that would empty out the ranking list because, due to the war, it was hard to accept for anyone on the list, especially a woman (and if you don't accept, they strike your name off and move on). If you go abroad and take your family with you, it's one thing; but if you go alone to certain territories, it's even harder.”

– What living difficulties did you encounter?

“First of all, just getting there. No direct flights existed from Europe to Moscow; you could only get there through Istanbul or, at most, Yerevan, taking two days of travel and at least a thousand euros each way. It was the only city in the world unreachable from Europe. You could reach Sydney faster. And then I couldn't access my email, the internet, Netflix, or anything European or American. To speak via WhatsApp with Italy, I had to route my phone via a VPN through another country so it wouldn't show that I was connecting from Moscow, but after a few hours it would be detected, everything would crash, and I'd have to switch VPNs. Buying a return flight was extremely complicated: I could only purchase the first leg to Istanbul or Yerevan, but it was impossible to buy the second leg from Moscow to get to Italy because internet systems were blocked and monitored. So I had no choice but to ask a friend in Italy to buy the second part of the trip for me and reimburse her upon my return, because money transactions were blocked too. From Moscow, I couldn't access my Italian bank account; I had to bring cash with me and hope it wouldn't run out before I got back. Currency exchange was complicated due to the war as well. They no longer accepted euros and wouldn't exchange them, they were scrap paper. There was an embargo on Parmigiano Reggiano; you couldn't pack it in your suitcase. Absurd but true. Most Italians had returned home, and those who stayed were there because they had married Russian women and built families or businesses. Not to mention the climate, the two hours of daylight a day, the lack of distinction between day and night that made it hard for me to sleep, the Russian food, and the absurd costs for Italian products.”

– And the ice...

“Every day there were men on the roofs to prevent them from collapsing under the weight of the snow. Right before my eyes, a young girl died when a huge block of snow and ice collapsed right onto the sidewalk where she was walking. I was just a few meters away

from her. From the seventh or eighth floor, the weight of the snow becomes enormous. The risk was serious and daily because, due to the war, there were fewer workers available. I walked with studded shoes, but the icy marble sidewalks are always very slippery, so much so that an Italian woman I spent time with ended up in the hospital with a head injury precisely from slipping on the sidewalk. Walking around, you always have to keep an eye on the ice, both on the ground and on the roofs. And then the maps...”

– The maps?

“Yes, a huge problem for me since I didn't speak Russian, given that the signs were all in Cyrillic. Moscow was under a kind of invisible cloak, used to avoid being located and to protect against Ukrainian drones, so the GPS systems were out of order. When I called a taxi, I could stand with my feet in the snow for hours waiting for it to find me... I would follow the dot of the taxi on the app as it spun around like in a pinball machine trying to find me, and then often gave up... you had to be lucky enough to find a taxi driver who knew the way. I was in the city center, so in the most heavily shielded area, making location tracking impossible. Taxis are very inexpensive for us, and the drivers have infinite patience driving round and round trying to find people; without maps, it was difficult for everyone. Taxis were also often stopped by the police, something that never happened to me in Italy, and in that case you had to pull out your documents and lost a lot of time... and Moscow's traffic is unbelievable; Rome by comparison seemed like a quiet island.”

Behind her is a whole series of books that have in some way left an important mark: *Vite senza corpi. Verità e giustizia per i desaparecidos argentini*, Gorée editions (2009); *Quel Giorno. Storie di vittime delle mafie nel racconto dei loro familiari*, Gruppo Abele editions, for March 21, 2013; *Non per il naso* (olfactory marketing), November 2014; *Nel cuore di chi resta*, Eraclea editions, 2015; *Mai Più*, Castelveccchi editions; *Pratica quotidiana per la governance nella scuola*, Anicia editions—a book for preparing for the school principal competition widely used in the latest competition, with a new updated version coming out on the use of communication as a strategic management tool for schools.

“When I was young, working as an investigative journalist, I also collaborated a lot with Libera. I traveled all over Italy as a volunteer, visiting the homes of people who had a child, a father, a husband, or a mother killed as an innocent victim of organized crime, ‘innocente’ in the sense that the Ministry of Interior guarantees an absolute absence of links to that world. In a book presented by Don Ciotti in Florence when Renzi was mayor, I thus told twenty-seven little-known stories, victims that some define as ‘second-tier’ because they aren't famous. I narrated what happened after the spotlights went out: the story of those who are gone, but above all the story of those who remained with immense pain in their heart and years and years of courtrooms ahead of them to fight for justice. It is a book that many families use as a tool to tell their own story.”

– You graduated twice.

“Yes, the first time in ‘Communication Sciences’, which back then was a five-year degree, when I still thought it was the right path to work as a journalist, and the second in psychology.”

– Why?

“Because when I started my first year of university, I was still living in an analog world, so much so that at Rai we were still using Beta tapes. While I was studying, though, the world changed: after five years, the newspapers where I dreamed of working had all fallen into crisis and were no longer hiring. Internships, like at *Repubblica*, without the right connections in high places, could only turn into more or less unpaid collaborations. Despite having independently conducted investigations that made the front page of *Repubblica*'s print edition, and despite many people being hired without ever reaching the front page... it became clear to me that there was nothing within my power I could do to be hired at *Repubblica* or Rai. Meanwhile, since I had to support myself in Rome, I worked at school, where the children didn't ask me to be an expert in geopolitics, they asked me for human support. So I decided to get a degree in psychology to have more tools to live alongside them every day. They were absurd days: mornings with young children, afternoons covering Iraq and Afghanistan in journalism school and in various newsrooms where they sent me for internships.”

– What did the investigations you carried out teach you?

“That there is no limit to evil, that in the end many people decide to pretend nothing is wrong because it's convenient, and that those who truly fight are increasingly alone. I worked with top-notch journalists, I think of Attilio Bolzoni, Paolo Griseri, Daniele Mastrogiacomo, who after his kidnapping became my head of investigations at *Repubblica*. I also crossed paths several times with Andrea Purgatori, and I wish so much that someone would continue his work.”

– When Daniele Mastrogiacomo was kidnapped, were you at *Repubblica*?

“Yes, in the online newsroom. During evening shifts, I spent hours and hours searching for leads to figure out where Daniele might have ended up, and at one point I identified the right one, but obviously we didn't write about it because it was the exact lead the secret services were following to free him. It was a joy to have him back with us, and when he later became head of investigations, thinking back to the days of his kidnapping, it seemed surreal to me that he was really there in the newsroom with his usual grit and energy. I had already experienced kidnapped colleagues, it had happened years earlier to Toni Fontana, a great journalist I worked with before going to *Repubblica*.”

– Your worst experience?

“It was at *l'Unità*, which had recently reopened with Furio Colombo as editor-in-chief. It was the Catholic University that sent me for an internship at *l'Unità*: the web newsroom was newly created and considered inferior to the print edition by the rest of the paper. However, there was a fantastic journalist there, Toni De Marchi, who unfortunately, is no longer in this world, who had well understood that the web was the future. He counted on me heavily and assigned me entire sections of the website, which is why I was convinced I would get a contract. Instead, a twist of fate: the management decided to give a huge contract to a famous person whose name I prefer not to mention. And since he alone cost as much as four of us who were doing the 'kitchen work' - that is, actually building the pages- they didn't give us contracts. At the time I thought I was left-wing; I was 20 years old. It was a real epiphany for me, seeing that a newspaper claiming to be left-wing put four people out on the street to hire one favored by left-wing salons. I understood firsthand that economics dominates politics and that what I had been told as a child wasn't

true- that the left works for workers' rights. So I began to reflect on the hypocrisy of political proclamations and on what my own youthful convictions had been, and thus began my political maturation free of blinders. To this day, I believe ideologies are just a visual limitation and that people should be judged for who they are and what they do, not for the political faction they claim to belong to. It is truly sad to see that even intelligent people become blind when it comes to politics: everything coming from 'the other side' is considered wrong even when it's right, worse than bulls reacting to red."

– What remains with you from the years lived in Calabria?

"The awareness of no longer wanting to work in Calabria, and a few moments that remain indelible in my mind: the help of prosecutor Nicola Gratteri, who at a very difficult time for me came to the school to plant trees with the children; the image of my father mowing the grass in the Garden of the Righteous, since no one else was doing it and I cared deeply that this garden, a strong symbol of legality, was well kept; the support of international organizations, which was greater than what I received locally, in particular the EIP (*École Instrument de Paix*), which recognized my work by giving me an important national award, and ENO, a global network of sustainable schools and communities that in Finland appointed me national coordinator for Italy to bring sustainability and environmental care into Italian schools. The eyes of the children when I asked them what they needed to improve our home, which was the school. I wanted the kids to internalize the awareness of having a strong role in school and in society, even while still minors, to learn to assert their rights before adults. Seeing in their eyes the strength to take a clear stand in favor of justice and legality was what I wanted."

– You also covered the ESMA trial hearings for Repubblica.it?

"Yes, 30,000 dead and a trial involving a relative of mine, Angela Maria Aieta, a heroine of freedom. In Argentina they dedicated a plaza and a Peronist club to her. Thanks to her silence, many people were saved and came to Rome to testify on her behalf. The last time they met, they were prisoners destined to die. A historic trial in which the Italian State filed as a civil party. The trials in Italy took place thanks to Jorge Hithurburu, who dedicated his life to searching for evidence and witnesses around the world. The trial revealed historical truths I didn't know, which have stayed inside me."

– For example?

"For example, I always asked myself: why did Italians take to the streets for Vietnam, but not for Argentina, which was populated entirely by Italians? The answer came during the ESMA trials: because the Russian Communist Party had ordered the Italian Communist Party not to react. The reason? Because the Argentine junta were the primary buyers of Russian Communist grain. Once again, economics dominating politics. I'm glad the CGIL and other trade unions joined as civil parties in the trials, but the true reality is that when money is involved, ideologies turn into papier-mâché. My relatives would probably still be alive if someone at the time had mobilized the way they did for Vietnam. Only Pertini, a great man, organized a sort of counter-resistance. My cousin Jorge came to Italy for this; after meeting President Pertini, he decided to return to Buenos Aires, but shortly after his arrival, he was kidnapped and killed. And this while his mother was *desaparecida* and his brother Dante, who had been minister of youth, was in prison as a political prisoner of the dictatorship."

– Among the most important investigations you authored on human rights violations in Italy, we remember the tragic story of the "clinic of horrors" in Serra d'Aiello, First Prize at the Pordenone International Journalism Festival, and also the 2004 Calabria Award for journalism and literature for your thesis on public TV's third network in Europe...

“Yes, that of Serra d’Aiello was a terrible story that I followed for years. They said I was 'dreaming' and that those people had never existed: of course, all it took was tearing up the medical charts. Everything started for me with a young man in a wheelchair, Antonino Pio, hospitalized for years who, according to the clinic, had supposedly 'escaped'. For that story, I even left the newspaper I was writing for, precisely because interests in healthcare touched, through politics, even certain media outlets. 'If I can't write about a boy in a wheelchair, then I won't write about anything anymore,' I told the publisher, leaving. I continued my investigation alone, and when Eugenio Facciolla arrived at the Prosecutor's Office in Paola, I turned to him and gave him all my papers. He was also investigating it, I couldn't believe it, finally someone who hadn't been intimidated and wasn't pretending nothing was happening! At that point, I managed to convince Attilio Bolzoni to come to Calabria. We continued the work together, and the case broke in the international press as well. Federica Sciarelli invited me onto her show as the first journalist who had raised the issue and had taken risks to pursue it because, at the time, everyone was turning a blind eye.”

From 2008 to 2012, Anna Maria De Luca was called to the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR) for the "Interministerial Working Group for the Development of Scientific and Technological Culture," but she also became an operational arm of the "National Committee for Practical Learning of Music," both chaired by Luigi Berlinguer. Simultaneously, she oversaw the birth of the ITS, the new higher technical institutes for the revival of Made in Italy, receiving two solemn commendations from the Ministry of Education.

“Yes, exactly. Luigi Berlinguer was an enlightened minister, a reformist. Because he believed that even state-accredited private schools (*scuole paritarie*) perform a public service and therefore deserve financial support, he was ousted by his own political side: an example of the blindness of part of the left, which shoots its own finest figures. He wanted to bring music and science into schools in a practical, not theoretical way; he was convinced that to learn it was necessary to do, to get passionate, to use the body and action, he was against transmissive and passive learning. Decades have passed, today it seems obvious, but at the time it was not at all. As for the ITS, I can say they were without a doubt the best educational 'invention' of recent decades. At the time, Gelmini was minister and Murano was the Director General in charge of ITS. I worked with Murano and was an active part of the organization that handled the service conferences that led to the birth of the ITS, and in fact I received two solemn commendations for this work. I am very happy that both the Draghi government and Minister Valditara subsequently chose to invest heavily in ITS as a key to the country's development.”

– You were also part of the ministerial working group for Media Education, wrote dozens of analyses for *Rassegna dell'Istruzione*, and were part of Cantiere I, the working group that drafted the Renzi-Giannini reform “La Buona Scuola”?

“Yes, at the technical table of Cantiere I, I brought forward many proposals for the enhancement of teachers. The story of the 500 euros [teacher bonus] did not come from my proposals; it was packaged 'at palazzo' [behind closed doors in government halls] and was, in my opinion, one of the reasons the world of education voted against Renzi, even though Renzi had invested heavily, not as much as Valditara, but still much more than any previous minister, in education.”

– Is it true that in 2014 you worked with "Avviso Pubblico", the network of administrators fighting organized crime, overseeing direct training for schools?

“Yes, a wonderful experience. The headquarters were at the Campidoglio, and it was the year of 'Mafia Capitale'. That too was a very intense period.”

– Behind you, you have a whole series of books that have left an important mark in the field of human rights, most recently *Come liberarsi dalla dipendenza affettiva* [How to Free Yourself from Emotional Dependency]...

“I believe emotional dependency should be studied in schools: it is one of the main reasons leading people into toxic and dangerous relationships. Unlike other addictions, emotional dependency is idealized by a certain segment of literature, but also in films and songs, which is why it is even harder, when young, to learn to recognize it and free oneself from it. We grow up with distorted messages, as if it were legitimate to die for love. Deconstructing false romanticism is an essential operation.”

– When you took the competition for assignments abroad, you were in Calabria, directing nine schools in Fuscaldo under a thousand difficulties, not least the school buses set on fire?

“It was an experience I consider closed, certainly a great life lesson. The situation was red-hot, and an extraordinary event happened: Prosecutor Nicola Gratteri came to my school to offer me support, hope, and confidence. He started planting trees together with the children. And everything changed there. I will be forever grateful to him for that.”

– Speaking of trees, years ago in Finland, I read that you were appointed as the Italian representative for ENO?

“Yes, ENO and Plants and Care for Peace, two organizations headed by Mika Vanhanen, a Finnish educator who just a few months ago received the Knowledge Ambassador award in Slovenia. With the Italian network, together with Linda Giannini, who was national coordinator before me, we bring a love for nature into schools, always on a volunteer basis, and we try to convince municipalities to create educational parks shaped like the peace symbol.”

– Are you a self-made woman, or do you come from a family that was able to help you with social connections and work?

“I am the daughter of two teachers who emigrated to the North to find work; in fact, I lived in a small town in the province of Pavia until I was 13.”

– So, school in your blood?

“No, for 13 years school was mostly a source of suffering for me: I was heavily discriminated against for being Southern. Today it's called bullying; back then it didn't have a name. I faced it by studying: studying and doing well at school was the only way I

had to show my aggressors that I too was a person, that I too was worth something. School was my social elevator, just as it is today for many young people coming from migrant backgrounds. Certainly, I could only ever count on myself, on the seriousness of my words and my behavior. I am definitely a free woman, one who submits neither to a man, nor to ideologies, nor to pressures of any kind.”

– Was school your turning point?

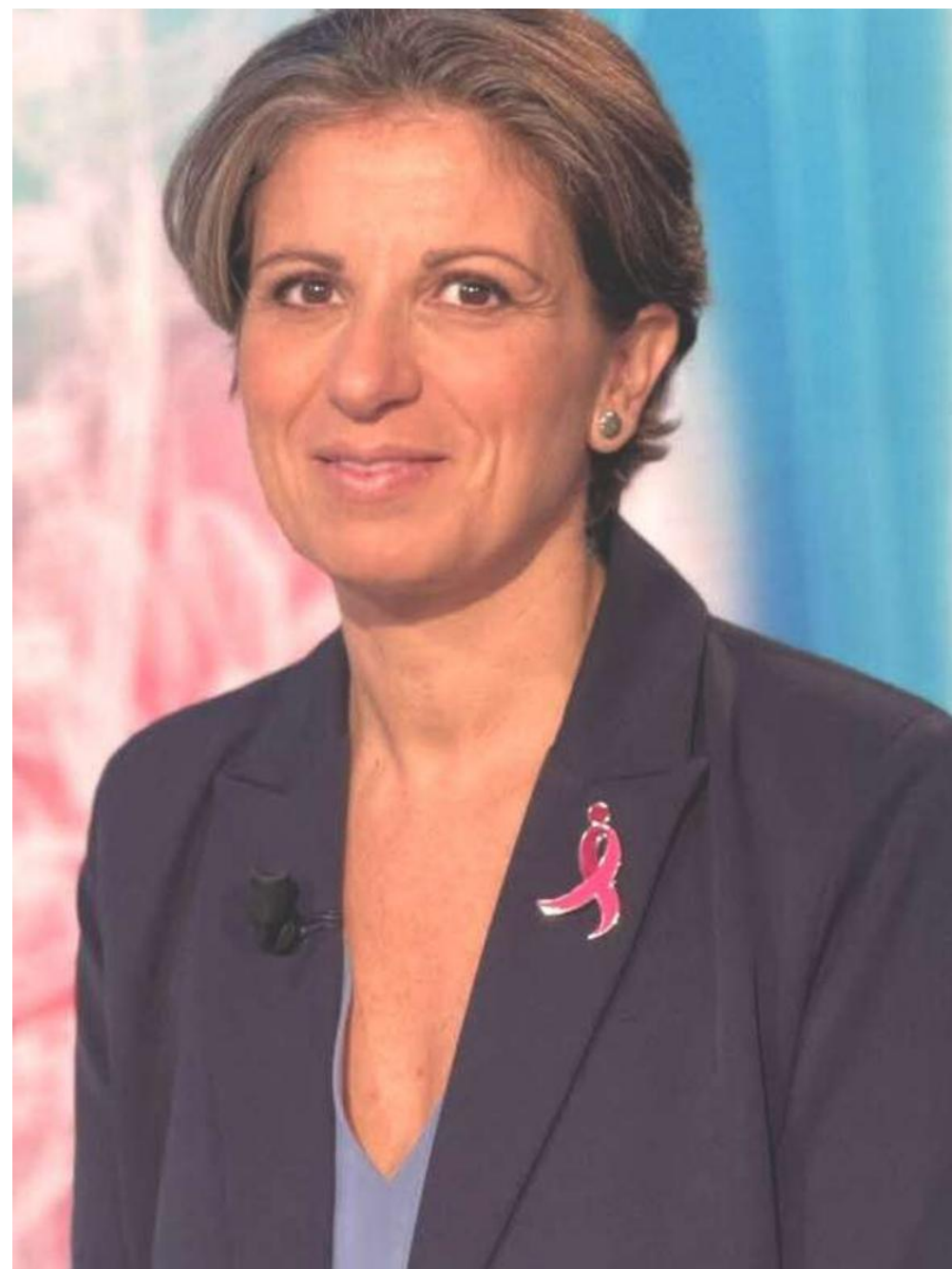
“Succeeding at school also helped me 'rebalance', speaking from a systemic-relational perspective, my parents' sacrifices. My mother, despite having a university degree, chose family over career, and so, in order not to be away from us children, instead of using her degree she agreed to work in a school office. Just a couple of steps away from retirement, though, she went back to studying to get an upgrade. Even though her memory wasn't helping her much anymore, she worked hard and succeeded: I finally saw her do something for herself. As her daughter, that sacrifice of hers had always weighed heavily on me.”

– And your father?

“My father taught in middle school, as it was called back then. He was always forced to be far away from us children because, despite having a disabled mother, I don't recall ever seeing my grandmother standing up in my life, he was never able to obtain the benefit under Law 104 required in Italy to get a transfer. These are the distortions of a good law that is often misused when local health authorities (*ASL*) are infiltrated, as happened for many decades in Italy. And so he decided to retire very young, giving up a job he loved for our sake.”

– What would you like to say at the end of this interview?

“I would like to ask Giorgia Meloni if she could bring, during her travels as a State gift to leaders of other countries, a copy of the *Divine Comedy*. In my doctorate, I am studying precisely the illustrations of the *Divine Comedy* produced over the centuries, one need only think of the hundred Dante drawings on parchment commissioned from Sandro Botticelli between 1480 and 1495 by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, second cousin of Lorenzo the Magnificent. For centuries, heads of state were presented with the *Divine Comedy* as a gift. It seems to me a beautiful gift of peace, and I believe that she, a woman capable of maintaining balances, is the right person to bestow it.”



ALBA DI LEONE

Alba Di Leone The surgeon who smells of Cedro

I express heartfelt thanks to the President of the Chamber, and a word of deep gratitude to attorney Laura Mattarella, who chairs our Honor Committee. Finding ourselves today in this institutional context, so high and representative, makes us deeply proud of your presence and the closeness you demonstrate to the Komen Italia community. We are here to thank and celebrate the Honor Committee of the Race for the Cure and the new Ambassadors of Komen Italia: women and men who, through their daily commitment and authentic participation, have chosen to share and support the values and mission of Komen Italia, to spread a culture of prevention and make breast cancer increasingly curable, without leaving anyone behind. Your presence demonstrates that institutions, academia, and civil society can and must team up when health, a true common good, is at stake.”

At the Chamber of Deputies, last Tuesday, February 24th, in the Sala della Regina at Montecitorio, in the presence of the President of the Chamber Lorenzo Fontana and the President of the Honor Committee of the Race for the Cure Laura Mattarella, the ceremony appointing the “Ambassadors in Pink, Komen Italia 2026” was celebrated in all its traditional solemnity. These honorees are none other than the year's primary figures “in spreading and supporting projects for women's health protection and fighting breast cancer.”

An important event for the history of the country, but one that this year takes on an even more special meaning for us, because the new President of Komen Italia is a former “girl from Santa Maria del Cedro”, one of the most evocative places on the Italian coast, where during these days, despite the war in the Middle East, rabbis arrive from Israel for the harvest of citrons, which they consider the finest “sacred fruits” in the world. Indeed, Alba Di Leone is an absolute authority in oncological surgery related to breast cancer treatment, a thoroughbred researcher, and today the spearhead of this Association, which has made the fight against cancer, and above all the prevention of breast cancer, an international mission.

– The solemnity of the ceremony is attested to directly and firsthand by President Lorenzo Fontana himself.

“The Chamber,” emphasizes the President, “is particularly pleased to host the award ceremony for the 2026 Ambassadors in Pink. Komen has also contributed decisively to changing the approach to oncological disease. Parliament can and must support the work of non-profits with conviction, translating support for prevention and early diagnosis into clear guidelines and legislative initiatives. We must value and support the work of doctors and researchers, without forgetting that behind every new study are the expectations and hopes of so many patients, their daily hardships, and their suffering. To all of them, I offer my thoughts and my closeness: you are not alone.”

Taking turns at the microphone are first Riccardo Masetti, an icon of Italian surgery around the world, and then Alba Di Leone herself, who faces perhaps the most difficult task of the day: explaining to the new ambassadors of her Association the true meaning of her

work and social commitment in service of the sick, in her case, focused primarily on women grappling with cancer.

“After 26 years, our mission,” repeats Professor Di Leone, “still challenges and summons us. We want to commit alongside you—institutions, civil society, academia, businesses—to ensure that no woman feels alone when facing illness, and to make a concrete impact on the avoidable suffering of so many women, families, and communities. We can help transform prevention into a permanent infrastructure for our country. We can make women's health a shared, concrete, and measurable priority.”

– But isn't all of this a dream?

“To be sure,” emphasizes the scholar, “our 'daydream' is to contribute to the search for innovative models that meet women's concrete needs and move toward equity and personalization of prevention and treatment pathways, improving adherence to therapies and treatment efficacy. And the Race encapsulates in a single event this collective embrace against fear, offering an opportunity for great sharing of emotions and hope.”

A wonderfully well-preserved 48 years old, turned on February 15th. Her name is Alba Di Leone, and in life she does the job she dreamed of doing as a young girl: being a surgeon. At the hospital where she works, the Agostino Gemelli University Hospital, which is in fact her true home, they say of her that “The strength of this woman is her ability to smile even in the most complicated moments of her patients' lives.” She is a doctor who has made breast surgery almost a religion of life, and above all one of the most beloved Italian female surgeons, widely followed in the world of oncological surgery because she has spent her entire career treating breast cancer.

A star in her field, as even her mentor, Prof. Riccardo Masetti, noted when opening the latest celebration of their Association at the Chamber of Deputies, stating: “Alba is one of the truest and most serene people in our world, capable of solving a thousand problems at once, but above all a bearer of peace in every moment of our shared life.” An absolute protagonist, in short, of the history of breast surgery in Italy. Even more so because since she became President of Komen Italia, the Association has definitively touched the hearts of hundreds of thousands of Italian women dealing daily with breast cancer. Don't bother asking her for a personal photo to publish, she doesn't have a single one on her work computer, and the few she keeps on her cell phone show her with a beautiful little girl strapped to her chest, which represents the second truly great realized dream of her life.

– Present to render her the honors of the Republic on this occasion is the First Lady. Race for the Cure.

“The true strength of Komen Italia,” emphasizes Laura Mattarella, “is its ability to bring together people from different fields and backgrounds, side by side with healthcare staff and researchers, with the common goal of conveying the importance of care and prevention to society. I am increasingly full of admiration for Komen Italia's ability to network. In this framework, the Ambassadors in Pink play a fundamental role—a large team that expands even further today—and to all of them I express my personal thanks and best wishes for productive work.”

The ceremony taking place here at the Chamber today inaugurates the official activities leading up to the 27th edition of the Race for the Cure, the largest event in the world for

the fight against breast cancer. Scheduled in Rome from May 7 to 10 at Circus Maximus under the High Patronage of the President of the Republic, in 2026 the event will also be held in Bari, Bologna, Brescia, Matera, Naples, and Pescara, and this year will see Alba Di Leone herself right at the starting line.

Behind her, “Professor” Alba Di Leone has a history of professional commitment, dedication to patients, and deep care for the women under her treatment that is moving enough to share with students in medical faculties around the world. What strikes me most hearing her speak is the memory of her sea at Santa Maria, and her unforgettable summers on the promenade and beach, when besides the dream of becoming a doctor she still had time to savor the breeze of those beautiful places and the music that only the sea wind can convey on certain summer nights along the Cosenza Tyrrhenian coast.

In her professional record, she carries remarkable numbers: nearly 3,000 surgical procedures for the treatment of breast neoplasms. As primary surgeon, she has performed over 1,800 breast cancer surgeries using oncoplastic techniques. She is the author of 119 full-length scientific publications with an H-index of 22, primarily on topics of breast cancer surgery and the application of biological research in surgical oncology. She is also a member of the Editorial Board of numerous international scientific journals.

– But who are you, really, at Komen Italia?

“We are a surge of energy for those coming to terms with treatment and for those experiencing the difficulty of living alongside and supporting women who suffer. But Komen is above all an inexhaustible engine of energy for healthcare workers too, who discover a truly special dimension of 'being alongside.' It is an extraordinary occasion to celebrate Life and cultivate Hope. Therefore, to those joining the Honor Committee today and to those bestowed with the title of Ambassador goes our most sincere thanks.”

As of February 1st, 2026, Alba Di Leone is so many things all at once.

She is Director of the “Integrated Breast Care” Operative Unit at Gemelli Isola Tiberina; since March 1, 2024, Head of the Operative Unit “Management of Young High-Risk Patients,” part of the Complex Operative Unit (UOC) of Breast Surgery at the Agostino Gemelli University Hospital Foundation IRCCS. From 2014 to present, tenured staff physician at the Department of Women's, Children's Health and Public Health Sciences. But even earlier, from June 2013 to June 2014, contracted physician responsible for breast surgery within the Urogynecology Operative Unit, part of the Women's and Children's Health Hub - Women's Health Area - Columbus Integrated Complex. She is Principal Investigator for four scientific studies entrusted by the “Agostino Gemelli” University Hospital Foundation and Scientific Director (Local Investigator) for two national multicenter studies on the surgical treatment of breast neoplasms.

– Professor, may I ask where you grew up?

“I grew up in Santa Maria del Cedro and was born in Praia a Mare, but only because my town didn't have a hospital.”

– What kind of family background do you have?

“I am the eldest of four children. My younger brothers Luigi and Giuseppe and my sister Chiara have always been a great source of inspiration for me, and each of them has courageously achieved their dreams.”

– Mom and Dad?

“Our mother was always active in the town's social network, and our father was a tireless labor consultant. They always supported us and raised us to 'continually surpass our limits,' with a deep sense of freedom and respect for everyone.”

– Grandparents?

“I was fortunate enough to know all four of my grandparents and even two of my great-grandparents. In my memory, I picture them as a great, gnarled olive trunk from which everything sprouted.”

– What was your relationship with them like?

“My grandmother Assuntina was a very determined and enterprising woman, proud of her origins and of her own grandmother, who crossed the ocean seven times traveling between her Calabria and Brazil, never able to get used to her status as an emigrant because of the visceral relationship she had with her land, in particular with the red earth of a rural area in the plain of Santa Maria del Cedro with an evocative name: Marasogna.”

– Do you have a special memory of your relationship?

“I remember that my grandmother Albina would light up when speaking about her elementary school report cards, and her gaze always made me feel like a grounded child.”

– And your grandfathers?

“My grandfather Luigi, who survived six years of imprisonment in Africa, taught me that we have immense strength inside us if we don't let ourselves be overwhelmed. He had decided that he would return alive to his Orsomarso, among his Pollino mountains, and wouldn't give in to those who had brought him and the finest youth of Italy in those years to fight a useless war, as all wars are.

My grandfather Giuseppe, on the other hand, unconventional and completely free from the judgment of others, taught me never to feel like a prisoner.”

– What kind of childhood did you have in Calabria?

“Happy! Seasoned with wonderful sunsets that still warm my heart after all these years, and endless, energizing summers.”

– Do you have any personal memories from that time?

“Mountain bike adventures with my brothers and our friends, and an immense sense of freedom, even from the excess of connectivity that grips us today.”

– Which schools did you attend and where?

“I attended kindergarten with Sister Ines, who, among other things, taught me a time-tested, centuries-old model of female leadership... then I attended elementary and middle school in Santa Maria del Cedro, and classical high school (*liceo classico*) in Praia a Mare.”

– Which teachers do you still remember from middle school?

“Professor Urciuolo, who made us fall in love with reading, and Professor Palmieri, who explained to us the extraordinary practicality of mathematics.”

– And from high school, which teachers are worth remembering?

“Professor Barbieri, who in explaining ancient Greece educated us on democracy as a universal value and gave us the key to interpreting historical events, instilling in us a noble sense of politics.”

– How did your choice of university degree come about?

“It was always very clear in my heart that I wished to stand alongside those going through illness, so that I could be of help.”

– How much did your family's charisma influence your life?

“They always made me feel free to choose my own path.”

– In your view, what price is paid when choosing not to live in Calabria?

“A connection with one's roots is broken; you feel a bit like an exile, almost guilty.”

– Your first position?

“A maternity replacement contract.”

– An extraordinary career today, I would say...

“I also had precarious jobs for a long time, once even for just two months. But I was never discouraged.”

– Your first major experience?

“Coordinating as a fresh graduate, the activities of the 'Health Village' (*Villaggio della Salute*) for Komen Italia: a great opportunity to serve fragile and disadvantaged women and offer them prevention and dignity. Komen is an extraordinary tool to generate equity, tear down barriers, and provide prevention and health.”

– The research or goal to which you are most attached?

“Making curable those cancers that still leave us without effective answers today.”

– What advice would you give to a young woman wanting to pursue your career path today?

“To ask herself the right questions.”

– Which ones?

“‘Why do I want to be a doctor? What am I willing to give up? How much is the happiness of others worth to me?’”

– What was the true secret behind your success?

“Success is never losing sight of the reason you work hard every single day, which for me is: being in service of Human Life.”

– What future do you imagine for your professional life?

“To continue serving the people I meet along my path, working to reduce inequalities.

I forgot to mention that her mentor is Riccardo Masetti, Extraordinary Professor of General Surgery at the Institute of Surgical Semiotics at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Rome and professor of Breast Surgery at the same university's residency program in General Surgery, as well as director of the Complex Operative Unit of Breast Surgery and the Breast Center at the Gemelli Hospital in Rome. Riccardo Masetti is the man who in 2000 founded the Susan G. Komen Italia association, the first European affiliate of Susan G. Komen, which awarded him the title of Volunteer of the Year in 2015. Essential are his contributions in low-resource countries, thanks to the creation of the Breast Health Global Initiative and his work as senior medical director at the Ghana-based humanitarian organization HopeXchange, within which he has served since 2006 as scientific coordinator of the HopeXchange Medical Center research and clinical training facility in Kumasi and curator of the female cancer department. Masetti, as reported on the official Treccani Encyclopedia website—is the author of 215 scientific publications, primarily on general and oncological surgery, breast cancer surgery, and the applications of biological research in surgical oncology.

– As if to say: the pride of belonging. Today it rests entirely with Alba Di Leone, who here recalls her other great mentor, Prof. Gianluca Franceschini, another sacred monument of Italian surgery worldwide.

“I would very much like to emphasize another pillar in my daily growth and training, who is Prof. Gianluca Franceschini, Full Professor of Surgery and current Director of the Integrated Breast Center at Gemelli Hospital. With him, every day I share the responsibility of living up to the Project that Prof. Masetti gifted us through his vision. Daily exchanges with Prof. Franceschini are a source of great support for me. Our synergistic action and the pleasure of working together, sharing the same values, is a great privilege for me every day.”

– Professor, may I ask how much of Calabria passes through your life and your hospital each day, and how much attention Komen Italia devotes to your land of origin?

“So many Calabrian women pass through our care, and so many have been treated and followed by us with truly infinite love, believe me. I would also like to remind you how over the years there have been many Komen ambassadors from Calabria, testifying to the great vocation of our land's children not to remain indifferent in the face of others' suffering, placing themselves at the service of others.”

– What you say is very beautiful...

“Throughout Calabria, there are many people today who work to spread a culture of Prevention with great generosity. The recent synergy activated with a group of entrepreneurs from CONFAPI and active professionals, for example, born from the meeting between Komen and President Francesco Napoli, will, I am convinced, further strengthen the bond with the territory, multiplying initiatives with significant benefits for women. I'll tell you even more: the Vice President of Confapi Calabria, Francesca Benincasa, with her contagious enthusiasm and great organizational skills alongside the President, will contribute significantly to a major cultural shift toward Prevention as a common good, even in our region.”

– Before Franco Napoli and Francesca Benincasa, did you have others?

“Among the ambassadors of past years, a special place belongs to Dr. Angela Riccetti for her remarkable ability to grasp the potential of interactions between the non-profit sector and public institutions in a vision of participatory healthcare. With her, we had the pleasure of embarking on a journey with the Cosenza Provincial Health Authority (ASP) to implement institutional screening, generating a virtuous and innovative framework we called the 'Cosenza Model,' which also received acclaim from the National Screening Observatory.”

– How do you view the future of your relationship with Calabria today?

“I am very confident that the new commissioner De Salazar will further foster this innovative model, which actively involves general practitioners, the linchpin of community medicine, in an effective synergy with the non-profit sector and institutions serving women. Of this I am certain.”

(Dedicated to my sister, Graziella Nano, who at this hour in the Bergamo Hospital is experiencing these issues firsthand).



GIADA FAZZALARI

A life dedicated to journalism

I seek out Giada Fazzalari for the first time, the new Director in charge, introduced to me, and warmly so, by Carlo Parisi, General Secretary of FIGEC (the Italian Federation of Journalism, Publishing, and Communication), who asks me to tell the story of her professional experience as a journalist for his publication, *Giornalistitalia*. But after that first meeting, I look for Giada Fazzalari again, and I remain literally fascinated by the explosive force of this Calabrian journalist on loan to politics, who tells me about her childhood in Taurianova by quoting the fathers of Italian socialism, starting with Pietro Nenni. I could be wrong, but I believe she has read everything Nenni wrote and said to the country across his many years of political militancy, and I sense it from the way she remembers him, quoting from memory one of the socialist leader's historic phrases:

“Do you know what Nenni said to the youth of 1944? That ‘The republic for which we fight is not the new ball gown of bourgeois society or the rouge with which it attempts to hide the outrages of years and events, but the concrete affirmation of the democratic sovereignty of the people.’ Growing up, I learned not only from history books; what I am today I owe above all to my family. A family that transferred into my life, perhaps without even meaning to, two of the fundamental pillars that underpin the values of socialism today: merit and a sense of justice.”

– Could you explain that better to me, Giada, please?

“Let's start with 'merit.' As a young man, my father left for Germany with no money, to work and pay for his own studies in Economics in Messina, which my grandparents couldn't afford. He graduated in 3 years and 9 months, becoming an esteemed accountant and building a livelihood out of nothing. And then, the 'sense of justice.' That is, lifting up those 'born behind,' as Nenni used to say, regardless of their starting economic condition.”

Today Giada Fazzalari is the new director of *Avanti! della Domenica*, the first woman in the history of the Italian Socialist Party to take the helm of the party's newspaper. Behind her is a deeply impressive political background.

“You ask about my childhood. I was born in a socialist home, and the historically conflicted relationship between socialists and communists inevitably played out, on a small scale, right inside the Fazzalari household, in my childhood home in Calabria. While my father, Totò, a lifelong socialist, ran in local elections—getting elected continuously from 1975 onwards, serving as city councilor or cabinet member for the municipality of Taurianova, always under the socialist banner during the years of Raffaele Terranova and Saverio Zavettieri—I was active in the youth left from a very young age. I was 13 when I signed my first membership card with the PDS [Democratic Party of the Left], which meant demonstrating and taking political—and public—positions that were often in direct opposition to my father's. On one side, my father's approach: a more responsible, institutional politics; on the other side, mine: student struggles, street demonstrations, university hall occupations—everything you can imagine. I remember fiery, endless debates

at home, intense arguments about politics, morality, and the general conditions being experienced in Calabria at the time.”

– Director, may I ask whose side your mother was on?

“Naturally, on my side. My mother Giusy, Catholic and anti-communist, always supported and fueled my political and militant spirit in every season, with all the strength she had. A beautiful, understanding woman, discreet yet decisive in everything. A wonderful mother.”

– What years were those, and what were they like?

“They were unusual years. The national political and institutional context had become more fragile. The transition between the First and Second Republics represented a shock not only for traditional parties—which were swept away by the judicial shockwave of Tangentopoli—but for Italians themselves, who began to trust new political formations and, consequently, new leaders. And in Taurianova, those were years of bloody massacres, feuds, fear, severed heads displayed in the piazza, kidnappings, and the 'Ndrangheta. Years that forced a boy or girl like me, just entering adolescence, into two choices: inertia or reaction.”

– And in the end, what did you choose?

“The second path: reaction. And I believe that exact historical moment was when a huge, wild passion for politics was born inside me. But in parallel, another great passion was born within me: journalism, which has never stopped.”

– Politics and journalism together, if I understand correctly?

“Truth be told, the seed of political commitment sprouted perhaps even earlier.”

– Who deserves the credit for that?

“The credit goes to my paternal grandparents—farmers, simple but honorable people. They worked the land in the Calabrian countryside in the first half of the twentieth century. My grandfather Natale is unforgettable. He was tall, with blue eyes, big hands, slightly stooped from a lifetime of hard labor. He always carried a pocket watch, a small knife, and a bicycle that I plan to restore so I can bring it to Rome. Generous like my father, who remains my compass to this day. He was a farmer, was called up for war, was a socialist who opposed fascism and had close encounters with Mussolini, to whom he never bowed, though they left their mark on him. Details and fragments of life that were the centerpiece of the stories he told me as a child. After all, Mussolini had been a socialist and director of *Avanti!*, expelled from the party, and thus from directing the paper, for his pro-war stance. Do you know what my grandfather's key words were? War, poverty, the tuberculosis he contracted as a young man, anti-fascism, having survived and returned to Calabria. I grew up with all of this inside me.”

– Giada, how much did all of this subsequently shape your life?

“All these 'reasons,' let's call them, prompted me to leave the party that had inherited a certain way of doing politics from the PCI, a politics steeped in moralistic populism and extreme judicial punitivism. And all these reasons eventually drove me to join the PSI [Italian Socialist Party]. These values form the foundation of *Avanti!*'s editorial plan today:

an ideal and moral vision inspired by humanitarian socialism. A kind of convergence between secular values and those at the core of Christianity, holding as fundamental the words Craxi uttered during his first years as secretary and Italy's first Socialist Prime Minister: 'Wherever in the world there is or was a good cause to defend, there you will find an Italian socialist.'

– Director, may I ask what song defines your life?

“‘Anima Fragile’ by Vasco Rossi. Do you know it? It goes: *‘E tu / Chissà dove sei / Anima fragile / Che mi ascoltavi immobile / Ma senza ridere / E ora tu / Chissà dove sei / Avrai trovato amore, o come me / Cerchi soltanto le avventure / Perché non vuoi più piangere / E la vita continua anche senza di noi / Che siamo lontani ormai / Da tutte quelle situazioni che ci univano / Da tutte quelle piccole emozioni che bastavano / Da tutte quelle situazioni che non tornano mai / Perché col tempo cambia tutto, lo sai...’* [And you / Who knows where you are / Fragile soul / Who listened to me motionless / But without laughing / And now you / Who knows where you are / Have you found love, or like me / Are you just looking for adventures / Because you don't want to cry anymore / And life goes on even without us / Who are so far apart now / From all those situations that brought us together / From all those little emotions that were enough / From all those situations that never return / Because with time everything changes, you know...].”

– Beautiful, I'd say... even if deeply sad...

“I have two other songs I love deeply, though. One is ‘Pezzo di Vetro,’ and the other is ‘Sempre e Per Sempre’ by Francesco De Gregori. It goes: *‘E ho visto gente andare, perdersi e tornare / E perdersi ancora / E tendere la mano a mani vuote / E con le stesse scarpe camminare / Per diverse strade / O con diverse scarpe / Su una strada sola / Sempre e per sempre / Dalla stessa parte mi troverai’* [And I've seen people leave, get lost, and return / And get lost again / And reach out a hand to empty hands / And walk in the same shoes / Down different roads / Or in different shoes / On a single road / Always and forever / On the same side you'll find me]. I see my entire self in that.”

– And what was the last book you read?

“*Three* by Valérie Perrin. I think I share the review from *Corriere della Sera*: ‘Above all wins the portrait of a generation of young people straining at the leash on the dawn of rapid modernization, so similar to the generation of youth here (and everywhere). But also the feeling that not all innocence is lost, not all songs are finished, nor have all dreams fallen; rather, along the mysterious threads that bind us and sometimes tangle, some have actually come true.’”

Giada Fazzalari is a Southern woman through and through, with all the strong characteristics of Southern women—a mother and daughter of her family, with three sisters she adores: Lucia, Diletta, and Beatrice. “I have a symbiotic relationship with them, as children and now.” Charming, beautiful, unfailingly elegant, at times stern, eternally eclectic and visionary, mother to a seven-year-old boy, Leonardo, “who is the reason for my life.”

Giada is a woman of immense charisma.

A thousand different connections, all of high institutional standing, and an important future within arm's reach. A tough character, a woman who possesses the quiet awareness of being at the top of her class in a world dominated by men, and a life story almost solemn

in its composition: made of bread and politics, bread and journalism, bread and international travel, bread and a sense of the State, bread and family, bread and many friends around her, bread and hope.

“What were you good at in school?”

“I excelled in history and philosophy, and I still remember the brilliance of my professor, Prof. Luccisano.”

Giada Fazzalari's Facebook profile is a sort of personal anthology of her life. Her and her sisters, her and her mother, her and her grandmother, her and her dog, her and her favorite places. Her in New York, at the feet of the Statue of Liberty, in front of the Ellis Island Museum, on the Empire State Building, her and her son Leonardo, to whom she writes beautiful words: “To you who are the measure of my happiness. Who measure beauty, who manage my restlessness, who give me air, who gift me freedom, who make me long for the future. I will give everything I have, with all the strength I possess, so that you may become a respectable man. Always and forever you will find me on the same side. Happy birthday, Leonardo of my heart.”

There is one photo in particular among the many on her Facebook profile that perfectly conveys her charisma and personality, taken while sitting on the national executive table of the PSI, with her legs crossed on the table, with that sharp gaze of hers that seems to say “in this house you will find the social justice you have always been searching for.” It is hard not to believe her. Above all, it is hard not to think that Giada Fazzalari was born to become an important part of this country's history.

Yet all of this can also be clearly gleaned from the way this young Southern woman explained her primary mission to the accredited press a year ago, on the occasion of the official relaunch of the publication.

“Bringing *Avanti! della Domenica* back to newsstands,” explains Giada Fazzalari with her disarming and magnetic smile, “is a courageous publishing venture, especially at a historical moment when print newspapers are unfortunately suffering a deep crisis. And it is a unique endeavor because the PSI is the only party returning to newsstands with a physical print edition. We have the ambition to spark debate with high-level contributions on topics close to our hearts, starting with work and justice, and to raise public awareness about a fragile Italy. It will be an open platform for developing a new left-wing leadership class. A free voice is what we aim to be.”

Thirty-eight years old, carried proudly, Giada Fazzalari was born in Taurianova, comes from a family with a long socialist tradition, and in town there are those who remember she was not yet 15 when she first joined as an activist in the 'Charlie Brown' Branch of the Youth Left in Taurianova. This continued until 2007 when, in disagreement with the party line during the Veltroni leadership, she did not renew her membership card of the former PDS, which had become the PD.

Today, behind her, Giada, 'the director,' holds an unexplored and still secret mountain of important memories. Above all, her old childhood friends, many of whom were comrades in pure and unyielding struggle.

“I think of Gianni Accardi, my first party and struggle companion in the Charlie Brown branch in Taurianova. And at university, Massimiliano Nardella. During adolescence,

Antonella Spinoso. Then Walter Schepis, who died in an accident as a young man, whom the old youth left group remembers every year on the anniversary of his passing, thanks to his father Franco, who keeps the old friends connected through memory and commemorations. An award will be dedicated to him for young people who wish to devote themselves to public life. Those young people, that group, that generation are today Roberto Speranza, Arturo Scotto, Goffredo De Marchis, Vinicio Peluffo, Giacomo Filibeck, Nico Stumpo, and others as well. Friends included Massimo D'Alema, Walter Veltroni, Bianca Berlinguer, and even Giorgia Meloni, who as Prime Minister remembered Walter Schepis last May as a young man who was her political opponent, yet a respectable person full of passion. I also remember that my friend, companion in struggle, and best socialist friend was named Emanuele Pecheux, who passed away in 2019, a man of great intelligence and vision."

A glorious political season for the girl from Taurianova, but from that moment on, her passion for activism would never fade.

"*Avanti!*," Giada wrote in the pages of *Il Riformista* a year ago, "was the meeting place for the greatest intellectuals who, throughout the last century, built socialist thought, still lit today with our ideas, in these pages that we keep alive as an act of freedom and resistance, responding to the call of one of the fathers of the Republic and one of the greatest directors of this newspaper, Pietro Nenni: 'Ideas walk on the legs of men.' *Avanti!* is not just our newspaper. It is a heritage of a civilized and free Italy."

Demonstrations, student assemblies, strikes by workers and day laborers in the plain of Gioia Tauro, rallies, meetings, and reflections of all kinds in the squares across the entire hinterland made her a prominent activist, a woman, as they tell us in Taurianova, who even back then possessed organizational skills that were the envy of party veterans. A true powerhouse.

Then one day, journalism entered her life, and her passion for writing and communication merged with her passion for politics. An explosive mixture, an alchemy, which clearly served to bring her to the leadership of her party's newspaper, which first appeared on newsstands, as historians recall, between January 1903 and March 1907, "one of the most interesting cultural periodicals of that first decade of the twentieth century, coinciding with the Giolittian era and the constitutional left, a historic period of great economic and social achievements that saw the first authentic rise in collective well-being."

Yet her passion for journalism comes from far back, from the day she met Maurizio Costanzo and absorbed from him a sense of moderation in life and in the profession.

On the day Costanzo passed away, Giada picked up pen and paper and dedicated a truly special farewell to him: "An important piece of our country's culture departs. An intelligent, sharp man. A man of long vision. Maurizio Costanzo had an eye for talent. He was curious, possessed a subtle irony, and used ordinary things, at times with a trenchant attitude, to dig into facts, people, and things. He was driven by passion, in everything. He liked people, probing into their lives, discovering their worlds, capturing nuances. During the years I collaborated at the university and at the Parioli Theater on his broadcasts, I learned most of what I know today. I will always be grateful to him for everything he imparted to me. He was happy about my leadership at *Avanti! della Domenica*. He told me: 'When my students do important things, it is a medal on my chest that I wear, and I polish them every day.' My medal. Goodbye Prof, thank you."

A graduate of Sapienza University, student of Ugo Intini, historic director of *Avanti!* under Craxi and alongside Pietro Nenni and Sandro Pertini, Giada Fazzalari became a freelance journalist in 2006 and a professional journalist from 2019 onward. Her resume also includes important institutional roles, such as spokesperson and chief of staff to the Deputy Minister of Transport in the Renzi and Gentiloni governments, and in the Senate Commission on Education and Culture.

On June 11, 2022, the political world wondered about her.

Who could this Giada Fazzalari be, who prompted former Speaker of the House Luciano Violante to say things that would end up in newspapers across Italy the next day?

“Giada's interview in *Il Riformista* split the judicial world. To the question ‘For years, and from many sides, the urgency of a justice system reform has been repeated, yet nothing has ever been done. Can the Referendums be useful?’, Luciano Violante answered with his ancient pride: ‘None of the questions touch the fundamental problems of the administration of justice, this topic deserves radical and deep reflection. In the past, the judiciary was threatened from the outside, now it is threatened from the inside. The Palamara affair and related scandals brought a moral question within the judiciary to light. There is a corporate culture that disregards the responsibilities proper to a judiciary that forms part of the country's governance.’

Not satisfied with this, the ‘Calabrian guerrilla’ insisted, and President Violante eagerly agreed. ‘It is true,’ he replied to her, ‘politics and media granted judges this power. Politics progressively yielded pieces of sovereignty to the judiciary, and the judiciary took them. The media turned many investigations into a show, and many judges into showmen.’”

The year 2023, on the other hand, was the year of her first real book, co-authored by Giada Fazzalari and Riccardo Nencini, with a title that speaks volumes about the national tragedy of the Covid pandemic, *Secret Stories: Surreal Chronicle of a Quarantine*.

“Director, you have always fought for the pluralism of opinions, do you still believe in this battle?”

“Pluralism in media has been experiencing a profound crisis for thirty years now. Yet it remains one of the great pillars supporting our democracy. It is important to defend the freedom to inform, just as the citizens' right to be informed is fundamental, because this allows them to become active participants in the public life of the country and thus make fully conscious choices.”

“Do you believe the narrative of politics in major newspapers is the right one, or should it be revised?”

“I believe there are accurate narratives and inaccurate ones. One of the worst forms of journalistic storytelling is exaggerated sensationalism, that invasive type of information that chases the emotional wave of public opinion without going deep. One example above all, the politician who receives a notice of investigation becomes the monster plastered on the front page, and then often turns out to be innocent, which is a vivid demonstration of this improper way of reporting. On these assumptions, an entire democratic system shattered during the transition between the First and Second Republics. The result is inevitably a decline in public trust in the media and a certain deviation in the role of journalism.”

“What role do you believe journalism can still play in service to this country?”

“It plays a fundamental role, but it must report the facts without superficiality or carelessness, respecting a sort of ethics of responsibility.”

“Director, what are the cardinal points of your editorial plan at the helm of *Avanti!*?”

“The key words of the editorial plan on which we work tirelessly are justice, freedom, and merit. In Italy, two and a half million people give up on medical treatment, healthcare is in disarray, and almost six million Italians live in conditions of poverty and social exclusion. A poverty that is inherited and blocks the elevator that anyone with merit and talent should be able to access, regardless of their starting economic condition. We want to give a voice to the last, to the excluded, to those who have no voice. It sounds rhetorical, but if you think about it, who takes care of vulnerable people? It is an army of people invisible to politics, the media, and society. That has been the mission of *Avanti!* for 130 years, and we are carrying it forward.”

“What assessment can you make after two years on newsstands, one of them independently?”

“When we brought the print edition of *Avanti! della Domenica* back to life, the only left-wing and party newspaper on newsstands, we gave ourselves a mission: to be a reference point around which to build a useful debate for a left wing experiencing a terrible political and inspirational crisis. Thus, the most authoritative political scientists, intellectuals, constitutional scholars, politicians, commentators, and jurists in the country, from De Rita to Cassese, from Amato to Pasquino, to Prodi, to name just a few, found in our newspaper a platform to offer a contribution of ideas to an increasingly frayed society where democratic institutions have weakened and fear of the future is growing. It was a high ambition, and the outcome is positive.”

“Until a year ago, journalism had a single union. Now FIGEC has been founded, which you have joined. Do you consider this an added value to the ongoing debate in the country, or conversely, something of little use?”

“It is not only an added value, but it is truly fundamental for our profession that demands and rights are defended and represented from multiple sides. That is the very mission of a union like this. It is most welcome, and indeed I hope it becomes as representative as possible. We journalists have a great need for this.”

“May I ask how many difficulties, as a female journalist, you have encountered in this profession?”

“I am the first female director in the history of *Avanti!*, and I do not believe being a woman is a merit in itself, but it is already something. Especially in a historical period when something has moved from this perspective. The first female prime minister in history sits at Palazzo Chigi, there is a female party leader at the head of the main opposition party, and women are increasingly taking top positions in institutions, companies, and beyond. However, it is not enough. I believe I express the feelings of many female colleagues in this work when I say that the difficulties are truly numerous, starting with the most unfair one: having to choose, and therefore to give up.”

“Many people ask themselves this: how did you reach the top of a historic newspaper like yours? Hard work, or also deep political commitment?”

“I grew up in party branches, starting as a teenager in the youth left in my hometown of Taurianova in Calabria, and later training in the PSI, which I have belonged to for many years. I believe political commitment repaid the effort and activism. The trust shown by my party, starting with secretary Enzo Maraio, who was the first to want my appointment, is a source of pride for me. Besides, politics and journalism share one thing in common: they are all-encompassing life experiences from which you never emerge. Never.”

“What remains today in your life from your native land?”

“Everything. Anyone who grew up in Calabria continues to have an umbilical cord that does not break over time. It is a natural fact, I would say inevitable. I only feel at home when I step foot in Calabria.”

“How did Giada Fazzalari arrive at journalism?”

“The major leap happened years ago from my hometown to the PSI, when I assumed the role of spokesperson and head of the press office, going on to gain experience in the Renzi and Gentiloni governments, then in parliament and in various commissions. Yet journalism is a much older presence. I cannot remember a life without a passion for journalism. It is a part of me that I consider natural and that has driven the entire course of my life.”

“If you could go back, would you do what you have done all over again?”

“Yes, with conviction, except for losing sight of a master of Italian journalism, Maurizio Costanzo, who taught me so much. Rather, if I went back, I would also do what I didn't do.”

“Director, what price is paid for a career like yours?”

“Many small prices. And it is not over, quite the contrary.”

“Do you remember your first major investigative report?”

“Yes, it was also very complicated, and I have vivid memories of it. In Rosarno, in the province of Reggio Calabria. There, migrants lived in inhumane conditions, sleeping in shacks without electricity or water, sometimes in abandoned farmhouses, leading a life unworthy of the name: traveling miles at dawn, in the cold, to pick oranges and earn 5 euros a day, if things went well, after breaking their backs all day bent over in the fields. Illegal labor, exploitation, illegal hiring networks (*caporalato*). That report kept me awake for months. I consider that experience as one of those that marked me the most.”

“Have you had a mentor whom you recognize as such today?”

“When the first edition of TG5 anchored by Enrico Mentana aired on January 13, 1992, I was still a child, and I immediately thought I could follow no other path than journalism. Since joining the PSI, my mentor and point of reference has been Ugo Intini, with whom I speak almost daily. Ugo directed *Avanti!* under Craxi during historic, extremely difficult moments that shaped the political life of the country. One day he called me and said: ‘We old socialists have a duty, we must transmit to you young leaders as much as possible the values of socialism.’ I realized I was enjoying the privilege of being his student.”

“What advice would you give to a young woman who dreams of becoming a journalist?”

“Not everyone hears that clicking of the keyboard that inspires the ideas, curiosity, courage, and talent of a journalist. If you hear it, it is the right path.”



WANDA FERRO

“A life entirely spent and dedicated to my country”

Here is the complete translation of the text into English, with all hyphens and dashes omitted and replaced with commas and natural punctuation:

Wanda Ferro, born in 1968, means above all Catanzaro. Beautifully worn years. An extraordinarily elegant woman, with her blatantly solemn bearing. After attending the Linguistic High School, she graduated in Modern Literature with top marks and honors from the University of Calabria, where she defended an experimental thesis on “The Meaning of Music, Education, and Communication,” likely the result of an intense passion for songwriter music, from Vasco Rossi to Anastacia, from Solomon Burke to Billy Cobham, from James Taylor to Renato Zero, all the way to Baglioni. Yet the “girl” also has a political background that starts from way back, begun when she was very young, with the important, almost proud, grand memory of a highly beloved doctor father in the city, who likely hoped in his heart to see her become a doctor like him. A battle naturally lost from the start.

Refined, bourgeois, deeply cultured, Wanda Ferro is currently Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of the Interior. She has held this role since November 2, 2022, and she will go down in history as one of the very few Calabrian female politicians who lived through and personally experienced, in earnest, the controversies of the First, Second, and Third Republics. A deep connoisseur of power, yet light years away from it. There is not a single moment in her life when she did not reject the sometimes absurd privileges of the leadership roles assigned to her from time to time. Ever since she was twenty years old, Wanda Ferro has always been on the barricades of active politics. Eternally on the front lines, in exclusive service to her ideals and the moral principles that inspired her whole life, with a rigor and consistency that are almost intimidating, and with an almost religious sense of belonging to her political and ideological group. Had she been born twenty years earlier, I am certain she would have been one of the key figures of '68, a passionaria by temperament, rebellious and revolutionary by nature, determined, stubborn, headstrong, eternally sunny, she made her political creed the mission of her existence, sacrificing family, romance, and personal interests on the altar of politics. She never found time to do things other than her institutional commitments, and whenever she was called to handle situations different from before, she plunged back into new adventures with the exact same spirit and energy as her very first time. Magnetic, full of life, constantly strict with herself, Wanda Ferro grew up on bread and politics, shaped by rules and rigor, deeply attentive to transparency, obsessed with respect for democracy and pluralism, possessing an innate sense of the State that ultimately led her to the top of the institutional pyramid of the Republic.

A “woman of State,” educated and devoted to national security, a woman of great charisma who interacts directly and firmly every day with the highest ranks of the country's various police forces, a woman grounded in extensive reading, but above all extraordinarily well informed like few others in her position and role. By day she lives at the Viminale among a thousand different dossiers, some of them delicate and pressing, by night she is at home

studying tomorrow's duties. Indomitable, restless, tireless, a thoroughbred, at the recent G7 summit the foreign leaders present mistook her for a career diplomat. In truth she is simply Wanda, and she is that for everyone. Never a word too many, never a hasty judgment, never a negative comment about her detractors and opponents, never a superficial analysis, a deeply faithful practitioner of "institutional silence," a rule of life she learned as soon as she was appointed a member of the Parliamentary Antimafia Commission and which became her existential signature. Behind her lies a top tier political background, immensely faithful to the ideological positions of the Center Right from beginning to end, a daughter of the people like few others in Calabria, possessing an enduring modesty and a disarmingly simple nature that she has always offered to her people and her city, Catanzaro, much like a guardian angel sent by God to watch over the regional capital.

Wanda Forever. I am partly a direct witness to her political rise, as I was Editor in Chief at RAI in Calabria back then, and she was already President of the Province of Catanzaro, and never once do I remember receiving a single phone call from her requesting TV coverage, or worse, a personal interview about what she had accomplished. Extremely polite in manner, yet detached, always formal, respectful of reciprocal roles, and careful not to be misunderstood, she had and continues to have an almost sacred relationship with the world of media and journalism, with never a negative interference, never an undue protest, never a single form of institutional leverage. If you are there, fine. If you are not there, she moves forward anyway. Had she been born and raised in a different region from ours, she would have become a Deputy or Senator of the Republic at least ten years earlier, but in our parts, women have always paid double the price compared to women in other areas of the country. When she first ran for President of the Region, I thought Calabria could experience a new political spring with her, but the election results ultimately rewarded her direct opponent, Mario Oliverio, a historical fixture of the Southern left. She then took a step back and waited for her turn, or rather for the right opportunity to come along to make her case.

Today she is truly one of the most powerful female politicians in the country, but very few people actually know it, perhaps only those few who have the privilege of working alongside her shoulder to shoulder, because she reportedly gave her press office a single directive: "Let as little leak as possible." Because the work that a man of State, or in her case a woman of State, performs for the country is only a tiny portion of her duty, as she casually mentions, "bound moreover by the oath of loyalty that every member of Government like her takes in the hands of the Head of State." In short, absolute discretion mixed with an almost obsessive knowledge of issues and a meticulous expertise that sometimes make her an "iron lady." Yet these are likely the core characteristics that bound her political and personal life to the success and story of Giorgia Meloni, who remains for her an example of life and social commitment. This is how politics becomes religion.

"Undersecretary, may I ask what kind of year this has been for you?"

"What can I answer? That this was a particularly demanding year, both personally and politically. As always, politics requires tremendous effort, but this year also brought very concrete challenges related to security, immigration management, and the fight against organized crime. Despite the difficulties, however, it was an exciting year, full of satisfaction."

“Could you mention at least one dossier that heavily occupied your desk?”

“Over the course of the year at the Viminale, we addressed major challenges regarding security and countering illegal immigration. Particularly demanding was the work on the flow decree, which I managed for the Government, representing the synthesis of a broad and determined effort to counter human traffickers, promote legal and safe immigration channels, prevent deaths at sea, and ensure genuine, dignified reception for those coming to our country.”

“Tell me the truth, was it not just deaths at sea?”

“What I can tell you is that I derived other major satisfactions regarding my responsibilities from all the activities focused on reusing assets confiscated from the mafia, which we greatly strengthened, and from the major work on the new consolidated law on local authorities, which will grant municipalities and provinces regulatory tools suited to future challenges.”

“And among the most gratifying experiences of this past year?”

“It was certainly the opportunity to chair the G7 Sustainable Urban Development summit at Palazzo Altemps, a session during which, on behalf of Minister Piantedosi, I coordinated bilateral sessions and a plenary meeting with ministers of member countries and representatives of relevant European and international institutions.”

“In the interviews I see of you online, I read in your eyes a sense of pride in what you do, but it seems to me it has always been that way?”

“There is always a sense of pride for anyone holding the responsibility of representing their community, feeling the duty to honor the trust and hopes of fellow citizens. For me it has always been that way, right from my first roles: in the party, as a municipal administrator, or as President of the Province, I always felt the responsibility to serve the community. Today, as a member of government, that responsibility is even greater: representing the Nation is an honor requiring my utmost commitment, as well as a duty to respect the trust bestowed upon me by Giorgia Meloni and Fratelli d'Italia.”

“How many sacrifices does this Government role entail for you today?”

“We work immensely hard to fulfill the commitments made to citizens, during a very difficult time when we found ourselves dealing with scarce resources caused by the mistaken and often reckless choices of previous governments. With great dedication, we are winning battles for economic development, employment growth, particularly for women and young people, providing more dignified wages for medium and low income earners, supporting families and birth rates, and sustaining the healthcare system. It is work that consumes all your time, because there is a desire to do well, to honor commitments, so that no one can ever say you aren't doing enough or don't deserve the role.”

“How much of your private life have you sacrificed for politics?”

“Politics has asked a lot of me, especially on a personal level. I had to sacrifice much of my private life, finding it difficult to balance such an all consuming commitment with the time I would like to dedicate to my family and loved ones. Private life and public life end up coinciding. Yet ultimately, this was a choice I made consciously. I do not want to speak of

sacrifice, because political commitment and institutional work return very strong and gratifying emotions. To be sure, the choice not to have children was not easy, and the little free time I manage to carve out I dedicate to my mother and family members, leaving very little for myself.”

“If you could turn back time, would you do everything you have done again?”

“Yes, I would do it all again. Who we are comes from positive and negative experiences alike. Perhaps with time and political experience I learned that one must not lower one's guard toward those who, after turning their backs on you, ask for a second chance. If I went back, I would be more careful in understanding whom to allow along with me on various stretches of the road.”

“As President of the Province of Catanzaro you were deeply loved, has your relationship with the city changed as a deputy?”

“No, my relationship with the city has never changed. I have always seen politics as a journey, where every role has a beginning and an end, but the commitment to the community always remains. I am convinced that if you sow well, you reap affection and gratitude. These are feelings returned to you even when you no longer hold a seat, and I experienced this firsthand when, after my candidacy for regional president, I remained outside institutional office for reasons everyone knows. It was the relationship with the people that kept me alive, not only politically, but as a person. I must also say that the attention and closeness of the press motivated me greatly. The great privilege of politics is being among the people, listening to their needs, trying to interpret their feelings, giving hope, and ultimately achieving something that makes you feel useful to people. That will always remain part of who I am, regardless of my role.”

“If you had not gone into politics, what else would you have liked to do?”

“I would have liked to become a doctor, the same profession as my father, even though I pursued entirely different studies, having graduated in literature and philosophy. That aspiration was the only one in which I was not supported by my family, who believed it was too demanding a life for a woman. Those were different times and they thought they were acting in my best interest, but I am convinced that being a doctor is a wonderful mission, a profession that brings you face to face with pain, suffering, the hope of recovery, as well as the joy of a birth, as was the case for my father, who was an exceptionally talented gynecologist.”

“Undersecretary of State at the Interior Ministry, had you ever thought about that? Did you expect it?”

“I had neither thought about it nor aspired to it. With the formation of the new government, there was a proposal to give me the chairmanship of the Antimafia Commission, where I had served as secretary during the previous legislature. Then came the Viminale, which is an important and delicate ministry, and it was a position I was very proud of, even if it was not easy work initially. Today I feel the Ministry is like my home, I feel its weight and the importance of its jurisdiction, which, as I mentioned, extends beyond security apparatuses to include significant daily work on prevention, spreading a culture of legality among young people, assets confiscated from the mafia, enhancing the extraordinary artistic heritage of the Fund for Places of Worship, such as concluding work

on the beautiful church of Santa Maria del Popolo and 240 active sites, as well as supporting local officials who face intimidation and assisting local authorities navigating financial and administrative difficulties. I am deeply grateful to President Meloni for considering me worthy of this position, which I hope to complete honorably and constructively.”

“What was the absolute most important day of your political experience?”

“There are several moments I consider most important. From a political perspective, it was the day I was elected unanimously for the first time as provincial secretary of Alleanza Nazionale, after having been active in the MSI and FUAN. For me, it was recognition from the grassroots of a party that, locally, had never been led by a woman. From an institutional perspective, I am deeply attached to my first election to the City Council, which initiated a journey culminating in an unforgettable experience as Councilor for Culture, and then my election as President of the Province of Catanzaro, the first and last woman directly elected by citizens.”

“Has politics changed since you first entered it?”

“There has been a profound evolution in politics, which today seems more influenced by the speed of social media and the demand for visibility. Once, politics was a place for deep, respectful debate where dialogue was sought. Today, however, language is too often reduced to confrontation and insults. That is a shift that concerns me. Yet there are positive aspects, such as the ability of women to win greater trust from citizens, and it is no coincidence that today we have a woman leading the Nation for the first time.”

“How heavily does the heavily guarded life you are subjected to weigh on you today?”

“It weighs on me greatly not having freedom, even though I am accompanied by wonderful people who over time become part of your family. I always liked driving, being independent, meeting people, and managing my time in total autonomy, but that is no longer possible.”

“How does it feel to be considered a 'woman of the Republic'?”

“As I mentioned, it is a source of immense pride that repays many sacrifices. Yet the personal aspect matters little, because I live this role with great responsibility, thinking only of doing my part in service of a political project during years when Italy recovered its international authority and returned to being a point of reference in Europe and the world, thanks above all to the dedication, credibility, and visionary leadership of Giorgia Meloni. That is why I do not view this appointment as a final destination, but as a point from which to cast my gaze across a much broader horizon.”

“You were a major figure in the Parliamentary Antimafia Commission, is a commission conceived this way still necessary?”

“Yes, I believe it is very necessary, as President Chiara Colosimo is demonstrating through her work and her ability not to stop in front of those who try to discredit an effort aimed at uncovering vital truths this Nation needs to know, even the bitterest ones. There are many pages of our history to be freed from State secrecy, manipulation, and curtains of silence, such as the truths that are hard to bring to light regarding the death of Judge Paolo Borsellino.”

“Do you still manage to go to the theater sometimes?”

“Very little. As I mentioned, I have little time left outside of politics, considering that activity in the territory also occupies me greatly as regional and provincial coordinator of the party.”

“What was the last book you read?”

“There are several books that helped me cope with the deep pain of losing my Oscar, one in particular titled *Wait for Me on the Rainbow*, the book by Laura Vidal. Right now I am reading the novel *Vitamia* by Alberto Matano, a journalist I appreciate very much, and *That Meteor on the Right* by Carmelo Briguglio.”

“What was the last live concert you saw?”

“I have seen countless live shows, and above all I organized many as an administrator, from Vasco to Anastacia, from Solomon Burke to Billy Cobham, from James Taylor to Renato Zero. One concert that particularly moved me, which I attended a few years ago, was Claudio Baglioni, which brought me back to my time at the Department of Culture.”

“Where does a woman as busy as you find time for an evening with old friends?”

“What little free time I have I spend with parliamentary colleagues who are now friends, but I always try to carve out moments with my lifelong friends, as those are relationships one must never let go of.”

“Your best quality?”

“Altruism.”

“And your most obvious fault?”

“Stubbornness, which sometimes isn't necessary.”

“I imagine you haven't been to the cinema in a long time?”

“A few months ago I rewatched *Sound of Freedom*, which deals with child trafficking in Latin America. The issue of missing children also affects our country and is something we are addressing with great care at the Ministry of the Interior. In January, I would like to see the new animated feature of *The Lord of the Rings* at the theater.”

“Is the game really worth the candle?”

“Good question. I ask myself many times, every time I give up a trip, every summer I can't go to the sea, which is what I love most. The temptation to give in exists especially when facing outbursts from social media haters who resort to gratuitous insults rather than debating ideas, failing to understand that behind every person lies a private sphere, sensitivity, and vulnerabilities. In the end, I answer yes, that it is right to answer the call of responsibility, to be part of a change, and to make choices that support those most in need.”

“How do you imagine your future? Still the Chamber and Senate, or would you like to return to Calabria?”

“On a personal level, I hope for a future of health, serenity, and inner balance. I would like to fulfill a dream I have held for many years, spending time in Africa to experience firsthand a reality so different and authentic compared to the Western world, something

that responsibility toward work, politics, and family has always forced me to postpone. Returning to Calabria? In truth, I never left; I always say you can take a Calabrian out of Calabria, but never Calabria out of a Calabrian. I have a very strong bond with this land and its people. Politically, I have always said that committing to my homeland has been my dream, as it remains today while I have the privilege of serving in Parliament. However, I am quite fatalistic, we are not the ones who choose, I don't make long range political plans, events decide, and naturally, so does the trust of the people.”

“And from your privileged vantage point at the Viminale, how do you see the future of Calabria?”

“First of all, there is a present of great attention, as demonstrated by Minister Piantedosi's frequent presence in Calabria, translating into concrete measures such as strengthening police stations, funding for video surveillance, tackling school dropout rates, supporting communities on the front lines of migrant reception, assisting local authorities financially and with staffing, and designating confiscated assets to build law enforcement posts and social utility facilities. We are putting massive effort into this, all of politics is doing so, including at the regional level, to change the narrative of a land rich in resources that has nothing to envy in other regions.”

“Has enough been done in recent years?”

“Much has been done, but it is never enough because we are aware that enormous challenges remain to be faced. For Calabria, institutional commitment alone is not sufficient; a cultural shift is needed that involves every citizen, entrepreneur, professional, and publisher, so that our land can express its full potential.”

“What advice would you give to a young woman who wants to enter politics?”

“To do so with passion, but always reserving a space for personal life. It is a commitment that risks becoming all consuming, as it was for me. I can say it is an even more beautiful and smooth experience if you have the opportunity to share and have the support of your life partner, as was true in my case for a long time. In general, I would invite all young people to participate in politics, rejecting hatred and violence while opening up to exchanging ideas, seeking knowledge, and building constructive proposals. I believe it is the most beautiful way to live one's life, dedicating it in part to others.”



MARIATERESA FRAGOMENI

The Women's Face of Antimafia.

“For me, it was a source of great satisfaction. The fact that the DIA gave me such an important recognition honors me, but at the same time, charges me with a further responsibility that I hope to always live up to. It is certainly a personal satisfaction, but above all I consider it a recognition for the city of Siderno. Siderno clearly chose which side to be on, and did so through strong, well-attended public demonstrations: I remember the young people, the schools, the citizens taking to the streets following the well-known events involving the Municipality. It was a powerful civil signal that spoke to all of Calabria.”

For the first time in the history of the Italian Republic, a Calabrian mayor becomes the image of an institutional calendar of the police forces. Indeed, in this case, much more: we are talking about the official calendar of the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia for the year 2026, which is one of the premier institutions in the fight against mafias and organized crime, and which dedicates the month of October this year to the Mayor of Siderno, Mariateresa Fragomeni.

“I don't consider myself a heroine,” she says. “I am a normal person doing my duty. I simply put into practice, and continue to do so, the change we promised. Ours was a very clear electoral campaign: Siderno changes. We asked for a vote for change, and that vote was given to us.”

For Calabria, this can only be a cause for great pride and collective honor, because for too many years now, mayors have been viewed as conduits, perhaps indirect and sometimes unwitting, of the murky affairs of public administration. Today, however, we discover—mind you, at the highest levels of investigation—that for DIA analysts, there is a female mayor in Calabria who merits a recognition as solemn and iconic as a calendar produced within the walls of the Direzione Investigativa Antimafia, portraying Mariateresa Fragomeni as an icon of Italian legality in the world.

Mariateresa Fragomeni—reads the official motivation published on the DIA calendar—“is the first woman to be elected mayor of a major center in the Locride area (Siderno) following a period of extraordinary administration. She publicly committed to the restoration of legality and administrative transparency in local government, ultimately receiving threats, intimidation, and insults, including via social media. She reported these incidents and declared that she will not be intimidated.” Just above this motivation, the calendar features one of the Mayor's most characteristic statements: “It is not a skirt or pants that makes the difference: it is the institutional role, the strength of representative democracy. I am the mayor, period.”

“You see, I firmly believe,” emphasizes Mariateresa Fragomeni, “that educating new generations is fundamental to building a culture of legality to be practiced every day, not just invoked in difficult times. Legality is not a slogan, but a daily exercise that concerns everyone.”

The central theme of the month of October dedicated to her is “The Voice of Politics,” a theme the DIA uses to highlight “the value of political commitment as a safeguard of

legality and a tool for countering mafias.” Within this framework—the DIA analysts emphasize—fits the fundamental contribution of women who, like the Mayor of Siderno Mariateresa Fragomeni, through their role in local and national institutions, “have chosen to defend the common good and firmly oppose mafia infiltration in public affairs. Often isolated, sometimes targeted by threats and intimidation, these women have carried out their work with integrity, opposing corruption and refusing any compromise.” For many of them, the example set by institutional representatives, even at the cost of ultimate sacrifice, “has represented,” add the DIA leadership, “a source of inspiration, transformed into political commitment at the service of the community and concrete acts in defense of justice and transparency. Their actions also symbolize a new political culture that rejects ambiguity and promotes citizens' right to free and clean institutions.”

Without circumlocution, the DIA's 2026 Calendar speaks of “courageous women who, with consistency and determination, have chosen to 'do politics' to bring change, protect democracy, and affirm the principle that the public interest must never be bent to the logic of mafia power.” This lucid analysis was echoed during the official presentation of the calendar at the Chamber of Deputies, Palazzo San Macuto, by the President of the Parliamentary Antimafia Commission, MP Chiara Colosimo.

“The history of the mafia tells of women with many faces, all complex but profoundly different from one another. There are women who chose to defend the clans, guard their secrets, deliver orders, and educate their children in criminal loyalty and omertà. Women who became fiercer than the fiercest bosses. Then there are the other women: those who work in institutions, in schools, who with courage, commitment, and dedication affirm the value of legality. They know that the path chosen involves sacrifices, exposes their lives and those of their loved ones to danger. They spend hours away from their children, living sacrifice not as a sentence, but as a conscious choice, renewing every day their loyalty to the State. And our thoughts naturally go to Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, the first woman to hold that role, and notably the only one to link her political path directly to a choice made while watching images of the Via D'Amelio massacre. Beside them are women who lived close to the arrogance of power, who knew the strength of the mafia, and chose to abandon that world that seemed inevitable.”

The Director of the DIA, General Michele Carbone, took the opportunity at the official presentation ceremony to praise the role of women on the front line of courage and legality: “From the beginning, women have embodied a form of civil and moral resistance capable of undermining the foundations of mafia power. Their choices, guided by unconditional passion and an inalienable thirst for truth, have opened deep cracks in the wall of impunity, offering an indelible example for future generations and proving that true courage is born from the love of justice and the defense of the common good. In this commitment, deeply rooted in our country's civil history, the words of the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, resonate with particular force when he recalled that 'The world will be better with strong leadership from the wisdom and balance of women.'”

President Chiara Colosimo also spoke of “wives, mothers, and daughters who broke ancient bonds, renounced the riches and protections assured by mafia membership, and entrusted their lives to the State. They chose to navigate solitude, judgment, and abandonment to reaffirm their dignity, to rescue their children from a predetermined fate and give them back the greatest value: the freedom to choose. Our thoughts immediately go

to the lined yet radiant faces of the women who spoke to the Commission in complete secrecy about how they were reborn thanks to the farsighted 'Liberi di Scegliere' project, which we are transforming into State law. Finally, there are women who suffered immense pain, who lost a loved one at the hands of the mafia and chose to honor their memory by remaining faithful to the values they were taught. In their silent, composed, and dignified gaze is reflected the quiet power of those who suffer but do not retreat, who continue to defend legality and believe in the truth even when all seems lost. They did not yield to hatred, did not seek the spotlight or words of revenge. They chose the path of respect and trust in institutions: carrying out their search for truth with tenacity and firmness, turning their loss and the memory of their relative's courage into a source of light for the entire community.”

Mariateresa Fragomeni, then. A strong, fascinating, visionary, and pragmatic woman, full of light, shaped by personal memories that deeply marked her life, a true witness of a Locride that has never stopped dreaming of a different future for generations to come. At the Regional Government, where for a period she served as a formidable Regional Assessor for the Budget under President Mario Oliverio, she is still remembered for her complete mastery of numbers, her meticulous knowledge of public balance sheets, and above all the extreme rigor with which she managed a highly complicated phase of Calabrian politics. A mother and manager, a dedicated politician madly in love with her land, fully aware of the risks of serving as a transparent mayor, an icon of modern left-wing politics, skilled at mediating major administrative disputes, yet intellectually free as only modern female managers can be. Her election came after a runoff victory securing 64.07% (4,452 votes) of the preference against her opponent, Domenico Barranca, who received 35.93% (2,497 votes).

An almost foregone success in the city and surrounding areas. I found her deeply compelling for the way she shares her story, her welcoming warmth, and above all her palpable charisma. I am certain we will hear more of her in the years to come, far beyond the DIA calendar that consecrates her as an iconic image of legality in Italy. A woman with her drive and fortitude is destined for the major political arenas of Rome. Whether the Chamber of Deputies or the Senate, only she will decide what is best for her land and her people.

“Dr. Fragomeni, I would like to try to tell the story of your life. Where would you prefer to start?”

“Where it all began.”

“More precisely, where?”

“From my home. I grew up in a family where study, sense of duty, and responsibility toward others were not abstract principles, but an integral part of daily life. My childhood in Siderno was marked by deep bonds, a close-knit family network, and figures who decisively influenced my human and civic development.”

“Do you have a special memory of your childhood in Siderno?”

“I have a particularly vivid memory of my paternal grandmother. She was a humble, simple woman, but widely known and appreciated in town. One of those people capable of leaving a mark without ever raising her voice, through daily example.”

“What was your relationship with her like?”

“I had a very strong bond with her, even though she passed away when I was still small. My relationship with my other grandmother was different—she was of German origin, noble background: a proud woman with a regal bearing, with whom my relationship was more distant, but who contributed to shaping my sense of rigor and discipline.”

“And your grandfathers?”

“I never knew my grandfathers. My maternal grandfather was an engineer, my paternal grandfather a shoemaker: two very different professions, yet united by a strong idea of work as a value and personal dignity.”

“What about your parents?”

“My mother, a teacher, always followed my studies with great attention, nurturing them with constancy and dedication. My father, a certified accountant and high school professor, imparted to me a clear sense of responsibility and the importance of education. He always urged me to study, to put learning before everything else, and never to seek shortcuts. His untimely death, occurring when he was still very young, was a deep wound and a watershed in my life, but also a moral legacy that continues to guide my choices.”

“What kind of childhood did you have in Siderno?”

“My maternal family was largely composed of teachers and doctors. It was an environment where care, attention, and knowledge were daily staples. I fondly remember both the security of feeling protected and the fact that, with so many teachers in the family, after-school study support was always guaranteed, as was medical care.”

“Do you have any personal memories from that period?”

“My father's family had a different background. Aside from an aunt to whom I was deeply attached and who played an important role in my upbringing, my father's other siblings had moved to France. Every time they returned for summer or Christmas holidays, it was a celebration. My father, the only one among his siblings to pursue higher education and excel, was seen as the one to protect and cherish. Naturally, this affection extended to me, and I always felt deeply loved.”

“What memories do you hold of middle school and your teachers?”

“I hold wonderful memories of middle school and high school, both of my classmates and my teachers. In particular, female teachers of Italian literature were fundamental in my journey.”

“Could you name a few?”

“In middle school and classical lyceum, I met strong, authoritative teachers capable of stimulating critical thinking and helping me build a determined character. I fondly remember Professor Caravelli and Professor Minici, who played an important role in my personal and cultural growth.”

“How did your choice of university come about?”

“I attended classical high school, a choice that deeply affected my formation, teaching me rigor, method, and respect for words. After graduation, I moved to Rome for university.”

“To study what?”

“Initially, I chose a scientific faculty, Chemistry, and passed four exams in my first year. However, reflecting clearly on future prospects, I realized that remaining in Calabria and Italy, that path would offer very limited opportunities at the time.”

“And then?”

“One day I decided to change faculties, making a conscious choice guided not only by passion, but also by the need to build a sustainable professional future.”

“How do you remember that experience?”

“The university experience in Rome was fundamental for my personal and cultural growth. However, in my final year of study, my father's death brought me back to Siderno. There was a need for me in the family firm, and I felt a strong duty—human even before professional—to return.”

“I imagine it was tough?”

“It was during those years that I began to approach politics concretely. Living in the territory daily, facing people's real problems, I developed the conviction that civic commitment could not remain theoretical, but had to translate into active participation. From there came my entry into the City Council, my first real political experience.”

“What did this first experience teach you?”

“It taught me the absolute value of institutions, the thorough study of issues, and the weight of decisions. Also during those years, I became party secretary, without ever changing direction.”

“How much did your family's status weigh on your life?”

“Not that much, I believe. In parallel, my professional work in the family firm taught me respect for rules, competence, and the consequences of choices—elements that I now consider indispensable in public administration as well.”

“What is your experience today as Mayor?”

“My approach as Mayor stems from all of this: my family history, education, and the belief that politics is first and foremost service. Being Mayor means taking on collective responsibility, listening, deciding with rigor, and never losing human contact with the community. It is an all-consuming role with no set hours, carrying the city's concerns into private life, but giving back a deep sense of usefulness and belonging.”

“May I ask who was your first real supporter in politics?”

“My first real supporter was my family, my mother in particular... the first to campaign for me! My passion for politics did not stem from a single moment, but from a gradual, almost natural path.”

“Meaning?”

“It came from observing reality, from the injustice felt when rights are not equal for everyone, and from the conviction that public commitment can and must concretely improve people's lives.”

“I sense an endless love for your family in what you say...”

“How could it be otherwise? But family in the deepest sense: the education I received, the value attributed to study, responsibility, work, and human dignity formed the soil on which my political choice grew. Thanks to all of them, I can say I have never viewed politics as a personal ambition, but as a form of service.”

“Has it ever happened to you, traveling around Italy, to feel 'ashamed' of being a child of Calabria?”

“Are you joking? I have never felt ashamed of being Calabrian. On the contrary, I have always felt pride and the duty to represent a complex land like mine—often portrayed through negative stereotypes, yet rich in competence, dignity, and everyday beauty.”

“What advice would you give to a young woman wanting to enter political life today?”

“To a young woman wanting to enter politics today, I would say: study, get proper training, do not seek shortcuts, and do not be intimidated.”

“Sounds like quite a lot...”

“Don't think it's easy. Politics requires competence, consistency, and humanity. If I had to point out what I consider the real strength of my journey, I would say consistency itself.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means remaining faithful to your values, even in the most difficult moments.”

“What future do you imagine for your life?”

“I imagine my future still tied to public service, in whatever form it manifests. Continuing to work for my community, with seriousness and passion, is what gives meaning to my path.”

“What kind of period do you recall as Regional Assessor for the Budget?”

“The period as Regional Assessor for the Budget was one of the most complex and formative of my journey.”

“In what sense?”

“Managing such a delicate subject in a region like Calabria means grappling every day with structural limits, tight financial constraints, high expectations, and often insufficient resources.”

“I imagine it was not easy for you?”

“It was a difficult, often thankless role that demanded rigor, continuous study, and the ability to hold together political vision and technical responsibility.”

“What did that period teach you?”

“In that phase, I experienced firsthand how exhausting it is to try to change things in a land marked by historical delays, but also how necessary it is to do so with seriousness, without shortcuts, and without giving in to the temptation of easy consensus. It was an experience—for which I thank President Mario Oliverio—that taught me to bear the weight of decisions and never lose a sense of limits.”

“Who were your role models back when you were young, and later as an adult professional?”

“My ideal references as a young girl were primarily tied to the culture of the reformist left—women and men who conceived politics as an instrument of emancipation, social justice, and protection for the weakest. Growing up, these references became criteria rather than 'myths': consistency, study, sobriety, respect for institutions, focus on work and rights. As an adult, I learned to appreciate especially those who work in silence, without proclamations, and build lasting results.”

“May I ask about your family now?”

“Today my family is my anchor of balance. I have a nine-year-old daughter, Benedetta, a fantastic, intelligent, and surprisingly understanding child.”

“Are you sure you have nothing to reproach yourself for as a mother?”

“When she was younger, Benedetta used to ask me: 'Mom, how can you be on TV and at home at the same time?' A simple but profound question that says a lot about what it means for a woman to hold together a public role and motherhood. Benedetta doesn't throw tantrums; she observes, she understands, and that carries an enormous responsibility for me. My husband Domenico is a fundamental presence.”

“In what way does he help you?”

“Believe me, it is thanks to his sacrifices, patience, and daily support that today I can dedicate myself to the city as I do, striving to fulfill my role in the best possible way. Without this shared commitment, politics today would simply be unfeasible.”

“Do you really believe that politics can still save this region?”

“I still believe politics can save this region.”

“Under what conditions?”

“Only if the political class becomes credible again. Calabria doesn't need slogans; it needs seriousness, competence, transparency, and vision. This land needs a politics that doesn't promise the impossible, but tells the truth and works with consistency.”

“And the Locride area, which you know like the back of your hand, what does it still expect from politics?”

“Locride, which I know deeply, has been asking for the same thing for a long time. Above all, it asks for respect. Respect for its healthy energy, respect for young people who persevere, respect for those who work honestly and no longer want to be described solely through their wounds.”

“Do you realize that conducting transparent politics the way you do can also entail risks?”

“Of course I am aware that transparent politics entails risks. Exposing yourself, making decisions, refusing to compromise downward often means paying a price. But I believe the real alternative is worse: giving up your consistency. And that, simply put, is not part of who I am.”

“What are you most proud of today?”

"I can tell you that today I carry out my mandate as mayor of this city with only one constraint: the public interest. The Municipality of Siderno is no longer anyone's cash machine, but the house of everyone. It is an administration run with transparency, continuous dialogue with citizens, maintaining a correct, institutional relationship with higher bodies, and loyal, continuous collaboration with the Prefecture."

"I have to ask: are you truly convinced that the mafia is far from these walls?"

"To the question of whether the 'Ndrangheta is present in Siderno, the answer cannot be elusive. I am fully aware that the 'Ndrangheta exists in Siderno just as it exists in Calabria, in Italy, and across the world. Numerous court rulings in recent years confirm and prove this. The 'Ndrangheta is a global phenomenon today, no longer confined to a single territory. The decisive point, however, is that it remains outside city hall. That is how the credibility of a public administration like ours is measured."

"I imagine it isn't easy to keep it out of these walls, is it?"

"Of one thing I am certain: the 'Ndrangheta is fought by choosing which side to stand on every single day, with transparent administrative acts, consistent behavior, and an administration impervious to any form of influence. We made that choice without ambiguity, and we continue to practice it with seriousness and determination. In my view, the 'Ndrangheta creeps in above all where there is need. It exploits social, economic, and cultural vulnerabilities, drawing strength from inequality and lack of opportunity. That is why true legality cannot exist without social justice. Enforcement is necessary, but alone it is not enough."

"A cancerous octopus—how can it be contained?"

"Only one way: through a present State, with strong public policies capable of reducing need, creating jobs, guaranteeing services, education, and rights. Only in this way can territory be reclaimed from organized crime and substantial legality built, founded on human dignity and trust in institutions. That is the highest challenge of politics, and that is the ground where we intend to keep proving ourselves."

"A true mission, it seems?"

"What I can tell you is that for the future, the intent and hope is to continue the work we have undertaken. The commitments in our electoral program were largely fulfilled ahead of the natural expiration of the mandate, but that doesn't mean the journey is over. On the contrary, it opens a new phase to consolidate what has been done and face the remaining challenges."

"Concretely, as mayor, how do you move forward in this climate?"

"One of the most significant and courageous choices made in recent years was deeply reorganizing the municipal structure. We created a stable managerial framework, strengthening administrative operations and restoring functionality and efficiency to the entity. Concurrently, we invested in personnel through public competitions, filling historical shortages and introducing new skills essential to modern administrative challenges."

"Don't tell me it was a smooth walk in the park, though?"

“It was not an easy choice; it required vision, responsibility, and the ability to look beyond the immediate moment. But it was a necessary condition to guarantee better services to citizens and make the Municipality stronger, more autonomous, and more credible. Believe me, without an efficient administrative structure, no political project can truly be implemented.”

“It must be a difficult process, I imagine?”

“Alongside this, our priority remains providing continuity to initiated policies, preventing change from being episodic. True transformations require time, planning, and a long-term vision. That is why we must further strengthen local public services, making them more efficient and closer to citizens' daily needs.”

“What is your relationship today as mayor with young people?”

“As a mother, I tell you that special attention must continue to be directed toward young people, offering them spaces, educational, cultural, and social opportunities so they can grow in a healthy, stimulating environment. At the same time, it is essential to build an inclusive city capable of meeting family needs and offering senior citizens quality care and proximity. Furthermore, we must make our city even more attractive, as we possess resources envied worldwide.”

“As mayor, don't you feel like one of the mayors furthest removed from the center of things?”

“I feel immensely proud to be the mayor of Siderno. I am convinced that Siderno's future depends on attracting resources, valuing local talent, and building solid institutional networks to support development. In this regard, relationships with higher bodies and State institutions will continue to be marked by loyalty, collaboration, and respect for roles. Finally, I consider participation and dialogue with the community fundamental. A strong administration listens, involves citizens in decision-making, and keeps public interest as its sole benchmark. In this spirit, we intend to keep working for the future of Siderno and Locride.”

“The last book you read in full? The last time you went to the cinema? And the last live concert you saw?”

“On a personal level, time is always scarce. The last book I read completely probably dates back to my university years.”

“Yet I hear you are a very cultured woman who reads extensively...”

“Today I read a lot, it's true, but in fragments—by jumps and out of necessity rather than leisure. Going to the cinema has also become rare. My last genuine moment of lightness was last summer when I managed to go to a concert in Puglia with my husband and friends. The tickets were a birthday gift, knowing that otherwise I would never have allowed myself to leave. It was a simple, precious moment of normal life.”

“May I thank you for everything you've shared?”

“You see, I share all of this with great sincerity, only because I believe politics needs human truth—not to build an image, but to make understandable the journey of those who choose to serve.”



ANNAMARIA FRUSTACI

“The girl who wanted to defeat the Mafia”

“There is an entire world, populated by young people who fail to... preceded, but also by young people who instead decide to travel a new, different road, where the direction is indicated by that beautiful word that instills so much fear back in town: justice.”

The story of Annamaria Frustaci is the story of a woman of the Institutions, a woman magistrate, a woman of character, a woman of Calabria, who as a young girl dreamed of becoming a journalist, and one day instead “encountered” justice and fell so deeply in love with it that she changed her course. She enrolled in Law School with a single goal: to become a magistrate of this country, because that was the only job she intended to do when she grew up. These would be years of intense study for her, of hard work, long waits, and analysis of the sacred texts of law; she knew she could not afford the luxury of failure, because she owed concrete answers to her father and her family, as the honor of her home was at stake. In the end, she reached her goal, but her life would never be what it once was, when as a girl and still a student she walked around the streets of her town with her friends, absolutely free and peaceful. Today, her life is an armored life, always on the run, teetering between one official escort car and another, hearings in the bunker courtroom, and then the weight of silence in her office at the Public Prosecutor's Office of Catanzaro, eternally kept under watch by her security detail, men who adore her and treat her with the same gentleness they would show their mothers or wives, thanks to her warm, welcoming nature, eternally sweet and respectful of everyone.

“Judge, I read in your eyes a sense of pride in what you do. Has it always been like this?”

“I am proud to perform a job I strongly desired, and this feeling has accompanied me from the moment I assumed my duties as a magistrate. But I am also aware of the delicacy and importance of carrying out this profession in a territory like Calabria, where the demand for justice is very high and there is a need for a stronger, more attentive presence of the State.”

“May I ask how much the armored life you are subjected to weighs on you?”

“The life I lead does not weigh on me. Beyond the work I love, my loved ones, and my passion for writing, which I cultivate in my free moments, I have no special needs. Of course, I cannot enjoy walks immersed in nature as I once did, but the beauty of what I do leaves no room for regret over the things I knew I would have to give up. The only thing I struggle to get used to is not being able to improvise a trip or move, even for unexpected needs, since I always have to plan every detail well in advance.”

“From the book, one senses a precise feeling: your visceral love for your mother... a mother who was a partner in your future?”

“Absolutely, yes. I shared all my dreams with her. She was a woman who had received a very rigid education and who, despite her preparation and brilliant abilities, had not been able to pursue higher studies. She often told me how her teachers had spoken to my grandfather several times to convince him to enroll her in high school, but back then there

weren't many opportunities, so my mother finished school after middle school and, still very young a few years later, married. She was deeply present in my life and my siblings' lives, imparting to us a passion for study and its value as an instrument of cultural and social emancipation."

Annamaria Frustaci's story strongly reminds me of *Gente in Aspromonte*, one of Corrado Alvaro's most intense and beautiful tales. In the final part of that novel, when the main protagonist Antonello is arrested, Alvaro puts a beautiful, iconic, and absolutely liberating line in Antonello's mouth: "Finally, I will be able to speak with Justice. What a long time it took to meet her and speak my mind." And even before Antonello took revenge for the abuses suffered by his family, Corrado Alvaro writes of him with a timeless gentleness, watching this child who grew up among the clearings of Aspromonte with the same apprehension and care with which Lara, the protagonist of Annamaria Frustaci's novel, describes her relationship with Totò: "Antonello, for the first time, understood that he was in the midst of something unjust; the feeling of his condition appeared sudden and clear to him, and he felt like a fallen angel." Annamaria Frustaci does the same with Totò, the protagonist of her novel, who despite being a borderline youth, ultimately recovers with Lara the humanity lost along the road of violence and solitude in certain Calabrian villages. At the end, Lara, the girl from the town where Totò lives, writes him a beautiful personal, almost intimate letter that stands as a hymn and a sacred manifesto to the goddess Justice.

"Judge, how did the idea for your book come about?"

"The idea was born in October 2021, following a proposal from Mondadori Ragazzi to write a book aimed at young people, to be published on the thirtieth anniversary of the Capaci and Via D'Amelio massacres. This proposal came right after the publication, in a column of the weekly *Corriere della Sera Sette*, of an interview I gave to journalist Maria Chiara Caruso. The idea was to jump back thirty years and retrace, albeit in fictionalized form, my adolescence and the experiences of that period, guiding readers toward understanding mafias through concrete examples and facts."

"When you decided to take the judicial civil service exam, what did your parents say?"

"During the preparation phases for the exam, both were skeptical about this path, especially my father. Initially, he wanted me to become a lawyer, and even after I passed the exam for entry into the prefectural administrative career, he would have preferred that I stay in that strictly administrative field."

"Did they change their minds later?"

"I think that seeing my determination, even though I had already achieved a strong level of independence, helped them understand how important fulfilling this goal was to me. And so, even without fully sharing my motivations, they supported me with all their strength."

"Do you have a special day in your life that you would like to remember?"

"How could I not? On the day of my oral exam, they came with me to Rome and waited outside the Ministry of Justice on Via Arenula, together with some of my closest friends who had come up specially from Calabria. I still remember the emotion in their eyes as soon as they saw me come out of the Ministry, and above all I remember the phone call I made to them upon returning to Calabria, when they found a letter I had left on the living room table the morning of my departure for the oral exam."

“I won't ask you to read it in full, but what was inside that letter?”

“In the letter, I thanked my family for the support I had received, because whatever the outcome of that exam had been, my greatest victory was having parents like them.”

“When you are described as a ‘woman of the State,’ do you see yourself in that image?”

“I prefer to think of myself as a woman in service to the State and its citizens. I believe it is necessary, today more than ever, to restore the image of a judicial function that is not viewed as an exercise of power, but is perceived as a safeguard of legality at the service of citizens.”

The Girl Who Wanted to Defeat the Mafia is a beautiful book. You read it in one night, all in one breath. But inside, we are all there. There is our life, our villages, our realities, our personal relationships, our emotions, our childhood, our way of understanding life with the world around us that belongs to us. A book that masterfully and gracefully tells the story of timeless Calabria. Because within these pages lies the Calabria that each of us has encountered at least once in our lives, and with which we then fell hopelessly in love. It is not a Calabria that is always beautiful or positive, as one might imagine at first glance, but it is the Calabria of our lives, of our youth, of us kids growing up together in the villages, passionately together, between the town square, the club, the church, the youth center, where we were truly all equal, and where the dividing line between what was lawful and its exact opposite coincided so seamlessly that it was difficult, almost impossible, to establish which side someone was on. There was mafia in our towns, just as there is everywhere, just as Annamaria Frustaci shamelessly and sublimely describes it, but like her, we did not experience it as such because, in reality, we were inside it.

In a small village like Sant'Andrea Apostolo dello Ionio (the author's hometown, which she calls "San Maurilio" in her novel) or in a slightly larger town like mine, Sant'Onofrio at the foot of Vibo Valentia, everyone was truly a child of the same mother, the same religion, the same faith. It was hard to separate the two. Hard to deny being in it with heart and soul to the very core.

This novel brought me back to my past, to my old playmates of former times, to my Easter processions, the *Affruntata*, to the enchantment of the saints and Our Lady of Sorrows, statues that were regularly "taken" and carried on the shoulders of boys with whom I spent my free afternoons after school. Only many years later did someone explain to us that certain dynamics of the procession were to be read in a key completely different from what we had absorbed growing up together. And this ambivalent relationship that Annamaria Frustaci describes between Lara and Totò, the protagonists of her novel, is the true story of hundreds of realities and towns like hers and mine, like ours, or like yours.

“Judge, what connection do you still have, if any, with your hometown and community?”

“Whenever I can, I return to my hometown, where I maintain important emotional ties. Unfortunately, depopulation and low birth rates have radically transformed that area. Many dear friends have left Calabria to pursue their life ambitions, but reuniting in the summer is as if we had never been apart.”

The Girl Who Wanted to Defeat the Mafia is a novel written with unmatched lightness, where one can clearly sense that the author, as she tells so well, ended up becoming a

magistrate almost by chance, rather than out of a deep-seated desire. In truth, she wanted to be a journalist; she dreamed of writing for the rest of her life, traveling the world in search of stories, aided by her mother who shared her dream of being an eternal globetrotter. Had Annamaria pursued that path, today she would surely be a highly successful writer and a front-page journalist for *Corriere della Sera*. It is a book of strong tones: full of rage, love, illusions, hope, and personal memories. Touching is the reference to her carpenter father who works more than twelve hours a day to keep his daughter in school at the University of Pisa, and sweet are the affectionate nods Annamaria dedicates to her mother, her grandparents, and the rest of her family, who reunite in summer at her grandparents' country home for a carefree life, far from the routines enforced by the town all year long.

"Ever since dad was hired again at the beginning of May, he works much more than before. He does his usual hours at Leone Rizzo's job sites, but he has also started looking for other odd jobs around town. He is a good carpenter, reliable and precise, and people call him whenever they need help. He fixed a neighbor's lock and built a new fence to enclose a colleague's plot of land. No one in the family has ever said it explicitly, but Lara knows that dad is trying to put money aside, the money that will allow her to go to university. He is often out late, busy somewhere."

It is impossible, I told myself after reading her book, that it was written by a frontline magistrate like Annamaria Frustaci is today: a deputy prosecutor at the Anti-Mafia District Directorate of Catanzaro, working alongside a powerhouse like Nicola Gratteri, Public Prosecutor of Catanzaro, who is her leader and guide, and to whom she dedicates a very special thank you at the end of the book. For this is a novel with a charm entirely its own, light-years away from the conventional narrative of organized crime. Moving and almost heartbreaking, finally, is the description of Michi, the puppy accompanying the story, whom Annamaria adopts and then gives up for the sake of moving forward in life, a backdrop to the final tragedy that befalls Totò, the most mischievous and difficult boy in Sant'Andrea / San Maurilio.

"Michi has truly become part of the family. And Lara tries not to think too much about the promise made to Totò, the one where she committed to giving him the puppy at the end of summer. September still seems far away, anyway. For the moment, Lara tries not to think about it."

A movie could easily be made from this novel today; all the ingredients are there. One day, in an abandoned building, Lara and Totò find a soft white puppy whining for help; Lara rescues it and takes it home.

"I'll call him Michi. Like Michelangelo, the real name of Caravaggio, the painter who painted the canvas representing Judith and Holofernes." She is the one to spot him first, yet the boy aggressively claims his right to keep the puppy for himself; he refuses to let it be taken by that girl who confronts him head-on, without fear. But Lara has already realized that the only way to defeat the mafia, which slithers among the homes and streets of the town, is to look it in the face with honesty and courage. So she decides to make Totò an offer he cannot refuse...

"Judge, may I ask how many sacrifices the profession of magistrate entails for you today?"

“It is a job that requires time, dedication, and immense patience. Often, even on Sundays, holidays, or during vacations, events occur that demand immediate intervention. The commitment of the prosecuting magistrate and the entire support team does not depend solely on efficient work organization, but also on the unpredictability of events and strict deadlines for executing certain duties. Anyone who does this job (and this also applies to the prosecutor's secretarial staff and judicial police officers who assist us) knows they must give up important moments for themselves and their loved ones if official needs require it. And then, one must lead a quiet life, far from high society: this is because all citizens must be able to place their trust in justice and rely on the authority of those called to evaluate their claims. But in this regard, I am helped by the fact that I have never enjoyed a high-society life or crowded places.”

“I imagine you haven't been to the cinema in a long time?”

“For at least five years, but nowadays there are many alternatives for watching a good movie.”

“Is the effort really worth it in the end?”

“The effort and dedication invested are not always compensated by results, but this is work done out of love for justice, even when it takes years to shed light on certain facts or when investigations prove fruitless. For those who have suffered a wrong or face problems that lead them to bring their grievances to the judiciary, the thirst for justice and truth does not fade with time. Naturally, as time passes, a sense of distrust may grow in them, but the need to receive answers will never disappear. That is why I feel confident in saying that, when it comes to justice, it will always be worth it.”

“Does the doubt ever cross your mind that you may have made a mistake as a magistrate?”

“When doing a job like mine, one is not immune to error. Naturally, I refer to cases where the error does not stem from superficiality on the magistrate's part, since in that case there could be disciplinary implications, but from situations where investigative findings that were initially solid are surpassed or disproven by the natural development of an investigation or trial. In any case, by training, conscience, and above all because it is my primary duty, when instructional findings are contradicted by the suspects involved and doubts arise during cross-examination, I put my work under a microscope to verify the validity of what is being stated. In this job, it is essential to listen to what your interlocutors have to say and subject it to verification without any prejudice.”

“If you could go back, what would you not do again?”

“There are no things I would not do again, but certainly, if I went back, I would handle certain events with greater maturity, a different approach, and a different temperament.”

“When you declare, ‘Having fear does not mean lacking courage,’ do you mean the determination to keep moving forward?”

“I am deeply convinced of it, because only those who have experienced fear can draw from that experience the strength and determination to push forward and free themselves from the limiting or paralyzing effect that this feeling carries. In the small and large daily challenges, we realize how feeling fear becomes an opportunity for reflection and spiritual

growth, as well as the first step toward finding the courage to face the situations that scare us. Therefore, fear is certainly a good thermometer for measuring our determination.”

“And when you say you worry about the lives of your loved ones, not your own, who are you thinking of?”

“My family, the person at my side, my friends, in short, my most important affection.”

“Judge, once you passed the judicial exam, was Calabria a deliberate choice?”

“When I passed the oral exams and completed the subsequent training period, I was called to choose my role and posting. I had already decided during my clerkship, as the training path for a trainee magistrate was then called, that I would choose to serve as a prosecutor in my home region. Based on my exam results and ranking, I could have chosen Milan, Palermo, Pisa (where I had completed my university studies) or Padova, where I had moved at the time for work reasons. I chose Calabria and returned here in September 2010.”

The Girl Who Wanted to Defeat the Mafia is a story of growth and social redemption like few others, one that Annamaria Frustaci writes in a single rush, with a passion in the storytelling that moves and engages, almost like a fairy tale: a timeless tale, ideal for explaining to young people that when facing the mafia, there is always the possibility of choosing a different road. And Annamaria learned all of this at the Galluppi High School in Catanzaro listening to Gherardo Colombo.

“The magistrate speaks of memory, of duties and rights, of the Constitution. He speaks of respect and human dignity, of education to be free, of feeling part of a society, and the kids listen attentively. His words slowly reach Lara, awakening her. Gherardo Colombo shares his own experience, but to Lara it feels as if he is speaking about Totò and San Maurilio. ‘The mafia is strong, but we are stronger. We can make justice prevail through our choices and our commitment. We are not condemned to criminality.’”

“Judge, is it true that if you had not become a magistrate, you would have liked to be a journalist?”

“As a teenager, I looked with great curiosity at the world of journalism and media. I liked informing myself through the means available at the time, television news, print media, and encyclopedias. And I really loved writing.”

“What fascinated you most about journalism?”

“Between the ages of 11 and 16, I was particularly fascinated by the role of foreign correspondent or special envoy, especially since in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were numerous significant events that my generation came to know thanks to courageous reporters committed on the front lines in search of truth. At the time, news was not yet accessible through browsing the web.”

“What events are you referring to?”

“Those were the years of the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime in Romania, the First Gulf War, the peace conference sponsored by Bush and Gorbachev to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Yugoslav crisis, and the collapse of the Albanian regime.”

“If you had to tie your strongest memory to a single image, what comes to mind?”

“How could I forget the docking of the ship *Vlora* at the port of Bari and the arrival of twenty thousand Albanian refugees, many of whom were welcomed into small towns in our territory in an outpouring of solidarity collecting clothes and food. In those same years came the Sicilian massacres of Capaci and Via D'Amelio in Palermo, followed immediately by the car bombs in Florence, Milan, and Rome.”

“Forgive me, but the detail and precision of your memories is almost striking...”

“You see, these events are deeply carved into my mind. I think, for example, of the assassination in Somalia, in the center of Mogadishu, of the journalist Ilaria Alpi. We talked about it constantly at school, and as students we had to do research to address current events in class. That was how my admiration grew for the work of special envoys.”

“Your mother was a partner in crime back then too, I take it?”

“Even more than that. One day, together with my mother, I wrote a letter to the journalism training institute affiliated with the University of Bologna. Even though it was premature, I was gathering useful information for choosing a university path after high school graduation exams. I was informed that a degree in law or economics was required to attend the program. So I began to consider that the faculty of law could be a possible option. Then, some time later, magistrate Gherardo Colombo visited the Pasquale Galluppi Classical High School in Catanzaro, the school I attended, and that meeting radically changed my choices. I understood how a magistrate, albeit with different tools, searches for the truth of facts, not to inform, but to provide answers of justice.”

“Judge, may I ask to whom you would like to dedicate your life and career today?”

“I dedicate it to all those who still believe in justice and place in it their legitimate expectations and hopes.”



LELLA GOLFO

"Bocale forever, the town where I grew up."

At the end of June each year, in the splendid setting of the Colosseum Archaeological Park in Rome and broadcast live on Raiuno, the appointment with the "Women's Oscar" is renewed: the Marisa Bellisario Award, internationally renowned, "Women Who Make a Difference", now in its 38th edition, which still bears the exclusive signature of Lella Golfo, the "pasionaria of Bocale", together with this extraordinary Calabrian protagonist's deep dedication to her land of origin.

Of Reggio origin, a charismatic protagonist, an innovative intellectual, independent and free like perhaps no other woman in Italy could ever be. An important political past at the heart of the Italian left, first communist then socialist, a personal friend of the men who mattered most in the history of the Republic, with a granite character, a woman of great civil courage, strong as a rock even in the most difficult moments of her life, still capable of traveling the world, writing, recounting what she sees, dreaming, believing, and hoping for a better future for the people of her land.

"Despite the many goals achieved and records broken," she says, "awarding and celebrating female excellence continues to be an absolute priority for us. The great challenges of the future, from the environment to technology to achieving lasting peace, require strong and recognized female leadership. This is the meaning and spirit with which the Marisa Bellisario Award has operated for almost forty years. And the 2026 Golden Apples represent another step forward in this direction, telling the story of an Italy that continues to grow with conviction toward the goal of equality."

An Award signed with pride by Lella Golfo, which is above all the story of a woman who dedicated her entire life to fighting for women and who today is a benchmark for the entire Italian and international female world.

"Lella Golfo, there is no public or private occasion where you do not find a way to talk about your Calabria. Wherever you go, you do nothing but speak about your origins, your land, and your people. Especially about Bocale, which is your hometown..."

"You see, the truth is that I deeply love the life of that small town of two thousand souls, just outside Reggio Calabria, stretched along State Highway 106. The church of Saints Cosmas and Damian and the ultra-modern pharmacy of Dr. Pellicanò: when you enter, it feels like standing on New York's Fifth Avenue. In the late afternoon, you find everyone there, standing around talking, campaigning, animating debates on who deserves to win, but above all talking about fishing. 'Did you go out with the boat? How many fish did you catch? What tackle did you use?'. And it is all whispered in low voices. Do not forget that fishermen are jealous of their secrets."

"Where does your story as a 'warrior woman' begin?"

"It begins first of all in Bocale. And then from my curiosity, my thirst for knowledge, my need to see distant worlds, and my desire to know realities light-years away from the life of a small Southern town like mine was."

"Did you do it all on your own?"

"How could I have? Everything my life has become I owe exclusively to my parents. They were people engaged in social and political work, in an era when society was essentially rural and dominated by great cultural obscurantism. In truth, they were my eyes on the world, even if in extremely different ways from one another."

"In your book *Ad alta quota*, published by Marsilio, you mention growing up on 'bread and communism'?"

"That is the bare minimum I can say. Antonio Gramsci, Giuseppe Di Vittorio, Palmiro Togliatti, and Enrico Berlinguer were the noble fathers of Italian communism, but also my adoptive fathers."

"In what sense?"

"I learned the name of Togliatti, 'The Best', from my earliest childhood, so many were the times I heard it repeated. My father lived the communist ideology with great passion and dedication, almost like an illness. He believed in it deeply and thought it was important to educate us children in the spirit of his ideals."

"To what do you attribute the success of your life today?"

"I was very fortunate compared to my peers, because my father and mother, Don Nino and Donna Rosina, gave me the keys to the world, encouraging me to study, understand, and travel. Then, as often happens in life, our roles inverted and I became their eyes on the world. And it remained that way until the end."

"Yet you constantly remember your father as a man who did not like to travel..."

"It is true, my father was more traditionalist than my mother. He loved staying in the town and was reluctant to cross the borders of Calabria. Just think, he died with the regret of never having visited 'his' Soviet Union."

"Why?"

"He was afraid of flying. But he was the one who opened my mental and ideological horizons, shaped my thinking, and passed down values and principles of great honesty. Through his deep faith in that ideology, I was able to build my own ideas and even be deeply critical of what was his 'religion'."

"What fundamental lesson did he leave you for the future?"

"His example, his unconditional passion, his ideological strength. I learned from him, and only from him, to understand that ideology was something truly worth fighting for. Always and in every situation. It could become a reason for living, even for me. And so it was."

"In the end, did he die a 'communist'?"

"It could not have been otherwise. I am convinced that if he could have witnessed firsthand, as happened to me, the lack of freedom and the oppressive totalitarianism of the Eastern regimes, he would have seen his convictions progressively waver. My father was a profoundly just man. His was the sincere faith of an innocent heart. And he was loyal. He would have given his life to defend his ideas. He always told me: 'Lella, always remember that I am not a traitor; I want to die a communist.' It was the phrase with which he concluded our animated political discussions, especially those focused on my involvement in the Socialist Party."

"As an old communist, I imagine he was very critical of Craxi, to whom you were instead very attached?"

"I wrote about it in my book, where I recall Christmas Eve in 1994. My parents were in Rome at my house, and around 2:00 PM, Nicola arrived, Craxi's historical driver, who had to deliver a gift from Bettino, who was already in exile in Hammamet. We opened the package with emotion and surprise. It was a folder of watercolors painted and signed by Bettino himself, titled 'Liars and Extraterrestrials'."

"What was your father's comment?"

"He told me: 'They were ruthless with him; he did not deserve to be treated like a criminal. He did so much for our country and now everyone seems to have forgotten Sigonella.' That was my father. A man who granted the honor of arms, who had no enemies, only adversaries. Craxi was indeed a socialist, but also a politician who had given everything for his ideas and would die for his ideas. A man like that, for my father, was worthy of respect."

Lella Golfo is all of this and much more, just like her life, with everything she has managed to achieve. Lella is a true hymn to female managers who with their commitment have marked the history of our country.

Let us start from the Marisa Bellisario Foundation, which is nothing other than Lella Golfo herself: an intuition all her own, but above all a creation and a tool of political struggle in the service of Italian women, none excluded.

Born in 1989, today the Foundation is a network of energy and skills, a merit lobby, a network for dialogue and exchange, a united and supportive group sharing activities and initiatives of the highest institutional profile to build a country tailored to women and social growth.

"The goal," repeats Lella Golfo on every occasion, "is to support women in their professional and personal lives, value their merit and talent, promote female careers, and raise awareness among the public, institutions, and the economy toward achieving conditions of true equality of opportunity."

In short, at least at the beginning, all of this was a real cultural challenge to the rest of the country.

Leaving the Quirinale, where President Sergio Mattarella a few years ago had just received the winners of one of the many Bellisario Awards, Lella Golfo was beaming.

"There are almost 600 women," she said, "who over the last 33 years have received what has become the Women's Oscar. Thousands of managers, entrepreneurs, professionals, researchers, journalists, actresses, fashion designers, and even an astronaut: a female reservoir of energy and ideas that Italy and the world can and must leverage for sustainable growth." And the recognition, the "Golden Apple", she recalled on that solemn occasion, awards women who have distinguished themselves in the professions, management, science, economy, social work, culture, information, entertainment, and sports, both nationally and internationally.

In reality, the Bellisario Award has become an integral part of the life, culture, and tradition of our time and our country. A recognition of female talent, a contribution to Italy's social growth, and above all to the fight against gender inequalities. An Award that seems made in Lella Golfo's image and likeness, born almost by chance after the passing of Marisa Bellisario.

"A woman, a story, an example for all of us. Marisa Bellisario represents the challenge and victory of gender equality, the redemption of women, and the constant, tireless commitment to a new cultural approach. First the presidency of Olivetti Corporation of America, then leading Italtel where, as CEO and the first woman to lead a public company, Marisa Bellisario made courageous and visionary choices, launching innovative projects unimaginable for the time. An undisputed success that today places her in economics textbooks as an example of restructuring a public company and earned her, in 1986, the Manager of the Year Award."

"Lella, do you still return to Calabria and especially to Bocale?"

"I have never abandoned the house where I grew up and I have always spent my holidays in this little kingdom. On summer evenings like those of this year, it almost seems as though you can touch Sicily. You can clearly see the lights of cars speeding fast from Messina to Taormina, and the fireworks of town festivals that children stop to contemplate."

"What do you miss most about Bocale today?"

"I miss the sea, my sea. I have traveled the world, I have known the pristine seas of the Maldives, the Seychelles, Mauritius, all the way to Phuket island, but the sweetly cold sea of Bocale, with its shifting colors and the transparency of a diamond, remains matchless for me."

"What is the fondest memory you keep of your years in Bocale?"

"You will not believe it, but the moment of greatest happiness for us children was when my father loaded us onto the handlebars and top tube of his bicycle, and together we headed toward the tiny projection room in Pellaro run by the nuns. We were going to the movies."

"What kind of childhood did Lella Golfo have?"

"A serene childhood, except for a single, grave catastrophe: the Reggio Calabria flood in the autumn of 1953. On that terrible night of December 23, the fury of the water carried everything away. In San Gregorio, my grandmother's village, the collapse of houses caused eleven fatalities. Across Calabria, torrential rains caused landslides, road and railway interruptions, telegraph and phone outages, numerous victims, and hundreds of injured. It was my first impact with reality and my first encounter with pain."

"What pain?"

"The water of that night, along with the things we would painstakingly rebuild and the objects we would repurchase, also took away life. I lost my uncle and my grandmother."

"A family tragedy?"

"Today we would say an expected tragedy. My grandmother and uncle went back to save the bags of rice and pasta by placing them on the counter. They did not make it and were swept away by the water overflowing from the Sant'Agata stream, the large watercourse starting from Aspromonte and emptying right near San Gregorio. That night, death entered my existence, with violence and all at once. From then on, nothing was ever the same. Without my grandmother who loved and spoiled me, filling the wardrobe with those 'impossible' dresses I adored! For my mother, it was a suffering that never ended."

"I read that your marriage was also a source of sadness for the family..."

"My activism in the FGCI, my experiences as a young former communist, were an 'original sin' hard to shake off. They seem like stories from another era, but the truth is that the parish priest of Bocale categorically refused to marry us in church. Such rigidity was a surprise even to us. He told my mother I was not worthy to receive that sacrament because mine was a family of communists: 'Your daughter has even been to Romania,' were his words to justify an unappealable refusal. My mother looked at him without betraying any emotion. 'The Church forgives, assuming my daughter committed a sin,' she replied simply with her usual composure."

"How did it end?"

"We turned our backs on the priest and left. But I was worried about the reaction of Pippo's family, deeply Catholic, whom I was about to marry. The only solution was a civil marriage. Today it would be completely normal, but back then I was probably the first woman in Reggio Calabria to marry in a civil ceremony. It was a courageous and painful choice, but our small revenge was being married by the socialist mayor of Sant'Eufemia d'Aspromonte, a dear friend of ours."

"Lella, will you tell us about your mother?"

"My mother was a concrete, strong, courageous, generous, and passionate woman. She had a vibrant personality and never surrendered to anything. Every obstacle for her was a challenge, a wall she would sooner or later break down through sheer stubbornness. I remember I was still very young and our neighbor, a poor widow without money and with three children, fell gravely ill. In those days, especially in the South, people died easily. You did not reach the hospital in time, and when you did, there was not always an efficient facility. The widow's family had already called the priest, and when my mother saw him, she stood right in front of him. 'This poor woman does not need the last rites, but to be treated in a hospital we do not have,' she said in a firm tone, looking him straight in the eye."

"And then what happened?"

"Within a few hours, my mother found the necessary money for an ambulance and without hesitation had the widow admitted to Cardarelli Hospital in Naples. She was right."

For our neighbor, it was not yet time to leave three children orphaned, and my mother's stubbornness had saved her. That was Donna Rosina!"

"Was she also a woman who loved to travel?"

"My mother represented an eye on the world for all of us in a broader sense, especially for that modernity that made her unique for those times. While women in Calabria back then barely left the house, she already had a passport (I still keep her passports!) and traveled around the world. You would never imagine it, but my father saw the pillars of that communism he preached with such emphasis only through her travel stories: Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Poland, former Czechoslovakia."

"From your books, a strong 'sense of family' emerges..."

"My mother saw her determination reflected in me and often told me I was the male son. But just as it had been for my father toward her, my brothers never felt belittled by my strength; on the contrary. We are very united, we have always shared everything, through good times and bad, and distance has changed nothing."

"Yet life took you very far from Bocale..."

"In our family we have different lives, but each of us has made the others part of the most important decisions. We supported each other without ever judging. It is precisely in difficult moments that we are even more united."

Great Lella Golfo. Born in 1941. Journalist, convinced Southernist, Commendatore and Knight of the Republic, and for a phase of her life also a deputy elected in 2008 in the ranks of the PdL, her life is an exclusive narrative of social commitment for the South and for women. Her official biography recalls that Lella was "little more than a girl" when she fought with determination to defend the rights of the jasmine pickers of Locride and the olive pickers of the Piana di Gioia Tauro.

Arriving in Rome with a group of women, inventing a form of self-financing to create ad hoc initiatives aimed at promoting women, in 1982 she constituted the cultural association "Buongiorno Primavera" and began her official march of cultural, political, and social activism dedicated to women, their issues, and aspirations. Struck by the figure of Marisa Bellisario, then CEO of Italtel and the first successful female manager in the memory of our country, in 1989, one year after her passing, she decided to create an award in her memory. Thus the Marisa Bellisario Award was born, followed two years later by the Marisa Bellisario Foundation. Officially recognized as a non-profit organization in 1996, since 2005 the Foundation has also been a recognized NGO by decree of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

After almost thirty years of daily commitment and tireless work (celebrated with two different exhibitions at the Vittoriano in Rome and Palazzo Reale in Milan), the Marisa Bellisario Foundation today represents an undisputed benchmark, both for women who have already proven their abilities and skills in the field, and for those entering the world of work.

"Lella, what was your first real big political experience?"

"Without a doubt, the first great experience of my life was the World Festival of Youth in Vienna, organized by the socialist and communist youth movements from all over the

world. It was the summer of 1959, and while accompanying me to the Reggio station toward that fantastic experience, my father repeated to me in a stern tone: 'If you are the only girl, you are coming home with me.' Obviously I was the only girl and I went anyway. I will always remember that very long train journey: from Reggio to Venice, crossing the Alps toward Austria."

"You always talk about your first trip to Romania..."

"It all started with an award trip offered by the Central Committee of the FGCI to a group of young people selected for their activism, and I was among them. I had the opportunity to immerse myself in Ceaușescu's Romania, the homeland of communism in power."

"Is it true that you were deeply disappointed by that trip?"

"The East, so often imagined and idealized, turned out to be the bitterest of my disappointments. What for me and my peers represented the symbol and pillar of social justice, solidarity, and above all direct participation of the people in public affairs, was in reality simply a prison."

"In what sense?"

"No ideal could justify that absence of freedom that I experienced firsthand. No egalitarian value, no good principle could produce that atmosphere of oppression that jumped out at you. It was the first betrayal of my life. And I was the one who had been betrayed by communism."

"At a certain point, a nun became an important reference point in your life..."

"A truly special nun. It was March 1998, my mother had died less than a month before, and we were preparing the tenth edition of the Bellisario Award. We had decided to hand the Golden Apple into the hands of Sister Nancy Pereira, the 'banker of the poor', the sole support for the forgotten of Bangalore. We were in Rome on the stage of Confindustria, then chaired by Giorgio Fossa. I was emotional, but Sister Nancy looked into my eyes, read my pain, and without saying a word held me in an affectionate embrace, smiled at me, and whispered 'courage'. It was like immersing myself in my mother's embrace, a feeling of infinite serenity: like finding peace and at the same time the strength to continue the journey."

"What was instead the fatal meeting of your life? I mean the one that allowed you to engage in politics as a protagonist on a national level?"

"Without a doubt, the meeting with Giacomo Mancini. I was taking the train to Reggio for the Christmas holidays. On that express train from Rome to Reggio was Giacomo Mancini, then Minister of Public Works. He was one of the most powerful men in the country. For five hours, sitting across from me, he asked me about my Roman life, and I did not miss the opportunity to make myself known to that man whom I admired as Lella Golfo, and not simply as the wife of Pippo Spinella, an important socialist leader. After the initial moments, the emotion and concern of making my personality emerge gave way to ease, as if I were there telling my story to my father. Mancini listened to me, spoke little, and observed me with interest, at times amused. He had great intuition; he was capable of

going to the heart of people, perceiving their potential. He told me to 'get in touch' upon my return. I immediately understood that would be my big break."

"Was it really like that?"

"Once back in Rome, I got in touch and Mancini proposed that I collaborate with him. For me, a crucial period began: a human and professional training ground that marked me deeply. From him I learned what political commitment really meant, and to him I owe my subsequent involvement in the PSI. Without that experience, I do not know if my life would have taken a different turn. Especially because during a very difficult period for me, his confidence was a real injection of self-esteem. I understood it was a unique opportunity and felt a great responsibility on my shoulders."

"What political judgment do you feel like giving him today?"

"Mancini was a great innovator, a pragmatic and efficient leader who backed up words with deeds. The Sabin polio vaccine was authorized in 1962, and as soon as he became Minister of Health in 1963, Mancini made it mandatory and free. But above all, he had the immense merit of looking at Calabria and the Mezzogiorno as a great resource for the country. He had been the architect of the bridge law on urban planning, and with his commission of inquiry into the tragedy of the Agrigento landslide, he turned the spotlight on the development of the South. Furthermore, he initiated work on the Salerno Reggio Calabria highway and fought for us to have a university in Calabria. It should not be forgotten that he was the first to speak about the possibility of building the bridge over the Strait of Messina. He was proud of his region, and Calabrians saw in him a politician ready to fight for them: not for small interests, but for major public works capable of offering work and prosperity to the many young people he considered the architects of a possible rebirth."

There is a book, beautiful, intense, romantic, and deeply engaging, that Lella Golfo wrote in recent years, titled *Ad alta quota. Storia di una donna libera* (Marsilio Editori, with a preface by Antonio Catricalà), in which the President of the Bellisario Foundation retraces all the stages of her life: from her commitment to women in Calabria and then in Rome, to her marriage, her son ("the love of my life"), her painful divorce ("among the first in Calabria"), active politics, her never-denied friendship with Bettino Craxi, her stubbornness in creating and carrying forward the foundation named after Marisa Bellisario, her work abroad and at home, her entry into Parliament in 2008, up to the most important affirmative action ever applied in Italy.

Corriere della Sera even included her among the "twenty-five personalities who made a significant contribution in Europe in 2012", while at the Davos summit, Viviane Reding highlighted the importance of the gender quota law bearing the name of Lella Golfo: the Golfo Mosca law.

It is the famous law 120 that came into force on August 12, 2012. In February 2012, the government regulation was issued to govern its application to state-controlled companies. For Italian women, it became the passport to access corporate boards of directors from which they had been excluded and kept away for years.

"Lella, in 2008 you also became a parliamentarian. What kind of experience was it?"

"As a deputy I learned a lot, but I also gave without reservation, without ever holding back, engaging in important battles. I think of the law on stalking, or the one that, reforming family law, finally sanctioned the equalization of children's status, or the one that introduced gender parity in local authorities. I worked tirelessly and perhaps for this reason I was not able to fully enjoy the victories achieved. I always had the next goal in mind, and obviously in my heart, the cause of women."

"Speaking of women, today a law of the State, the one on gender quotas, bears your name. A great victory, don't you think?"

"Without a doubt, yes. The law on gender quotas on the boards of directors of listed and state-controlled companies is the greatest source of pride of my entire life. You see, it is one of the very few parliamentary initiative legislative measures of the last three years of the legislature during my time in parliament. And it is a historic measure because it introduces gender quotas on boards of directors and board of statutory auditors of stock-listed companies and those controlled by public administration. Finally women at the top, something that in the past seemed impossible and above all unthinkable to imagine."

"Are you happy when they define you as the 'noble mother' of this historic law?"

"Let us put it more simply like this: this law, better known as law 120/2011, is a recognition to which I am deeply attached, because it was my obstinacy as a woman that ensured the proposal I created and presented did not get bogged down, like so many others, in the twists and turns of parliamentary committees."

"Is it true that you had many opponents at that time?"

"I had powerful forces against me, such as Confindustria, ANIA, ABI, and many male and female colleagues who saw the so-called 'pink quotas' as a red flag. For two years I stubbornly continued to call them 'gender quotas' and pushed straight ahead. I went through difficult moments; many times I thought about quitting, believing the obstacles were insurmountable. But then I told myself it was a just cause and took another small step forward, stubbornly and under the incredulous gazes of many."

"Yet it is also true that many people thank you for that law, and not only in Italy..."

"I will tell you only this: in March 2012, Viviane Reding, Vice President of the European Commission, invited me for a joint press conference in Brussels, during which she defined the law we had just approved in Italy as 'an example for Europe'. Do you understand why I am proud of it?"

"Lella, you have met the whole world. Who do you like to remember the most today?"

"I will limit myself to three Presidents of the Republic: Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, and Giorgio Napolitano. As for Prime Ministers, Mario Monti. These meetings also marked an important stage in our journey. Being received as a delegation of the Foundation at the Quirinale is always a significant moment and a recognition of one's work. But perhaps the most emotional moment for me, and the most unforgettable, was the meeting with Pope John Paul II. Emotional, extraordinarily emotional, and unforgettable. Truly unrepeatable."

At the 2021 Todi Festival, Lella Golfo spoke about "her" Afghanistan, and at the end of her lectio magistralis, the festival audience gave her a standing ovation.

"The long red thread with Afghanistan," recalls the *pasionaria* of Bocale, "was born in 2001, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed our project titled '100 scholarships for 100 Afghan women'. The war in post-Taliban Afghanistan had just ended, and my idea was to train women so they could create craft micro-enterprises and actively participate in the socioeconomic development of a country on its knees. As always, I wanted to see and touch things with my own hands. So I left for Afghanistan to select the women who had the requirements for the sectors of intervention we had identified."

A few months later, at the headquarters of the International Training Centre, project partner, arrived the first twenty-six selected women, followed by two other groups.

"In total, we trained sixty women in Italy and another sixty in two local courses, all potential entrepreneurs who still write to me today thanking me and telling me about their entrepreneurial successes. It is a project I am proud of, and talking at length with those young women, I realized I could not stop."

Thus took shape a new international challenge for the Marisa Bellisario Foundation.

"I launched the campaign 'A Roof for Women' to build a shelter for Afghan women fleeing home, victims of domestic violence who often, having nowhere else to go, were imprisoned. In a short time, I managed to raise almost 30,000 euros and left for Kabul where, thanks to the help of our ambassador, I delivered the funds to Habiba Sarabi, then Minister for Women's Affairs. It was November 2003, and with her I signed a protocol establishing, among other things, that the fruit of our generosity would be called 'Marisa Bellisario Shelter'. It was also the first occasion where I toured the country to verify the real condition of women, and I convinced myself that my ideas were grounded. I saw many computers still boxed up and sewing machines never used: there I understood that international aid without training was useless, because 95% of women still could not read or write."

Not content with this, a few years later the President of the Marisa Bellisario Foundation retraces her steps.

"After eleven years I returned to Herat. This time, leading an Italian delegation sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, composed of female entrepreneurs and Alessandro Franchini, tireless creator and promoter of projects supporting the Afghan people. I found it changed, and not for the better. The enthusiasm I had seen in the eyes of women in the aftermath of liberation seemed to have given way to a silent resignation. Some women, however, continued to fight. Wonderful women who told me what was really happening in Afghanistan."

It is in her book *Ad alta quota* that Lella Golfo cites the names of these courageous women.

"Soraya Pakzad, for example, confirmed to me that the situation of Afghan women has worsened. And she knows what she is talking about, since she founded and directs 'Voice of Women', a non-governmental association for the defense of women's rights, awarded for her courage by the United States Department of State and defined by *Time* as one of the one hundred most influential people in the world. And then there is Maria Bashir, the first and only female prosecutor general in all of Afghanistan, who spoke to me about great

discrimination, especially in rural areas, where women are still considered inferior beings and where it often happens that families sell their daughters for money."

Today the current picture is truly devastating, but it cannot be said that at the Bellisario Foundation people have forgotten the women and children of Kabul.

"Upon returning from Herat, I decided with the Foundation to develop a new project, which I considered cutting-edge and which could provide Afghan women with the tools needed to operate at all levels of the production chain, ensuring at the same time their self-fulfillment. We would have created a permanent 'Doing Business' workshop and one for technical training and technology transfer. We would have launched tools for access to microcredit, we would have established a 'Green Energy Desk' for energy sustainability, and we would have promoted local operational chains for sustainable poultry farming. The same approach adopted in Argentina, where in 2002, together with the Calabria Region, I carried out with then President of the Regional Council Luigi Fedele and Roberta Caldovino, a tourism training course for fourteen Argentine women of Calabrian origin. We gave them a scholarship. They spent six months in Reggio Calabria, at the University for Foreigners, learning Italian, business concepts, business management, and marketing, and coming into contact with tourism realities and entrepreneurs. And this during one of the toughest periods of the Argentine economic crisis."

From one war to another. One morning Lella Golfo decides that the time has come to think about the children in Ukraine who have now learned to live under bombs. This time, the destination is Lviv.

"As the Marisa Bellisario Foundation," she explains during those days to the foreign press, "we want to make our contribution to the ongoing war. Not everyone wants to or can leave Ukraine, and the situation in besieged cities, but also in the rest of the country, is increasingly dramatic. For this reason, after various steps with Interior Minister Luciana Lamorgese, the Emigration Department, and Civil Protection, we decided to organize collection centers for essential goods for children in all Italian regions: medicines, food, blankets, clothing, but also toys that we will then personally deliver to these poor people on Wednesday."

It is not the first time that the "pasionaria" Lella Golfo rolls up her sleeves in defense of peoples oppressed by conflicts. Already in 1999, the Marisa Bellisario Foundation had collected 80 tons of essential goods in a short time for Kosovo refugees, delivering them personally at the Piscine camp. Today Lella Golfo tries to replicate the feat.

"The terrible images seen from Ukraine in recent days have deeply struck us. Already many friends of the Foundation are hosting entire families of refugees in their homes, and just as many are stepping up, but the solidarity and relief network cannot stop in Italy. Women and children are the primary and most fragile victims of war, and we cannot stand by and watch them suffer hunger and cold. We must reach them and help them, and continue doing so. The Marisa Bellisario Foundation is a great and strong network of solidarity, and I have no doubt that in record time we will manage to reach Ukraine and bring our concrete support."

Her images among the ruins of Lviv, with all those children around her to receive toys and snacks brought from Italy, will remain one of the most moving pages in the history of the war and perhaps also in her private life.

For Lella Golfo, who will celebrate her first 85 years of life on May 18, it is yet another challenge to war: a challenge that tastes of protest, that tastes of courage, that tastes of solidarity toward the Ukrainian people, and above all, of condemnation toward everything that is oppression and denial of the international law of peoples.

Enough, in short, to say to her today: "Thank you, Lella."



MARILENA GRECO

The Scientist Who Studies the Oceans "There is more of Cariati alive in me than I left behind in Calabria."

For Palm Sunday, we could not have found a more beautiful story than this. It is the story of a girl from Cariati who today lives in Norway, in the north, in the northernmost part of the land of the Vikings, and is one of the most famous marine researchers in the world.

Today's story is that of a scientist who knows everything about the sea, knows its most intimate and unmentionable secrets, and has built a record breaking academic career studying the sea, if only for the research conducted and results obtained through years and years of comparative studies.

When in 2023 the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella visited the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, his protocol team pointed out that among the prominent personalities he would meet and greet at the entrance of the Campus, there was an Italian scholar who had arrived in Norway at a very young age for a PhD and then returned, remaining in these parts for the next 25 years.

The city has an equally illustrious history. It was founded in the year 997 by the Viking king Olaf I of Norway under the name Kaupangen, which soon became Nidaros and served as the Norwegian capital until 1217.

A truly beautiful story, steeped in international success and poignant nostalgia for the family left behind in Calabria, the story of a woman who smells and breathes Calabria more than she herself could ever imagine, a woman who left her heart in Cariati and set off with her intellect to conquer the world, a woman who returns punctually every summer to Cariati so that her daughter, naturally born in Norway, can remain forever tied to the countryside house and the lands cultivated by her Calabrian ancestors.

Pino Nano / Women of the South 147 MARILENA GRECO

It is above all the story of a woman who will celebrate Palm Sunday today dreaming of being instead in Terravecchia, the original village of her grandparents and parents, a small town in the province of Cosenza on the hilly belt of the southern Ionian coast with a population of fewer than a thousand inhabitants, where as a child she dreamed of becoming an aeronautical engineer when she grew up.

She was crazy about airplanes, but perhaps even crazier about the infinite spaces that the world of scientific research would sooner or later offer her on a silver platter.

Today Marilena Greco, Master's degree in Aeronautical Engineering, 110 cum laude at La Sapienza University of Rome with Professor Giorgio Graziani, is a professor of marine hydrodynamics at the department of marine technology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, holding a chair financed for the first five years by Det Norske Veritas since 2010.

On March 27, she celebrated her 53rd birthday surrounded by her team and students who consider her a star. This is the same thing told to me a few weeks ago, when speaking of her for the first time, by lawyer Luigi Salvati, originally from Cariatì and currently president of the Calabresi Capitolini in Rome: "You write about so many talents around the world, but why don't you ask who Marilena Greco is to the scientific world?". Which I promptly did.

In 2023, she became a part time research director at the CNR INM research center, Institute of Marine Engineering, in Italy, but in the previous two years she was invited as an honorary professor at OSAKA University in Japan. Since 2004, she has been associated with the Centre of Excellence CeSOS in Trondheim, first as a visiting researcher and later as an adjunct professor.

These would be years of intense research and official recognition for her. So much so that in 2012 she was awarded, along with 5 other key scientists, by the Research Council of Norway for the establishment and scientific management of the Centre of Excellence on Autonomous Marine Operations and Systems, NTNU AMOS, globally recognized as a leading research center in marine operations.

Official University data confirms that 2023 concluded with an overall ten year budget for the Centre of Excellence exceeding 100 million euros and over 120 doctoral degrees for graduates. But there is more. Coauthor of over 130 publications, "the girl from Cariatì" is also Associate Editor of the Journal of Fluids and Structures and serves as a reviewer for leading international journals of fluid dynamics and marine hydrodynamics.

For entire generations of Norwegian students who attended her University, she has remained an icon, because besides explaining the secrets of the sea, she also spoke of the superb beauty of the Calabrian Ionian coast where she was born and where her parents took her to the sea and beach when she was very small.

Up to 2024, the cold statistics of her Campus tell us that Italian professor Marilena Greco has supervised 47 master's degree students with their theses, 6 doctoral students, 2 postdocs at NTNU, and six internships. She boasts an H index of 26 (Scholar), which is quite high in her field, and her research interests involve marine hydrodynamics, computational fluid dynamics, nonlinear free surface and multiphase flows, fluid structure interactions, and hydroelasticity.

In the work she does, the investigation tools are mainly numerical and theoretical, but many experiments are also used. The recent focus of her studies is directed toward bio inspired marine concepts, renewable energy sources in marine environments, aquaculture, and vehicle safety in extreme marine conditions. Anyone expert in these matters knows perfectly well that we are talking about standards of the highest professional and academic quality.

"Professor Greco, what do you actually do here in Norway?"

"My research activities have mainly involved theoretical, numerical, and experimental studies on problems involving sea body interaction. Some of the research contributions I have supervised involve the hydrodynamics of fish and bodies that behave in a similar way, bio inspired studies for underwater vehicles, the behavior at sea of fish farming cages based on deformable net systems or rigid structures, both semiclosed and closed, and the

analysis of damaged ship sections at sea. Within a multidisciplinary group, I provided the hydrodynamic model used in developing a new analytical hydro plastic strategy, aimed at studying the consequences of extreme water impacts on marine structures. I have also worked on local analytical solutions for water structure impact and their coupling with global analyses of liquid structure interactions."

"These are rather complicated topics for laypeople like me..."

"In reality, we deal with many other things. During my doctorate, I studied water on deck scenarios relevant to FPSO platforms subject to waves. Later, we developed a weakly nonlinear method to analyze seakeeping under severe wave conditions and large motions of offshore structures, both in the oil and gas sector and for renewable energy. The method also proved useful for analyzing the behavior of advancing ships in rough seas. We worked on the development of advanced, accurate, and efficient solvers for wave propagation and wave body interaction in scenarios dominated by potential flow effects. Another important research line involves the development of hybrid numerical strategies coupling different solvers to obtain predictions that are simultaneously accurate and efficient. This approach has been applied to several critical scenarios for structural safety and integrity, such as water ingress or the response of structures near underwater explosions."

"You are a sort of excellence here in Norway. But what kind of family background do you have?"

"I come from a large family. There are seven siblings in total, five brothers, my sister, and me. But we like to think we are many more, because we grew up with a deep bond with our cousins as well, on both my father's and mother's sides. Our roots lie in large families in Terravecchia, a small hilltop village: my father was one of six children, my mother one of seven."

"Can you tell me about your father?"

"My father lost his father when he was only eleven years old and was the eldest of the boys. Reflecting on this, it surprises me to think how quickly he had to grow up."

"In what sense?"

"When he became an orphan, he was the age my daughter is now, and it is hard for me to imagine a child of that age carrying such a heavy burden. Not only him, but all my uncles faced this terrible ordeal, and perhaps for this reason they developed a strong personality and initiative that they later passed on to their children. That explains their ability to overcome every difficulty and rise again."

"Let us go back to your father."

"My father was the embodiment of passion, perseverance, and a sense of duty. The premature loss of his father made him reluctant to show his feelings openly. As he used to say, 'children are kissed when they sleep', but deep down he could not truly hide his feelings. He had a big heart and did not seek recognition for it."

"A strict father?"

"Naturally, he was a strict father. Having had no real childhood of his own, it was perhaps difficult for him to fully understand ours."

"What clear memories do you still have of him?"

"Three of his phrases remain carved in all of us: 'sleep fast fast', for my brothers who worked in the family business while studying; 'you have done half your duty', when we brought home good grades; and 'we must tighten our belts', which he told my mother whenever he decided to launch a new project or invest in land. Choices that involved sacrifices for the whole family."

"His greatest lesson?"

"He taught us to always aim high, never to rest on achieved successes, and to always look beyond the hedge with determination. But he had a strong, at times edgy character, and for this reason he needed my mother as a life partner."

"What kind of mother was yours?"

"Mom had a more serene childhood than my father, and over the years she knew how to balance my father's character, smoothing his harsher edges. Where he saw flaws, she glimpsed potential. One teaching of hers that I always carry with me is: 'The fingers of a hand are not all equal'. Everyone has their own talent, their unique way of contributing to the harmony of life."

"I sense much emotion, Professor, in what you are telling me..."

"You see, we were born to two extraordinary people in their simplicity, who passed on deep values to us. And I like to think that their teachings took root in us. They certainly planted the seed of solidarity. Among siblings, we always support each other, share joys, and encourage each other in difficult moments. My brothers and sister are my strength, just as our parents were for us."

"What role did your parents play in your professional growth?"

"Our parents gave us the opportunity to study up to university level, but with the hope that one day we would return. Five of us did and today live in Calabria, carrying out their work with seriousness and passion. Without wanting to be biased, I can say with certainty that, with the iGreco group, they contribute to growing and enhancing the legacy our father left us, committing themselves not only to their personal path, but also to creating useful synergies for the development of our land. A commitment that looks not only inside Calabria, but also at how it is perceived outside its borders."

"If I say Cariati, how do you respond?"

"Cariati is the town my parents chose to live in, and that is where I practically grew up. Although I was not born there, I consider it my hometown and return every summer with my daughter to cultivate in her a sense of belonging and identity with our family and land. Cariati, to me, is the sea, which inspires emotion in every season, but it is also my Ithaca, where the narrow streets of the historic center still tell an ancient, layered story. Cariati is also the faces and voices of friends I met at school desks, bonds that time has not broken and that I still cherish with affection. Naturally, not all memories are colorful like a watercolor. As in any life journey, there were difficult moments, more for the people I love than for myself. That is why the Cariati I carry in my heart is not a postcard, but an artist's painting, which we do not always understand, but which fascinates us."

"How much did your father, in particular, influence your professional choices?"

"A great deal, especially in how I understand and live my work. My father worked tirelessly all his life with dedication and sacrifice, first for his family of origin and then for ours. He passed this deep sense of duty on to us, and I absorbed it naturally."

"Did you ever talk about work with him?"

"Constantly. I remember that once, while I was studying, he told me not to do like him, who had given everything to work. Yet what we are taught does not pass only through words, but above all through example. My father's example marked me deeply, as did my mother's, who shared work with him in family activities and at home. Both taught us that work does not define us, but rather the way we perform it. Whatever our occupation, what truly mattered was the commitment, seriousness, and passion with which we faced every task and, above all, respect for others. A reminder from dad, which remained etched in our minds, sounded something like this: 'people are measured from the belt up, not from the belt down', meaning that height or position does not matter, but intelligence and personal worth."

"How much of Calabria have you found around the world?"

"Regarding this, I want to make a premise. When living abroad, regional differences tend to fade, and one feels first and foremost Italian. It is a pride that goes beyond local borders and embraces everything positive that our country has built in the world."

"I completely agree with you..."

"I will tell you more. Over the years I have traveled extensively for work, attending conferences in my scientific field, but always for short periods, without having the opportunity to connect with Italian or Calabrian communities abroad. However, since living permanently in Norway, I have drawn closer to the Italian community and its presence locally. I am a member of ITAT, the association of Italians in Trondheim, which works dedicatedly to keep our Italian identity alive while integrating with our host nation. Here in Norway as well, I have met several Calabrians."

"May I ask what they do?"

"Some work in the technology sector, employed in major Norwegian companies, while others work in catering, with a strong desire to share and appreciate Calabrian culinary traditions."

"Many Italians?"

"I must tell you that a large percentage of Italians involved in research in Norway work right at my university, NTNU, Norwegian University of Science and Technology. I like to think that this helped strengthen the reasons for President Mattarella's visit to Trondheim in 2023 on the occasion of the 'Greening the Future' seminar."

"You played a leading coordination role back then..."

"I recognize that being chosen to serve on the committee of Italian professors to welcome him was an emotion and inspiration I will always carry with me, as an Italian and as a Calabrian."

"What was your childhood like in Cariati?"

"It was a childhood that was at times difficult, but also very beautiful."

"Why difficult?"

"Growing up in a large family of nine people meant that sometimes it was hard to find one's voice and space. But I am happy to have had so many siblings. We were not raised wrapped in cotton wool. At times I felt constrained by the distinction between boys and girls, but that separation never affected the educational or work opportunities we had."

"Do you have any personal memories from that time?"

"So many memories."

"One in particular?"

"I remember with nostalgia those moments when the power went out due to a storm or other reasons, and we all gathered around the fireplace. My father or mother would tell stories and anecdotes from the past, about their experiences or those of their ancestors."

"Can you tell me another one?"

"Another memory I have is the 'battle' with my mother, who always tried to stop me from studying too much. Indeed, she understood that children should not all be treated the same way, but according to what each one needs. Only as I grew up did I realize how much she worried about keeping me from closing myself off from the world and teaching me to find the right balance in things."

"And your father?"

"Every time I finished a stage of schooling, there was a quick exchange between us, with dad saying: 'Now you can be satisfied with yourself and think about getting married', or something like that."

"How did you answer him?"

"Normally I never answered back, but on those occasions I did, and my answer was always the same: 'Dad, who told you I want to get married?'. At which he would laugh. It was his way of telling me, without saying it explicitly, that he appreciated what I was doing and wanted me to move forward, wherever I decided to go or wherever my work might take me."

"What schools did you attend?"

"I started elementary school in Terravecchia, attending the first two years, and completed it in Cariati on Via Dante Alighieri. There I continued my studies at the Edmondo De Amicis middle school on the same street, and subsequently at the Stefano Patrizi Scientific High School."

"Which middle school teachers do you still remember?"

"I remember several teachers, but I want to mention two in particular. I hope the others will not mind. The first is Professor Madera, who taught Italian and passed on to me a love for reading and the importance of developing a critical approach to text. He also taught me the value of communication and discussion in class, even though I had to work on myself for a long time to overcome my shyness."

"And the other?"

"The second is Professor Cipriotti, who taught mathematics and instilled in me dedication to study. He was a strict teacher, which caused me some anxiety in high school, especially before math tests. However, he was the one who transmitted to me a passion for the scientific approach and curiosity toward the world."

"After high school graduation?"

"I graduated in Aeronautical Engineering from La Sapienza University of Rome in 1997 and earned a PhD in marine hydrodynamics from NTNU University in Trondheim in 2001."

"How did your university choice come about?"

"I think my passion for Aeronautical Engineering stemmed from the romantic idea of flight and the desire for freedom on one hand, and my aptitude for scientific subjects and mathematics on the other."

"Did you do it all on your own?"

"When I had to choose university, my father was crucial."

"Why?"

"I was afraid he would oppose my choice to study Aeronautical Engineering, which was the faculty I wanted to pursue, because both he and I knew perfectly well that such a degree would unlikely bring me back to Calabria. For this reason, I had initially decided to start Electronic Engineering in Bologna, where all my brothers had studied."

"And how did it end?"

"Through a twist of coincidences in life, a cousin living in Veneto came to visit us and asked about my university choice. He asked while my father was dozing on the sofa. During our discussion about the pros and cons of various faculties, as soon as I mentioned to my cousin that I would really love to study Aeronautics, my father woke up from his slumber and said: 'Then do it'."

"And what did you do?"

"The next day I enrolled at La Sapienza in Rome. My master's thesis and doctorate subsequently led me to focus on Marine Engineering."

"What were your university years like?"

"They were very demanding years, especially the first three, but also wonderful. I spent the last two years at the San Pietro in Vincoli campus, in a historic building steps away from the Colosseum."

"It is one of the rare gems of this still beautiful Rome..."

"I still remember the fear of those early days. I had started a few weeks late because I had planned to go to Bologna, and I was afraid of not being up to the task in that larger and more selective environment. But then I integrated. I soon met people who would become lifelong friends, with whom we took turns reserving places at the gate at 4 AM."

"Why so early?"

"Because back then, it was not so much about how good the professor was, but having the chance to sit in the front rows to hear clearly and see what was written on the blackboard."

"Important years, I imagine?"

"In those years, exchanges with my friends and classmates were essential for my growth and for opening my mind. I think that was just as important as long hours of study."

"What was your first real assignment?"

"My first assignment in research dates back to 1999, when I won a competition for a researcher position at what was then INSEAN, the National Institute for Naval Architecture Studies and Experiences, where I had conducted my master's thesis on a naval topic."

"Ten years later you were already a university professor?"

"My first academic appointment dates back to 2008, when I became an associate professor in the Department of Marine Technology at NTNU in Norway. The role was funded by the Centre of Excellence CeSOS (Centre for Ships and Ocean Structures), to which I was affiliated as a visiting researcher six months a year on behalf of INSEAN. I held it for two years, and then in 2010 I became a full professor."

"Reading the annals of your Campus, I discovered that you hold a record of your own..."

"If you are referring to the fact that I was the first woman in my department, yes, that is true."

"Have things changed since then?"

"Fortunately, female representation in the faculty has now reached about 13%. The number of women in engineering universities in my sector is growing, though still limited, with strong differences from country to country. For this reason, in 2021 I gladly accepted a one year special professorship position at Osaka University. The honorary role aimed to strengthen female faculty presence and offer an international role model for Japanese female students."

"Your first major experience?"

"Chronologically, I think my first significant experience was in 2003, when I served as INSEAN project leader for the research initiative EUCLID CEPA 10 RTP 10.17 Submarine Motions in Confined Waters, a four year initiative involving navies and research institutes from four countries: the United Kingdom, Italy, France, and Norway."

"I understand it might be covered by state secrecy, but can you tell me more?"

"My boss and mentor at the time, Maurizio Landrini, was supposed to take that role, but unfortunately passed away in an accident. The director at the time and one of my scientific fathers, Ulderico Paolo Bulgarelli, decided to entrust it to me. I could not have had a better guide. He helped me grow, teaching me to work with colleagues, value their contribution, and defend our work. He laughed with me over naive mistakes, but at the same time always supported me. My greatest satisfaction was when, with pride, he told me that the UK project leader considered me a 'Margaret Thatcher'."

"Which research or project are you most attached to?"

"Definitely, my greatest research adventure was the Norwegian Centre of Excellence NTNU AMOS (Center for Autonomous Marine Operations and Systems). For about a year, I worked within a multidisciplinary group of six NTNU professors, led by a colleague from my department, to prepare the proposal for this prestigious funding program, the most important in Norway in the field of research."

"I read that it is a research project with great scientific ambitions..."

"NTNU AMOS was approved in 2012 for a first five year cycle, then renewed for another five years, and officially concluded in 2023. The center was dedicated to interdisciplinary research, combining hydrodynamics, structural mechanics, control theory, and marine biology. Over its operation, it produced over one hundred doctorates and launched numerous national and international collaborations."

"Why are you so proud of it?"

"Because this Centre also allowed me to strengthen ties between NTNU and my institution of origin, INSEAN, which is a true family to me. Meanwhile, INSEAN became CNR INM (Institute of Marine Engineering of the National Research Council), with which I currently hold a part time affiliation as research director. A fundamental aspect for me was working side by side with two close friends and top tier scientists."

"Can you share their names?"

"I do so with immense pleasure: Claudio Lugni, now full professor at the University of Naples Federico II, and Giuseppina Colicchio, currently on secondment at the Ministry of Environment and Energy Security, where she works on commission tasks regarding the environmental impact of renewable energy."

"How did you arrive in Norway?"

"It was an opportunity and, at the same time, an act of recklessness."

"Can you tell me about it?"

"My direct boss at INSEAN, Maurizio Landrini, had obtained a Marie Curie fellowship for a research stay at the Department of Marine Technology at NTNU in Trondheim, a university recognized among the best in the world in marine and ocean engineering according to the Shanghai Ranking. The goal was to collaborate with Odd Magnus Faltinsen, an international benchmark figure in marine hydrodynamics."

"Which years are we talking about?"

"It was toward the end of 1997. I had received a scholarship after graduation and was waiting for the PhD competition in Rome. Maurizio told me about a PhD position at NTNU, with Faltinsen as supervisor, on a topic of great interest to STATOIL (now EQUINOR): massive water on deck events on ships and offshore platforms. The competition in Norway was mainly based on curriculum and experience in the field. A month later, they notified me that I had won."

"How did you take it?"

"Panic! True panic. How to tell my father? That was the fundamental problem for me at that moment. I decided to leave, telling him I would stay for only three months to prepare him gradually. Then my sister Filomena revealed the true duration."

"How did he react?"

"His reaction was simple and direct. He just said: 'Behave yourself, otherwise I will come with the tractor'. It was his way of wishing me the best without too many words."

"Did he ever visit you at your campus?"

"Unfortunately, my father never came to Norway. He passed away the day before my thesis defense, and that is a pain we carry with us. However, the biggest place in my heart goes to his teachings. My mother, on the other hand, managed to come to Norway at a special moment: the birth of my daughter."

"Have you ever thought about returning to a seaside town like your hometown?"

"I grew up in a place by the sea, and every time I smell it, I get emotional. Living near the sea, and if possible in my homeland, is a desire I always carry with me. With my daughter now settled in the Norwegian system, things are a bit more complicated. Fortunately, Trondheim has a beautiful fjord, but in life, 'never say never'."

"What advice would you give to a young female researcher who wants to pursue your career today?"

"To a young female researcher, who reminds me of myself many years ago, there is no need to say be curious and passionate. Believe me, anyone who chooses research already possesses these two elements. But I can give her three pieces of advice that were fundamental for me."

"Go with the first..."

"First, do not be afraid to make mistakes. Errors strengthen awareness and often open unexpected doors. Second, pursue your ideas with humility, but also with determination. Arrogance blinds and deafens to new perspectives, while excessive shyness prevents daring."

"Third?"

"Third, be generous and open to exchange, because research thrives on ideas, and ideas flourish best through sharing, complementarity, and synergies."

"And from woman to woman, what else would you tell her?"

"I would tell her, perhaps, in the field you choose, you might be the only woman or one of the few. I never wanted to view this as an obstacle. You do not need to hide being a woman. Because being a woman is an asset in your journey as a researcher. Organizational skills, attention to detail, and many other qualities can become true strengths in research."

"Professor, what was the real secret of your success?"

"I do not know whether to define myself as a successful person or not. But looking back, I think life presented me with opportunities and, out of courage or recklessness, I grabbed them and carried them forward."

"The price was high, I imagine?"

"Naturally, I made many sacrifices. Living in Norway as a Calabrian is not always easy. So if there is something that defines me, it is definitely determination. I do not stop at the first obstacle, neither in research nor in life."

"On your Campus, they say you are a force of nature..."

"I do not know who you heard that from or who told you, but I know that another aspect I consider fundamental in life is empathy."

"I can work alone, but I love working with others. Dialectics is essential for developing new ideas, for fully understanding a physical phenomenon, or for building a model. I believe that debate and sharing are the true engine of scientific and personal growth."

"To whom do you dedicate everything you have around you today?"

"If I were allowed, I would have three dedications."

"Of course you are allowed. Shall we start with the first?"

"To Tommaso and Rita, my parents, for the sacrifices made for all of us, for giving me the freedom to make unconventional choices and the strength to pursue them with determination."

"The second dedication?"

"To my family, made up of blood brothers and sisters, and others that Life has given me, for being shining beacons on my path."

"And the third dedication?"

"To my daughter and my nieces and nephews, because they represent our future and remind me every day of the importance of acting for the best."

"If the University of Calabria asked you to return to teach here in Calabria, would you do it? And under what conditions?"

"I would be honored and certainly open to exploring this possibility."

"Then why not send your curriculum vitae? I know it is among the most prestigious in your field, Professor."

"At the moment, there is no specific program in my field, but the University of Calabria recently launched a bachelor degree program in Sea and Navigation Technologies, an important step that recognizes the great potential of our region, thanks to its long coastline. I hope this can represent the starting point for developing a master degree that more broadly includes marine engineering topics, training professionals capable of promoting a sustainable use of marine resources and fostering proper integration with the current economic context."

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"Does this mean nothing is lost?"

"I have already expressed my availability to the Rector of the University of Calabria to collaborate on a possible initiative in this direction, should my contribution be useful. In my view, to best define a program of this kind, a multidisciplinary approach and

collaborations with Italian and international universities in the sector, as well as with CNR research institutes, are necessary."

"So, while waiting to see you again soon, perhaps at the Arcavacata Campus, tell me instead how you are preparing to celebrate Easter here in Norway?"

"Norway is a predominantly Protestant country, but there are also active Catholic communities. In Trondheim, for example, there is a church downtown with a very diverse and international community. That is where I met my first Italian friends. After Sunday Mass we used to gather in front of the church to spend some time together. Trondheim is a university city, and many take advantage of the Easter holidays to return home to their loved ones, as I did when I had the opportunity. Here too, the tradition of the blessing and procession of the Palms, as well as the Saturday Vigil, is preserved, but a unique feature is that Masses are celebrated in various languages besides Norwegian, along with a community lunch open to worshippers after Easter Mass."

"What kind of Easter will it be for you here?"

"The Easter period, this year, will be a bit different from usual. I promised my daughter Ritasophie our first real mother and daughter vacation. We will spend Palm Sunday in a small town near Versailles, hosted by one of my university brothers, along with him and his family. We will tour around with them and then move to Paris, between Disneyland and museums. However, we will return to Trondheim the day before Easter, so we can also spend it with her father if possible. The two of us have not been a couple for several years, but the concept of family is a fundamental principle for me that remains intact; therefore, we try to share important holidays with our daughter and raise her in a peaceful atmosphere."

"May I ask you which traditions from your past you miss the most?"

"Our family comes from Terravecchia, but we lived mainly in Cariati. So we grew up with the traditions of both towns."

"And after all, ours is an Easter rich in many beautiful traditions..."

"Easter, as the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, has always had a deep meaning for me, because it reminds us that, despite difficulties, each of us can find our own rebirth. However, for those who lived in Terravecchia, Easter is also deeply tied to the figure of Mary. The town has a special bond with Our Lady of Mount Carmel, celebrated with religious occasions and deeply felt moments of sharing."

"I was missing that detail..."

"Consider that one of these occasions falls right in the Easter period. On the Tuesday after Easter, a procession takes place in honor of the Madonna, passing through the town and recalling an ancient local belief according to which the Virgin defeated a dragon that threatened the community. The statue of the Madonna is carried on foot from the main church to the sanctuary dedicated to her, along a route that, unbelievable as it seems, ultimately appears to trace an M, like the initial of her name. I am very attached to the memory of these processions and, whenever they can, my family members still try to participate and honor her."

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"And in Cariati instead?"

"The traditions of Cariati that I carry in my heart are mainly those linked to patronal festivals, which fall at other times of the year."

"What are we talking about exactly?"

"Saint Leonard (November 6), Saint Cataldo (May 10), which was also my paternal grandfather's name, and Saint Roch (August 16). These are deeply felt events, with processions, religious celebrations, and many initiatives that strengthen the sense of community. Among these are the 'Leonardiadi', a sort of Olympics of traditional games, like sack races or breaking the piñata. Simple yet beautiful moments that involved young and old alike, making the town even more united. The boat processions in honor of Saint Roch are also striking, adding a unique touch to popular devotion."

"I see you even remember the details of these moments?"

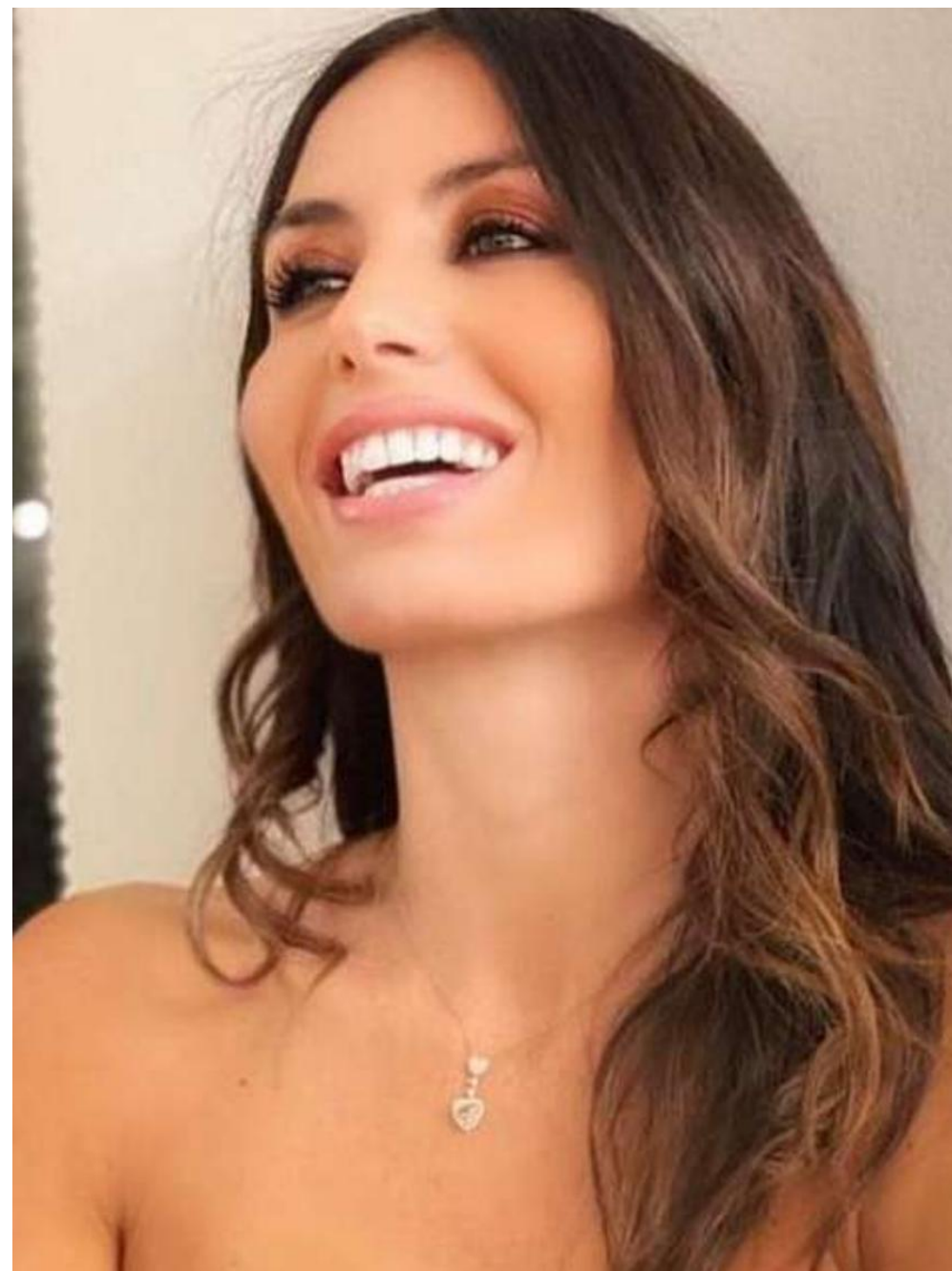
"But there is yet another tradition that both towns have preserved, which is that of 'i 'ncant', public auctions during the festivals, where goods offered by the faithful are put up for auction: precious objects, typical products, and even live animals, like roosters or cows. Our father always contributed, and even today our family continues this custom. The proceeds are used to cover the expenses for organizing the celebrations."

"What memories do you have of your Easter in Calabria?"

"From a religious point of view, I have fond memories of the Easter vigils I occasionally attended, as well as the Easter Sunday Masses. It is true that there was often a huge crowd and it was not easy to find a quiet moment for oneself, but that very heartfelt participation gives strength to prayer and the sense of community. On a family level, Easter has always been a special occasion to be together, including with relatives and friends. It was a time of true sharing. Easter Mondays, even if perhaps a bit less 'religious' in a strict sense, were still a way to experience the spirit of Easter in the simplicity of being together, in unity and brotherhood. A phrase my father used to say comes to mind when he wanted to distance himself from someone; it sounded something like, 'Have we perhaps eaten from the same plate?'. For us, sitting at the table together, sharing bread and wine, has always had a deep meaning, not only Christian, but genuinely human. The Last Supper, after all, is just that: a gesture of love, trust, and connection. And I believe that in certain simple yet sincere traditions, there is still so much of that message."

"Then Happy Palm Sunday, and Happy Easter, Professor Greco..."

"To you as well, and if I may: to all the Calabrians who will read your newspaper today."



ELISABETTA GREGORACI

Her friends, much more simply, call her “Ely”. Born in Soverato, in Calabria, on February 8, 1980. Her zodiac sign, Aquarius, truly encapsulates her entire life: “Original, independent, a dreamer, Aquarius has a great need for freedom, and sometimes even solitude. Unpredictable, with a rather unstable equilibrium, constantly projecting forward, in need of novelty, detesting any form of constraint but also capable of being a very patient and understanding person.” Her Instagram profile today counts almost 2 million followers, growing every day, a true media phenomenon. A living icon of “Calabrian pride.”

Her image is now international; she is a woman and a diva recognized as such everywhere, identifiable in the general collective imagination as one of the most envied and followed women of Calabria in the social media world. Actress, showgirl, television presenter, wife, mother, and manager of herself; beautiful as the sun, enveloping and cordial as only certain southern women still know how to be, modest and haughty all at once. In photographs, she is even more solemn than she appears in person. Princely, sublime, captivating. You name it. But this is how Elisabetta Gregoraci is, all of this together. At the same time, she is a woman who intimidates, embarrasses, creates awe, and makes people blush. And you can perfectly grasp all of this firsthand when it comes time to present her to the audience of the many international tourism operators present at the International Tourism Exchange (BIT) in Milan a few years ago.

It was not, in short, the usual routine, perhaps emphatic, presentation of the usual princess or show business woman chosen for a major promotional campaign like this, but something that goes much further. Today's event here in Milan is the celebration of a brand that is not just the advertising launch of a region like Calabria; it is also the presentation to the international tourism world of a woman Calabria should be proud of. Governor Roberto Occhiuto treats her with extreme institutional grace, and everyone here in the hall knows and admires her for what Elisabetta Gregoraci has been able to achieve, represent, and recount about herself over all these years.

Elisabetta Gregoraci and Calabria have always been two different sides of the same coin. Elisabetta and Soverato, Elisabetta and her sea, the story of a remarkably successful woman. There are pages and pages in major newspapers around the world talking about her today, and not just because of her love story with Flavio Briatore, who is one of the most successful Italian managers worldwide. They talk about her mostly because of her determination, her fortitude, her eternally jovial character, her ability to smile at life, and to be herself even in the most official and complex moments of her professional path. “Behind me,” she says, “is a lot of work, a lot of studying, so many sacrifices, but also a pinch of luck, which never hurts.”

She is an authentic icon of a land where women have always been daughters, mothers, and wives, and where women have always held together homes, families, and sorrows, hopes and certainties, disappointments and anxieties, future and tradition, life and death. Strong women, women educated in daily toil, devoted to silent work, accustomed to the sacrifices of the home; loyal women, women full of a sense of the State, of family, and of community. Women who are also happy with their difficult and sometimes eternally precarious condition. Elisabetta Gregoraci is all of this and more.

I remember the day I met her for the first time. We were in Rome, and introducing her to me was a very young reporter from Crotone, then still in his early days: Massimo Proietto, who today is one of RAI's top and most complete sports reporters. I remember the extreme simplicity with which she stayed to chat with us outside a shop where she had just bought something, already elegant, sober, and proud of her distinctly Calabrian cadence. Then the years pass for everyone, and as if by magic, she becomes the queen of gossip, the absolute protagonist of Formula One Grand Prix events worldwide, due to her magical encounter with Flavio Briatore, which would transform her life into one of the most beautiful fairytale stories in recent Italian history.

After many years away from Soverato and her birthplace, today this young Italian manager still fully retains the ability to be moved, to tell her story, and to know how to listen even to those she meets for the first time along her path. She is a modern, eclectic, multifaceted woman, capable of speaking to others with the disarming smile and eyes that have built her extraordinarily clean image in the international jet set world. Her personal agenda knows no pauses; there is not a day she does not have things to do, people to meet, appointments to set, events to follow or attend. Never a break, and above all, never a falter, impeccable and punctual as only great managers know how to be.

"It is true, I am someone who never stops, not even in August. In fact, this is the period when I generally closely follow my husband's activities," she explained to a weekly magazine that had been following her for months. "And then, as happens the rest of the year, the commitment that gives me the most satisfaction," she adds, "is being a mother. Nathan is a wonderful child, we are partners in crime and we have a world of fun together."

Perhaps what is most impressive about her today, compared to the past, is seeing and hearing her speak without any southern accent anymore, switching from Italian to English as if it were nothing, and responding in multiple languages to completely different people on completely unrelated topics. She has an undeniable stage presence and an ability to build transversal relationships, which are certainly the result of an extraordinary, unconventional life traveling the world. Well, this is the woman Governor Roberto Occhiuto chose a few years ago as the official testimonial of Calabria for the world.

"The true milestone is knowing where you want to go. February 8, 2022, Happy Birthday Elisabetta." It is not entirely common to read your name in huge headlines on your birthday in the *Corriere della Sera*, the most widely read and circulated newspaper in Italy, as happened to her, and on a full page, no less. But this too is part of her romanticized life, where despite the marital crisis already covered by every newspaper in the world, her true prince remains him, Flavio Briatore. He represents their home in Monte Carlo, their luxury residences in Kenya, their connections across the States, their shared passions, their international friends, and their most important memories

I confess that the most beautiful thing I remember about her from her time on *Grande Fratello Vip* (Big Brother VIP) was the infinite sweetness with which Ely spoke of her fairytale marriage, her first meeting with Flavio Briatore, the arrival of their child, and the moment of their separation. She did all of this with an almost sacred sense of respect for her son's father, a sign of an upbringing that is entirely ours. She is a daughter of the South

through and through, even though she later came to know the “souths” of the rest of the world and became an excellent citizen of them.

This is the most beautiful and wholesome side of this woman, who, had she lived fifty years ago, would have become more than a queen. I ask about her to the many colleagues who have worked with her at RAI in a thousand different situations, for very famous programs but also for simple routine appearances. The story I get back is of a girl who has never lost her taste for the simplicity of things, who even at work does nothing but talk about her home in Soverato, her childhood friends, her dad Mario, her sister Marzia whom she loves more than anything else in the world, her grandmother Elisabetta who just turned one hundred, and her mother Melina who “one day went away without warning me because cancer does not always have the time or desire to warn you.” It was 2011, and she was just under fifty two years old. Ten years later, Elisabetta remembered her with a post that went around the world in just a few hours: “I hate this cursed day that took you away from me,” Elisabetta wrote, publishing a photo of her mother. “I hate this number. Wherever you are, know that I miss you. Always so much, every day more. I love you, Mom.” Beneath the image of mamma Melina, Elisabetta chose to play the notes and words of a famous song, *Angelo*, by Italian singer songwriter Francesco Renga, the song that won the 2005 Sanremo Festival.

Family first, then everything else. For her birthday party, for her 42nd, in Monte Carlo, Elisabetta gathered family and friends, the closest ones, around the same table. A three tier cake studded with macarons, sugar flowers, and the two letters “E” and “G” emphasized that she is the true lady of the house. Charming, dynamic, strong willed, in eternal motion, highly attentive to her physical shape, as rigorous as any respectable mannequin (despite not being a model by profession). From her childhood, Elisabetta remembers the intense hours dedicated to sports and martial arts, at least ten years of strict and harsh discipline, and, in between, years of track and field. This passion for sports has never faded.

“I started practicing karate when I was just four years old. I became a black belt and even taught this beautiful discipline to children. It is a love my father passed on to me, as he was already an extraordinary teacher back then. As a little girl, I was a tomboy. It is no coincidence I preferred karate to classical dance, unlike what my peers did. Flavio still teases me today about my passion for karate!”

The only pause came when she was expecting Nathan, during the first months of pregnancy, but even in that phase, major international magazines captured her looking as beautiful as the sun and in perfect physical shape. It is as if time never passes for her. And yet, it was way back in 1997 when Elisabetta Gregoraci first started getting people talking about her. At 17, she participated in the regional Miss Italia pageant. It almost seemed like a game; she showed up at the selection with great nonchalance; deep down, she did not even believe it herself. But she won by a landslide, and for the first time in her life, she ended up in the spotlight of the early private TV networks. Miss Calabria, then Salsomaggiore Terme for the national Miss Italia finals, where Elisabetta immediately captured the attention of the great designers and photography directors present at the competition. Long black hair, faintly outlined eyebrows, a dazzling smile, and the superb bearing she has always had. In truth, you cannot help but notice her if she walks past you. Salsomaggiore Terme was her launching pad. She did not win the Miss Italia pageant, but

that year Ely won the *Miss Sorriso* (Miss Smile) sash. That was enough for her first castings and photoshoots in major national weekly magazines. Thus began the great adventure of her life. The first fashion shows arrived, the first contracts, the first big names of Haute Couture: Dolce & Gabbana, Giorgio Armani, Ermanno Scervino, Egon von Fürstenberg. One success after another, a crazy, daring, fantastic carousel that seemed to never want to stop. A whirlwind of encounters that would take her around the world and onto the most exclusive and famous photography sets in high fashion.

Beautiful and effervescent as ever, but above all Mediterranean, in her character and the way she presents herself: this is the Elisabetta Gregoraci we found again last Sunday at the BIT in Milan. Captivating, bewitching, regal, and above all, a worthy witness to the sea of Soverato and the white beaches of Calabria, the land where she was born and raised, and where she continues to return whenever she can to find her old friends and, above all, she says, "to find myself, and the most beautiful part of my childhood."

It is the stretch of sea where many years ago Elisabetta brought Flavio Briatore to meet her family and see her home, and where the arrival of the great "blue ship" of the Grand Prix man caused more of a stir than any other news story in the world. At the BIT in Milan, Elisabetta does not disappoint at all, and for a day she once again becomes the true star of this Italian event with tourism operators from all over the world. From today, she will be the true Ambassador to the world of "Extraordinary Calabria", the Calabrian pavilion at the Milan fair that Governor Roberto Occhiuto wanted to be among the most beautiful of the exhibition. In the end, it was, and there Elisabetta Gregoraci, this time in her new role as an influencer, created and illustrated a "post" that "illuminates the Region's emerging new narrative."

The "Extraordinary Calabria" that Elisabetta Gregoraci officially presents at the BIT in Milan is a "Calabria you do not expect," a story about the history, the places, the modernities, the events, the languages, the trends, a grand tour to look at Calabria, and make others look at it, with different eyes. In short, a Calabria that proposes a 360 degree tourist offering, 12 months a year, 365 days a year, through food and wine, trails, cycle paths, the sea, and the mountains, but also the inland areas, the culture, the villages, the archaeology, and a thousand different experiences of slow tourism. Elisabetta Gregoraci is a cloud of emotions. The Governor hands her the microphone, and she responds to the room in front of her with one of her most traditional, at times almost disarming, smiles. Then she explains the reason for her presence here in Milan, and she does so in this way:

"I believe that those who, like me, have become popular have a moral duty to convey a positive image of Calabria. I am very happy to be the testimonial for my homeland. I am very glad to have been a protagonist in this initiative, which aims to enhance its wonderful places. I was born and raised in Soverato and I always return in the summer or as soon as I am free from commitments. I have a wish that I believe all Calabrians share with me: to improve it. I hope they can upgrade the facilities, but also the services, and much more, to make our land an even more beautiful and accessible place for tourists. Everyone who holds prestigious institutional roles in this region must commit to moving in this direction."

The focus of the entire Calabria installation at the BIT in Milan is the *Soldanella calabrese*, a perennial herbaceous plant belonging to the Primulaceae family that lives at an altitude

between 900 and 1500 meters above sea level, and in Italy is present only in Calabria on the Sila mountains. It is the symbol flower of the Region, adopted by the Department of Tourism, and with which Calabria is now identified everywhere, a flower, simple and complex, wild yet elegant, that grows only in Calabria. It is almost an intentional analogy with Elisabetta's life and story.

"Calabria is the region I love, where I was born and which represents me, and doing this work around the world, I have also struggled a lot to make my land and my origins known. Today, instead, is a day of rebirth for me too."

Elisabetta, how does it feel to be the "Testimonial" of your region in the world?

"It brings me great intimate joy, believe me. Carrying the name of Calabria into the world with my way of communicating and my story can only fill me with joy and responsibility. It is 'the weight of someone who is aware that you are called upon to personally share and convey new ideas, innovative proposals, and futuristic projects with your own face, and to contribute to making these projects finally come true. All of this is simply moving, but also exhilarating and stimulating. It is a way to say thank you to my homeland, which has believed in me so much and has always reserved a special affection for me."

These are things and concepts to which Elisabetta had already accustomed us in the past. Unforgettable was her participation a few years ago in Aspromonte with great auteur cinema, where she was chosen to play a dramatic and important role for the first time in her life. The film was Mimmo Calopresti's *La terra degli ultimi* (The Land of the Last), where Gregoraci gives a face and a voice to the woman of the brigand "don Totò", played by Sergio Rubini, who is the boss that governs Africo, a village the film depicts as a "town without a future" and a "place of eternal perdition," abandoned to itself by God and men. We are at the end of the 1950s, and the inhabitants, exasperated by the village's state of neglect, decide to build a road leading to the coast, at least to allow the doctor to access the town, where even "the children, with their feet sunk in the mud, work hard in the name of the future and redemption."

"Seeing myself in this new role thrills me," Elisabetta Gregoraci said, interviewed in those days on the set by *Vanity Fair*. "Especially because I participated in a film shot in my Calabria, even though I did not know Aspromonte. When I first saw Mimmo Calopresti, he told me: 'Your teeth are too white.' So they 'uglified' me and 'muddied' me, but I was happy for such a different role. It was not logistically easy to shoot in the mountains. We worked with our feet in the mud, in the rain and the cold, but there was an air of peace. I would have liked to bring my son to the set, to show him those places. Sooner or later, though, I will."

But already in 1999, Elisabetta had debuted as an actress in Carlo Vanzina's *Il cielo in una stanza*, while in 2000 she made a brief appearance for Carlo Verdone in *C'era un cinese in coma*. She was again the lead actress in the feature film *Mata Hari*, directed by Rossana Siclari with John Savage, presented at the 73rd Venice International Film Festival in 2016 and distributed throughout Italy in October of that same year. The film would later be presented at the "12th Los Angeles Italia, The Italian Film Festival" in February 2017. In 2010 she acted, alongside Massimo Boldi, in the Mediaset fiction *Fratelli Benvenuti* in the role of Chiara, excellent, a fiction directed by Paolo Costella that aired as a premiere in the spring on Canale 5 and then in the summer on Rete 4.

There is so much television in her life that one could say Elisabetta was born with television, grew up on television, and built one of the cleanest and most glossy images in the media world on TV. Those who are older will remember it well: in 2002 she participated in the television program *Veline*, competing with other girls to get the role of the *velina* on *Striscia La Notizia*. In March 2003, she participated in the Canale 5 variety show *Ciao Darwin* along with Maddalena Corvaglia and Elisabetta Canalis, clashing with the "intellectuals category" led by the former President of the Chamber of Deputies, Irene Pivetti. Then came other films and fictions: *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna 3*, *Un medico in famiglia* on RAI 1 with Riccardo Donna, and the Canale 5 sitcom *Il mammo*, before moving on to host the program *Euro 2000* broadcast on Italia 7.

I remember that in 2005, when I was the RAI editor in chief in Calabria, a very young Riccardo Giacoia came to me to pitch a piece for our Saturday Weekly, and when he mentioned Gregoraci's name, I had no doubts. The next day Riccardo was already flying to Rome where he would meet this very young artist who was then just 24 years old. What came out of it was an amazing special, full of so many smiles, so much music, and so much color. The soundtrack was "Tu sei la più bella del mondo..." (You are the most beautiful in the world), a song by Raf, with Elisabetta hugging her big teddy bear during the interview and, "looking into the camera," teasing her upcoming TV series on RAI 1 with Carlo Conti, which would start just a few days later. The beautiful thing about that day, Riccardo later told me, was that Ely had not dodged a single question. None, in the fullest sense of the word.

Riccardo asks her: "In the end, you also agreed to do the classic year end calendar; did it cost you a lot to do it?", and she replied, flipping through it in front of the camera: "No, it was actually nice to do it, a professional experience I was missing, and it was also easy. I was dealing with a great master of Italian photography, Angelo Gigli; his wife was on set too, and in the end, the chemistry between us was such that the final product is truly beautiful." Riccardo insists: "But where does your story begin?", and without a moment's hesitation she answers: "From when I was little, still a child. I spent my days in front of the mirror with a hairbrush in my hand, as if it were a microphone, and even then I felt that when I grew up I would do a lot of television." Again Riccardo: "What have you learned by frequenting this world of show business?", and she, as innocent as a spring flower, replied: "I have learned that every day you meet a lot of different people, and not everyone you meet in the end is a decent person. You have to be very careful then. Over the years, I have learned to be wary."

For Elisabetta, it is a crescendo of appointments and events, divided between Monte Carlo where she lives, Rome and Milan where she works, Miami, New York, London, Paris, and Dubai, where she now moves with extreme naturalness and where, thanks to her highly communicative character, she knows half the world. Still very young, in 2004 she was chosen as the national and international testimonial for the underwear brand Wonderbra, and for her, this was truly a success without geographical boundaries. In that same year, she worked for Rai2, first as a correspondent for the program *Bravo Grazie*, then as a dancer, paired with Ilaria Spada, on *Libero*, a program hosted by Teo Mammucari, and then again as cohost of *Starflash*, a program hosted by Jerry Calà with Elenoire Casalegno. Is that all? Absolutely not. She hosted *Destinazione Sanremo* with Pippo Baudo and

Claudio Cecchetto on Rai2, and at the beginning of 2005 she participated in the Rai 1 reality show *Ritorno al presente*. 2005 was the year of *Il malloppo*, hosted by Pupo on Rai 1, and on September 5 she cohosted, along with Loredana Miele and Franco Di Mare, the Rai 1 special dedicated to the finale of *Sognando Hollywood*, a competition for new talents. And there's more: *Buona Domenica* on Canale 5, *Celebrity bisturi* on Italia 1, and in 2009 she was named "Woman of the Year" by GQ Spain. For her, it was yet another official consecration. Then came *Stasera tutto è possibile*, hosted by Amadeus again on Rai2, *Made in Sud*, *Baila!*, *Red or Black? Tutto o niente*, and finally *Battiti Live*.

Throughout all this daring world of TV, cinema, and fashion, Elisabetta still manages to find the time and space for the things she loves most. In October 2014 she wrote and published a book of children's fairytales, "Mamma Elisabetta racconta" (Mommy Elisabetta Tells), and in 2016 she was chosen by the Italian League for the Fight Against Tumors as the Association's testimonial. It is a way, perhaps the most beautiful and least official and least solemn way, to remember the love for mamma Melina, and her large family remaining and left in Calabria. A beautiful woman, but above all today, a mother and a manager, multifaceted, intelligent, and with her feet firmly planted on the ground. In Milan, the Sunday at the BIT will remain a Sunday to be repeated for Calabria, certainly not to be forgotten, and this is thanks to her charm and personality. This time, Governor Roberto Occhiuto, I repeat, could not have chosen better. Ely. Ely For Ever. Thank you, Ely.



SIMONA LO BIANCO

“The guardian of the “Giants of Sila”

“When I arrived in Sila, in 2017, I didn't know yet... the first time I set foot in this wonderful place, I remember silence, solitude, a stunning place, but almost forgotten: the Sila Giants Nature Reserve. It was an incredible place, but almost nobody knew it. Few knew about it and few visited it. And I asked myself: how is it possible that so much beauty goes unnoticed?”

Simona Lo Bianco is the true "queen" of one of Italy's most ancient woods, that of the "Giants of Sila." We are twenty minutes from Camigliatello Silano, and over these years, on behalf of FAI (Fondo Ambientale Italiano), this very young Calabrian manager has transformed the already beautiful image of this enchanted forest into one of the most beautiful and captivating natural reserves in Europe.

She is a young woman, full of charm and glamour, accustomed to working up to twelve hours a day without even stopping for a sandwich at lunch, a great mountain enthusiast, but also a highly trained scholar of tourist flows and international dynamics, accustomed to traveling the world and speaking other languages, always elegant, even if she does everything not to seem so. In short, a young manager like her could have found any kind of job in Europe, and instead she chose to work in Calabria, to return to Calabria, her native land, among the woods of Sila, in direct contact with the black squirrels that live wonderfully well inside "her" park.

Today she manages on behalf of FAI, the Italian National Trust, one of the most exclusive mountain reserves in Italy, which under her leadership and direction has recorded record visitor numbers in recent years for FAI's history across all of Italy. How to put it? Once Simona arrived in Sila, the forest began to live, speak, throb, and even get emotional again. But scientists have been repeating and teaching us for years that plants speak and get moved too.

Dr. Lo Bianco, what exactly are we talking about? Why do they call these trees that you manage on behalf of FAI "The Giants of Sila"?

“The Giants of Sila are monumental trees, the oldest Corsican pines in all of Europe, planted in the 17th century by the Barons Mollo. They are up to 45 meters tall with a trunk 2 meters wide.”

How many are there in total today?

“In Calabria's centuries old forest, there are over 60 specimens. The reserve that hosts them won a double record: in 2023, it was the most visited place not only in the network of FAI ETS properties, but in all of Calabria, especially during the summer period.”

When did all of this begin?

“The Giganti della Sila biogenetic nature reserve was established in 1987 by the Ministry of the Environment with the aim of studying, genetically conserving, and protecting a 5-hectare centuries-old forest: 53 Corsican pines and 7 sycamore maples dated between 1620 and 1650.”

And today you are there?

“Today the Reserve is owned by the Sila National Park and since 2016 it has been entrusted to FAI, the Italian National Trust, and the Reserve is the most visited FAI property in summer in Italy. Described as 'a colonnade of an ancient temple,' the monumental value of this corner of the Sila Park was recognized first and foremost by Baroness Paola Mollo, owner, in Fallistro, of a typical country estate, who promoted the establishment of the Biogenetic Nature Reserve.”

Simona, but we are talking about a long journey, if I understand correctly?

“Between 1600 and 1700, many trees were felled in the forest near the country estate, mainly to obtain planks and firewood and to clear land for cultivation. Numerous measures were issued by the government of Naples to limit this destruction, not out of an eco naturalistic spirit, but to have the timber necessary for building naval vessels.”

Really?

“I will tell you just this: in the Mollo Archive there is an edict from Governor Vincenzo Dentice dating from 1789, which from Cosenza ordered people 'not to dare cut any tree of the Sila Regia and Badia di San Giovanni in Fiore.' The same trees from dense forests in Fallistro were used to extract pitch, white or black, and for snow harvesting.”

How did we arrive at the Natural Park that you control today?

“In subsequent centuries, the forest was kept intact until the expropriations by the Opera Valorizzazione Sila that took place after World War II. The lands of the Mollo property were assigned to a tenant farmer who would have full disposal of them as soon as he redeemed ownership. In 1973, Mario Ciolli, then Administrator of the State Forests of Sila, published a brief note on the Fallistro pines in a text on Sila, describing them precisely as The Giants of Sila. The Fallistro pines thus became a tourist destination and, to preserve them, officials from the O.V.S. worked to ensure their return to the Former State Forestry Agency to promote the creation of a Nature Reserve. On July 21, 1987, with Ministerial Decree No. 426, the Minister of the Environment established the guided biogenetic nature reserve.”

Is it true that there are many curiosities linked to this magical world?

“Consider that even today, marks from past usage practices are visible on some trees: cavities created by the extraction of resinous wood chips, particularly rich in resin, used as torches to light fires, for illumination, or to feed charcoal kilns. The operation, known as slupatura, ended with burning the cavity to prevent ant attacks and the drying out of the tree due to the potential emptying of lymphatic vessels exposed by the procedure. These caverns, sometimes large enough to accommodate a person, were used as overnight shelter by shepherds crossing the plateau during transhumance.”

Crossing the Park, one notices large fallen trees on the ground that were never removed, why?

“Fallen trunks are not removed in order to study the natural evolution of the forest, and they can be observed along the visiting path. These are some specimens uprooted by snow in the winter of 1981.”

Is it true that squirrels can also be encountered all around?

“Sila is inhabited by the Calabrian black squirrel (*Sciurus meridionalis*), a species found only in Calabria and Basilicata. This squirrel, larger and heavier than the common one, is also distinguished by its coat color: black on its back and white on its chest. It feeds on nuts, pine cones, and mushrooms. It is absolutely fascinating to meet it or watch it scurry through the woods.”

Doctor, where were you born, and where did you grow up?

“I was born in Tropea, but grew up in Vibo Valentia.”

May I ask what kind of family background you have?

“A wonderful family. A family that passed on to me all the essential foundations needed to face my journey and become who I am, with dignity and pride. A family to whom I owe so much and to whom I am strongly attached. I am certainly a very fortunate person to still have them united, but the true blessing is feeling that I have a safe haven in each member. Whether it is my mother, my father, my brother, or my sister, I know that in them I can find a refuge, each different from the other, each as important as the other.”

And your grandparents?

“My grandparents... so many memories. In particular, Grandpa Michele, the grandfather I got to spend the most time with. An ingenious, sunny, creative, positive man, a true example in life for everyone. A grandfather who managed to raise seven children through the historical, political, and economic hardships of the time. A hero like many others, whom I was fortunate to have as my grandfather.”

What kind of relationship did you have with them?

“My relationship with my grandfather Michele was extraordinary, I would even say fun! I had the privilege of spending a lot of time with him during my adolescence, and that period was truly unique. While I was growing up and going through the reflections of a high school girl, he would tell me about the world wars, let me read his diaries, and share life stories that became part of our family history. At an age when I was focused on appearances and typical youth worries, he taught me to appreciate the beauty of nature, to pick fruit from trees, and to eat genuine food. Everything was always done with his original and slightly eccentric spirit. Every afternoon, coming home from school, my snack was bread and cheese or salami, accompanied by a glass of wine. Our lunches were bean soups or chicken broths, simple moments but rich in meaning. He would tell me about his pranks, enjoying himself like a boy until the very end. And in difficult moments, he was a constant presence, with the austerity and dignity of a man from another time. He gave me shelter when I needed it, and the memories of those moments spent with him in his home are indelible. Now I realize how much those moments gave me a sense of measure, balance, and above all, an authentic appreciation for things that I still carry inside me today.”

What was your childhood like in Calabria?

“My childhood in Calabria was fairly normal, in harmony with everything the place where I grew up had to offer. I really like the memory of those years: playing outdoors, afternoons spent in the parish youth center or in the fields, games of marbles, hopscotch,

500 lire spent to buy candies, tokens to make calls from phone booths. There were also the first groups of friends and the inevitable bicycle falls. The more I reflect on it, the more I realize the genuineness and lightness of those moments, which today might seem unthinkable.”

Do you have any personal memories from that time?

“So many. Like other kids my age, I lived my youth fully outdoors, and I am surrounded by beautiful memories. Summers certainly represent a large part of the most nostalgic and sweet memories I have.”

What schools did you attend and where?

“I attended the Liceo Classico in Vibo Valentia.”

From middle school, which teachers do you still remember?

“What a nice question! Unusual! I remember very well the math teacher and the technical education teacher.”

And from high school, which teachers are worth remembering?

“Liceo Classico was a period that profoundly forged me, a moment that prepared me to face a completely different reality. I was lucky enough to meet teachers with whom I still have a wonderful relationship today, which seems truly special to me. It would be difficult to mention all the figures who marked that period, but I can certainly cite two teachers who were fundamental in my path: Professor Gagliardi and Professor Cimato. Both taught Italian, Greek, and Latin, but they were also two women with different approaches, each with her own vision and strength, and together they were like two beacons who believed deeply in me.”

Those who know you well tell me that even then you were top of your class...

“I was always a brilliant student with excellent grades, but at the same time a bit of a rebellious girl, always eager to step outside the box, explore boundaries, satisfy my curiosity, and go beyond the rules. This desire to go beyond did not always align with a context of rigid school rules, but they, besides passing on knowledge, guided me in my personal growth during those very particular years. Professor Gagliardi, with a simple look, could make me understand when it was time to stop, while Professor Cimato, with her sweet yet firm voice, knew how to point out the limits not to cross. Both saw a girl with excellent academic results, but they also knew I leveraged that aspect, and thanks to them, I did not lose my way during those years when it was so easy to get lost.”

How did your choice of university come about?

“Ever since high school, despite the vocations others attributed to me (my performance at school, my liveliness, and my eloquence made everyone think I would make a perfect lawyer), I knew with certainty what I did not want to do. And while I was sure of what I would not do, I was completely undecided on what I could do, until I thought about my passions and my way of being. In the end, after high school, I flew to Milano where I embarked on a path of study that was absolutely pioneering compared to what we experience today: a managerial and administrative approach to cultural heritage.”

A nice challenge?

“Ever since high school, despite expectations others had for me (my academic skill, my liveliness, and my eloquence led everyone to think I could become a lawyer), I knew with certainty what I did not want to do. Then, reflecting on my passions and my way of being, I found my answer. So, at the end of high school, I decided to fly to Milano and undertake a course of study that was truly ahead of its time back then: a managerial and administrative approach to cultural heritage. A path that allowed me to combine my curiosity and interest in culture with a pragmatic and organizational vision, something that is still innovative today.”

How much did your father's and mother's charisma weigh on your life?

“My father's and mother's charisma was absolutely fundamental and decisive in my life. Although I found my own way of growing and developing, the affection they gave me and their way of educating me inevitably shaped who I am today.”

What prices are paid by choosing not to live in Calabria?

“Like many, I lived outside Calabria before returning, and like many, one pays the price of nostalgia and sometimes the frustration of not being able to do everything one would like in one's own land. However, we Calabrians are stubborn and know how to transform difficulties into opportunities. Living outside the region, for example, allowed many to seize opportunities that, hopefully, can one day be put to use right where one desires.”

Your first position?

“At 23, consultant for a major company in Rome dealing with cultural and territorial development projects.”

Your first major experience?

“My first major experience coincided with my first position: working on Matera's candidacy for European Capital of Culture 2019. It was a project that made me grow a lot, allowing me to better understand the many facets of a job that is as complex as it is fascinating.”

The research or goal you are most attached to?

“The goal I am most attached to is certainly having returned and finally having the opportunity to do what I desired: doing my job, which is sometimes still misunderstood and therefore even more challenging, 'at home', in my land.”

One day you leave and travel around the world, what kind of experience was that?

“I would say it was a fundamental experience. Living abroad offered me the opportunity to grow professionally, build an international network of contacts, and develop many skills. But beyond the professional aspects, it was also a decisive journey on a human level: it taught me to fend for myself, make decisions independently, and push past my limits. It was a process that made me more confident in myself, allowing me to better discover my personality and capabilities.”

Who helped you grow and in what corner of the world?

“Everyone I met along my path played a significant role in my growth. Facing new challenges in different contexts and cultures with different people helped me develop greater mental flexibility and an approach to life that I might never have acquired

otherwise. In particular, the experience in Toronto was the hardest, but also the one that shaped me the most.”

Why did you then return to Italy?

“To put all the skills I felt I had acquired at the service of my country, and out of the awareness of how much enormous potential there was right here in Italy to apply what was already widely developed in my sector elsewhere.”

Has it ever happened to you around Italy to feel 'ashamed' of being a daughter of Calabria?

“Sometimes yes, mainly due to the usual negative news that is often associated with Calabria, news that turns into stereotypes that are difficult to eradicate.”

How did you arrive in Sila among the giants of the mountain?

“I arrived in Sila thanks to the opportunity offered to me by FAI to manage this extraordinary place. The Giganti della Sila Nature Reserve, granted by the Sila National Park, along with Casino Mollo, donated by the Mollo family, represent one of the most important cultural attractions in Calabria. For me, it is a true honor, but also a great responsibility, to manage them.”

What advice would you give to a young woman like you who wants to undertake your career today?

“I would advise determination, study, constant training, curiosity, and great strength.”

What was the true weapon of your success?

“Success? I believe I still have many projects to develop, and even then I will not consider myself a 'successful woman'. What I can say with certainty is that I am a woman who is very aware of herself and of what she is doing. Tenacity and skills were undoubtedly decisive in achieving important results.”

What future do you imagine for your life?

“I hope for a future rich in professional satisfaction, while at the same time trying to learn how to carve out more space for myself and my private life.”

How many difficulties have you encountered in your role as guardian of the woods?

“Oh, many, stemming from mistrust and cultural closure. Nevertheless, the consistency and coherence of the work carried out has, I believe, transformed the way the community sees things, and they are learning to look at themselves with new eyes.”

What have you learned from spending so much time in the mountains?

“The mountains in themselves are a more demanding context in which to live and work, and for me, it was and is a true school of life. It taught me to develop greater strength and stubbornness in work, but at the same time it made me understand the importance of slowness, of fully enjoying small things, even sounds that you cannot hear in the city, and I grasped even more the importance of nature in all aspects of our lives.”

What kind of team do you have around you?

“My team is composed of local people, and I am very happy about this: it is a measure of the social impact that this development work in this place is generating. A team that I am training and of which I am very proud. I believe deeply in teamwork and in the growth of people, even more so in contexts where 'growing' seems impossible. We, on the other hand, focus heavily on this.”

Is it true that these gigantic trees are capable of talking?

“Of course! And I am not the one saying it, scientific studies say that trees communicate with each other thanks to a complex underground network, the famous Wood Wide Web: the internet of trees.”

What is the Sila mountain lacking to become the Trentino of the South?

“I believe that the Sila mountain should not try to become the Trentino of the South, but rather affirm its own identity. Great effort is already being dedicated to this work. The Sila plateau boasts numerous environmental recognitions that make it unique, and the Sila National Park, together with FAI and local business entities, is working to enhance them. For example, thanks to the precious work of the Park, Sila is today a Biosphere Reserve included in UNESCO's World Network of Sites of Excellence. Furthermore, the Park has obtained the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism, an important certification representing a practical management tool with which those who work in this territory contribute to protecting and enhancing our heritage.”

I had never realized the real value of the park...

“But there is more. Added to all this are the specific floral and faunal characteristics of our region: Calabria is one of the richest areas in biodiversity, with one third of Italian biodiversity coming from here. And then there are our food specialties, traditions, and intangible cultural aspects. Ultimately, a unique heritage that distinguishes us from other territories. Perhaps what is lacking is precise knowledge and awareness of what exists. We should know our land much more and be ambassadors of our rich heritage ourselves. Sometimes I am amazed at how my fellow Calabrians are unaware of important places that many national and foreign tourists come specifically to visit. Incredible, isn't it?!”

What kind of winter will this be for the Sila mountain?

“I hope it will be a positive winter. Sila is a place that can be experienced all year round, and winter represents one of the most important seasons. Every year we welcome numerous tourists, mainly Italians and people from neighboring regions, who choose Sila specifically in winter. This is also possible thanks to the work of local Associations and Park Guides, who offer various types of outdoor experiences designed for different audiences.”

If you had a magic wand, what would you do inside the Reserve?

“If I had a magic wand, I would like to see even more vision, efficiency, and collaboration. Sometimes it is difficult to carry out development processes due to different paces and ways of operating. But in general, I believe that, as is often said, it is fundamental to work on developing an integrated system of services. Furthermore, it would be wonderful to see greater awareness on the part of the local community, which is a key element in

improving the quality of the territory. This is not only for those who live and work there, but also for those who decide to visit it.”



MARISA MANZINI

Magistrate, Deputy Prosecutor General at the Public Prosecutor's Office, Deputy Chief Prosecutor at the Court of Cosenza, magistrate of the Anti-Mafia District Directorate (DDA) of Catanzaro, and Deputy Prosecutor at the Public Prosecutor's Office of Lamezia Terme, Marisa Manzini has been permanently in Calabria for 32 years now, and for 32 years as a magistrate she has never stopped, not even for a single day, dealing with the fight against the 'Ndrangheta.

Like all magistrates in charge of difficult investigations, for which she herself has suffered severe threats, she lives an armored life, under police escort for years. Yet this has never eroded her serenity or her lifestyle; even today, she remains a woman surrounded and marked by great civic passions and noble ideals, which she jealously guards in the drawer of her life.

Originally from Novara, after 32 years spent in Calabria (years that were by no means easy, believe me, entirely and viscerally dedicated to the service of justice and against every form of organized crime), I could not fail to seek her out. The excuse was precisely her latest book, *Il coraggio di Rosa. Storia di una donna che ha ripudiato la 'ndrangheta* ("Rosa's Courage: The Story of a Woman Who Repudiated the 'Ndrangheta"), published by Rubbettino Editore. In it, she extraordinarily and effectively tells the devastating life of mafia women in Calabria, their role within the clans, and especially the courage of "one of them" in wanting to free herself from the shackles of the past and finally regain her lost freedom and dignity, offering a ruthless and powerful glimpse into the heart of today's 'ndrangheta.

"With this novel," explains Marisa Manzini, "I wanted to send a strong and clear message to the women of the 'ndrangheta. With courage and determination, one can choose, by turning to the State, to regain one's freedom. To the readers, however, I would like an equally strong message to arrive: today the 'ndrangheta is an organization that tramples on human beings, considering itself the master of territories and people upon whom, through intimidation and violence, it can impose its demands."

In short, there is a bit of everything and more in this third book by Marisa Manzini: a public confession of her role and work, an open story of what a woman of the State is in these parts today, an open letter to the women of Calabria and to the Calabrians who welcomed her 40 years ago in Lamezia Terme, when she was still a very young contest winner, convincing her to stay forever.

Above all, this book is a courageous "manifesto" against the ruthless and boundless violence of the Calabrian 'ndrangheta.

"The true protagonist of the novel is Rosa, but the other important figure is represented by the female magistrate who, with the firmness and sensitivity that only a woman can have, leads Rosa in the right direction. Daniela Roviola is a magistrate who loves her work

and loves Calabria. She studies people, analyzes them, and tries to reach their feelings. In my professional experience, I have tried to use the same method.”

“Il coraggio di Rosa,” clarifies Marisa Manzini, “is my third work. The first two were essays; this is a novel. This was also a challenge. I wanted to reach people more easily, especially young people, with a language that was more immediate and simple, while still addressing the topic of the 'ndrangheta. I thought it could be a way to launch messages through a more engaging tool. The theme I wanted to highlight is the role of women within mafia contexts; Rosa is a woman who lives in a 'ndrangheta family, enjoying the privileges of being the woman of a boss, but also suffering severe limitations to her freedom as a human being whose dignity is gradually trampled on. Women in the 'ndrangheta are subjected to the decisions of men; they become tools in their hands.”

An autobiographical book? The suspicion that comes to mind is that this book is actually perhaps the most faithful travel diary of Marisa Manzini, magistrate by choice and by passion, in which this “woman of the State” reconstructs and tells the story of one of the most delicate and dangerous investigations of her life at the Prosecutor's Office of Vibo, doing so using the same tactical schemes and useful advice “absorbed” from her former mentor.

Already in her previous book, *Donne custodi donne combattenti. La signoria della 'ndrangheta su territori e persone* (“Women Guardians, Women Fighters: The 'Ndrangheta's Dominion over Territories and People”, also published by Rubbettino), Marisa Manzini had explained this concept very clearly: that the 'ndrangheta silently creeps into the economy, controls the territory in which it operates, and exercises “dominion” over things and people. The study of internal relationships within 'ndrangheta families allows us to affirm that the overbearing dominion exercised by the Calabrian mafia extends even to the lives of the family's women, who too often become tools of the organization.

“Change, then,” writes Marisa Manzini, “can only happen if, from within the family, the female component that passes down mafia sub-values rejects that task, and if women who are tools transform into women fighters.”

I am convinced of this too. In the long run, all of this could produce fundamental and positive effects in the fight against the 'ndrangheta. But Marisa Manzini knows this better than anyone else, having been in the sights of Calabrian clans for long seasons of her life, completely alone in the privacy of her prosecutor's office with only her security escort beside her, without ever yielding for a single moment in her “manhunt”. But one of the most beautiful things in this “logbook” is precisely the admiration, respect, attention, and unconditional esteem that the magistrate protagonist of the novel has for her escort officers, to whom she dedicates only words of overall great tenderness.

A woman of the State through and through.

Good morning, Prosecutor. Let's start from the beginning. May I ask how you reacted when you found out you had to leave Novara and come to Calabria?

“Calabria, and in particular Lamezia Terme, was my own choice, made at the end of the judicial internship, that is, the training period that magistrates must undergo after passing

the public competition. The year I did my internship at the Court of Appeal of Turin was a year that marked the history of our country: it was 1992, the year of the Cosa Nostra massacres. When it came time to choose where to go to practice my profession, I, like many of my colleagues in the course, had no doubts about choosing a place in the South where criminal organizations were present and fiercely opposed to the State. To tell the truth, I would have liked to move to Palermo, the city where Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino lost their lives, but when my turn to choose came, all the positions at the Public Prosecutor's Office of Palermo were already filled. I then decided on Calabria. In those years, the 'Ndrangheta was not considered an organization as powerful as the Sicilian mafia, but the violence that characterized it and the features of a closed organization based on blood ties made it, even then, a feared mafia association ready to take on a prominent role in the criminal landscape. Right in Lamezia Terme, on January 4, 1992, the 'ndrangheta had attacked the State by killing Police Superintendent Salvatore Aversa and his wife Lucia Precenzano."

Have you ever regretted this choice?

"Absolutely never."

Deep down, you also found love in Calabria...

"Yes, first I must say that I fell in love with the land of Calabria, with the wonders of nature it possesses, the sea, the sunsets that can be admired on the Tyrrhenian coast, its mountains, and all the lush vegetation. And then I met my husband and understood that my future would be here."

If your daughter asked you to become a magistrate, what would you tell her?

"It would be a great gift, but my daughter has other interests. In any case, I would tell her that the profession of a magistrate, especially an investigating prosecutor, is a profession that offers great and powerful emotions; often you forget your own needs and immerse yourself in investigations with the goal of bringing justice, especially for victims who have suffered the worst wrongs.

I often say it is the most beautiful profession in the world."

The most difficult day of your work as a magistrate?

"There have been, and sometimes still are, difficult days. They are the days when I realize I was unable to deliver justice to the victims. For various reasons: because the investigation did not yield the hoped-for results, because there was not the necessary cooperation from people, or because the rules changed and what was previously usable for evidentiary purposes no longer is."

And the day of greatest serenity?

"The day when I intimately feel that justice has been done."

Do you have a favorite song in your life?

"Yes, *Imagine* by John Lennon."

The last book you read that you really liked?

“One of the last books I read that I really liked is *Il Dio dei nostri padri: il grande romanzo della Bibbia* ("The God of Our Fathers: The Great Novel of the Bible") by Aldo Cazzullo. I found it very compelling because of the author's ability to approach the Bible in a way that is accessible to everyone. It is not a theological analysis; rather, the author managed to transform sacred episodes into current, living stories capable of transmitting values and a sense of humanity.”

How did your choice to become a magistrate come about?

“I decided to prepare for the judicial competition, fully aware that I might not make it, because during my law studies, among the various figures in trial proceedings, the one that fascinated me most was the magistrate. However, the examination to become a magistrate is very demanding; you have to study a lot, and a bit of luck is also needed. It went well for me.”

In your book, you talk about 'your mentor', but who was truly your mentor, Professor Cattaneo?

“Professor Cattaneo was certainly a great teacher for me; he was my civil law professor, with whom I also collaborated after graduating. However, when I talk about the 'mentor' in my book, I am referring to a magistrate. In the novel, it is a fictional magistrate, but if I speak about myself, I had a great mentor in Turin, Dr. Giancarlo Caselli.”

Years of living an armored life: how heavy is that weight?

“Since 1999, the Committee for Order and Security determined there were dangerous conditions regarding my person that required protection measures. Since then, on every movement, I am accompanied by a security escort. Over time, the men following me have become like family and, to be honest, after an initial period of bewilderment linked to an unimaginable life change, the escort has become part of my very existence.”

Your most difficult investigation?

“There have been many. The one I consider the most demanding, especially because of the emotional involvement it entailed for me, was an investigation into a murder and concealment of a corpse. The victim was a young man belonging to a respectable family who, for inexplicable reasons, had decided first to approach and then integrate with 'ndrangheta criminality in his town. The desire to reach top positions in the organization led him into conflict with ruthless criminals who killed him and hid his body without providing any indication as to where his poor remains are located. To this day, his mother cannot say a prayer at her son's grave.”

In your books, you always talk about your escort...

“I speak about them because, as I said earlier, they are an integral part of my life. They are men who accompany and protect me, and to whom I can express nothing but my esteem for the professionalism they put into their work.”

Do you still have a dream in your drawer?

“The most beautiful dream is to see real change in this land, a change that starts from the young people, who know how to dream and who know that only the defeat of the mafias can restore to the world that fresh scent of freedom that Paolo Borsellino wished for the younger generations.”

How do you imagine your future?

“My immediate future I always imagine inside courtroom walls. I would also like to continue writing. Through storytelling, one can make people's stories immortal, especially those that have marked our existence the most. And sometimes, through narrative, one can even change stories, give them different endings, send messages, and try to initiate changes.”

What would you like to be remembered for the day you leave the judiciary?

“I hope to be remembered as a magistrate who tried to do her duty without compromise and, above all, with special attention to the victims of crimes. In short, a magistrate who put people's lives first.”

To a young girl who says to you, "I want to be a magistrate," what advice would you give her?

“That being a magistrate is the most beautiful profession in the world, but it is also very demanding. You cannot think of closing case files as if they were simply paperwork to sort out, because behind every case file there are people's lives, and those lives deserve respect.”



FRANCA MELFI

“My life with robots”

Calabrian origins, an only child, a grandfather who was a doctor, born and raised in the Cosenza area, one of Italy's most beautiful villages, then she took flight, leaving Calabria for a degree in medicine in Pisa. Today, the story of Professor Franca Melfi is the classic tale of an extraordinary "Italian excellence in the world."

Born in 1959, Aquarius zodiac sign: "fearless risk lovers, always the first to volunteer, always and in any case protagonists, nothing better for them than living life to the limit." But according to experts, "Those born on February 18 under the Aquarius sign are even happier when they push things further, but they must ask themselves why they feel the need to live this way. Often, behind the mask of indestructibility, fears and insecurities are hidden." But is all this really true?

To find out, we went to the University of Pisa to look for a researcher of Calabrian origin, who is a cloud of electricity, overflowing, magnetic, very blonde, haughty, at times enveloping and romantic, with the proud, at times even arrogant look of a woman who has traveled the world, who has experienced firsthand extreme human cases and situations, called upon to analyze and interpret X rays and reports impossible for others to decipher and decode. In her own way a genius, a vivid and irrepressible intelligence, a hectic life running from herself, an academic scholar and highly successful manager. But not only this.

Today Franca Melfi is a number one in modern medicine, the pride and icon of one of the most famous historical universities in Europe, a professor admired, pampered, and envied by major robotics research centers around the world due to her advanced knowledge of telemedicine. We observe her beside her "robot," which she uses every day to treat and dissect the most aggressive lung tumors existing in nature today, and she herself seems like an integral part of the infernal machine before her. Green scrubs, dim lights, eyes fixed on the monitors reproducing the details of the human body struck and sculpted by cancer. From this workstation, Calabria seems very far away indeed.

Professor, do you still have a relationship with Calabria?

“Are you kidding? In Calabria I have the family home, which is located right in the ancient village of Oriolo, and clearly I return to Calabria every year because all my childhood memories are tied to my home in Oriolo and to the sea at Trebisacce.”

Is there anyone from your family left in Oriolo?

“My cousins are there; unfortunately, all my uncles and aunts are no longer with us, except for a few who have survived. I do not know how to explain it to you, but I am still very deeply attached to this part of Calabria, and not only because of my house. In Oriolo I did all my schooling, from kindergarten to elementary school, middle school, and high school.”

High school in Oriolo?

“Of course. In Oriolo there was also a Classical High School.”

Did you know that in Oriolo I knew Pia Basile? Pia married Franco Santo, who in those years was also mayor of Cosenza, and if I remember correctly, Pia had a brother heavily involved in politics?

“You really bring me home and back in time with these memories. Pia was the sister of Peppino Basile, who was then a Provincial Councilor for Christian Democracy, and he was practically always at home at our place. But in this regard, I must also tell you that if you had known my mother, and if my mother had known about your connection with the Basiles, my mother would have certainly hugged you tightly, because back then there was no woman involved in politics who did not cheer for them. She mainly campaigned for Peppino. Mom was a true Christian Democrat of times past, feisty and viscerally involved in person.”

And whose side were you on, Professor?

“Let us put it this way: I was rebellious as a child, and mom knew full well that I would never vote the way she might have hoped I would. Just think that my mother, knowing well that my ideas did not always align with hers, whenever there was an election in town and I told her, 'Mom, I am taking the train from Pisa to come home,' she would regularly reply, 'Franca, there is no need for you to come and vote. Stay in Pisa to study. We are enough on our own here.' This gives you a sense of the feeling of belonging that this woman of times past possessed, an almost sacred feeling. A true passionaria. And during campaign periods, when I called home to talk to her and my father answered, my father would tell me, 'Mom is out getting votes.' Different times, truly.”

What kind of friendly ties have you maintained with your land of origin?

“Very strong ties. Just think that when I return to Calabria, I see so many old friends from back then. The relationship, for example, with our old high school classmates has remained exactly the same as it was then. As if time had never moved forward for us. And then there are my cousins, with whom I practically grew up. One of them, the oldest in terms of age, also of Alessandrian origin, worked as a general practitioner in Cerchiara di Calabria. As you can see, there is an entire piece of Calabria forcefully present in my life at all times.”

What opinion have you formed about doctors of the past?

“Don't call me a romantic woman, but doctors of the past were great researchers on the one hand, but above all they were also great humanists on the other. Men of great professional value and deep cultural stature. I remember that my uncle Paolo graduated in '48, and I remember he had an extraordinary cultural background and, above all, a romantic soul in the most beautiful sense of the word.”

How much Calabria, Professor, do you carry with you around the world?

“You mean how much Calabria I usually meet around the world? So much. I have found, met, known, and admired Calabrians in every part of the world; entire colonies of Calabrian intellectuals have conquered the most diverse and distant countries, and this fills me with pride.”

At first glance, her operating room at the Pisa Hospital looks like the set of a science fiction movie, but in reality we are at the technological heart of the surgical department of the Pisa Hospital, where Franca Melfi is Director of the Multidisciplinary Center for Robotic Surgery, Robotic and Minimally Invasive Thoracic Surgery, the pinnacle of advanced surgery. It is like being and moving around the Global Robotics Institute in Florida, Celebration Health Hospital, one of the centers with the greatest international experience in robotic surgery for prostate cancer treatment, or at the Cleveland Clinic, the Mayo Clinic, Mount Sinai in New York, MD Anderson in Houston, or the OLV Institute in Aalst, Belgium. The difference is that here we are in Italy, and this Center directed by Franca Melfi is known throughout the world.

Today Franca Melfi is a professor of Thoracic Surgery at the University of Pisa, Director of the Multidisciplinary Robotic Center of the Pisa University Hospital, Coordinator of the Scientific Technical Committee of the Robotic Surgery Hub of the Tuscany Region, as well as Associate Editor of the Journal of Cardiothoracic Surgery, and past Chair of the Thoracic Domain of the European scientific society EACTS (European Association for Cardio-Thoracic Surgery) and member of the Board of Directors of the International Society for Minimally Invasive Cardiothoracic Surgery (ISMICS). In 2019, she became President of the prestigious Italian Society of Thoracic Endoscopy (SIET), founded on February 14, 1980, by the founding fathers of Italian Thoracic Surgery. The first female President in the history of SIET, which speaks volumes about her role and capabilities.

Professor, let us return to Calabria for a moment. High school in Oriolo, which means you left Oriolo once you turned eighteen?

"I was exactly seventeen years old when I left Oriolo for the first time, because I was in a hurry to go to University. I could not wait for new horizons to open up for me, so in high school I completed two years in one, back then it was possible, and I received my classical high school diploma a year early. At seventeen, therefore, I took the train and left for Pisa. I enrolled in medicine and began my new life. Furthermore, in Pisa during those years I also met the man who would later become my husband, also a Calabrian, from Pedace, so as you can see, a Calabrian colony along the banks of the Arno."

What is the fondest memory from your past that you still carry inside?

"My summers in Calabria, my first swims in the sea at Trebisacce, where we had a home and where we never stopped returning for the rest of our lives. And then, our summers. Back then they began in June and ended in September, three months of sea, sun, and wonderful, unforgettable friendships. I remember my vacations in Calabria and my house always filled with so many people around."

So, not only Oriolo?

"In fact, the story of my youth is tied to three different places. In Oriolo, as I told you, we had our family home. In Trebisacce was our beach house, but I also have Alessandrian roots."

In what sense do you mean that?

“My grandparents lived in Alessandria del Carretto, and I had a wonderful relationship with them. Just think that my passion for medicine was actually born in Alessandria del Carretto.”

And how was it born?

“It was my grandmother, who lived right in Alessandria del Carretto, who instilled in me the passion for medicine. The first doctor in our family, so to speak, was my grandmother's brother. And my grandmother held an almost venerated admiration for her brother. This strong feeling for him later led her to believe in the great value of medicine as a social mission. But my mother had the same passion for medicine as her mother, because Uncle Paolo, mom's brother, was a doctor too.”

Two doctors at home, that is quite a few to begin with...

“Two doctors, but only at the beginning. That was our starting point. Just think that today we are twelve cousins, and we are all doctors.”

And yet, your mother hoped you would not become a doctor?

“My mother probably thought that a woman was not cut out to be a doctor, and in any case she did not want me to become a doctor. She probably had an overly romantic conception of a doctor; a country doctor in a town like ours never had a moment of peace, having to run everywhere, day and night, even into the countryside or the woods, and for my mother this was perhaps a cause of worry for a daughter who dreamed instead of doing that job.”

In the end, though, you won, Professor?

“It was not simple. I had to fight a lot. Initially she wanted me to enroll in Literature and perhaps become a teacher; in short, she dreamed of a calmer job for me compared to being a doctor.”

A pioneer in the field of robotic surgery, Franca Melfi performed the first operation to treat a lung tumor exactly twenty years ago, in 2001, receiving numerous national and international awards. Among these, the "International Bio WomenTech Award," dedicated to women who devote their passion and talent to biotechnology, and the "TeleHealth Innovation Italy's First Surgical Telementoring Network" award for her dedication to telementoring and telemedicine using the latest technologies available in thoracic surgery. Furthermore, she received the Petyryvalsky Award "For development of international scientific cooperation in surgery" at BRNO University, the historic heart of the Czech Republic. In 2005, together with a group of female professionals, she founded the association "AIDAcP" (Italian Women Association against Lung Cancer), with the intent of sharing experiences and data related to neoplastic lung disease in women, as well as guiding young trainees and disseminating information through social programs and initiatives. Medicine at the service of the most vulnerable.

Currently, Franca Melfi works on many University of Pisa research projects that are innovative, transnational, and of great scientific scope, viewed with admiration by the international research world for the results that could stem from them, projects born in collaboration with major European Institutions and aimed at research into lung tumors and the treatment of pulmonary and mediastinal diseases. At the same time, she continues

to dedicate herself to teaching, as a university professor and as an authorized European tutor and proctor for robotic thoracic procedures in the most qualified centers in Europe.

Professor, as a surgeon, do you finally feel like you have 'arrived'?

"I must say that despite so much time having passed since the beginning of my professional journey, I never feel like I have 'arrived', as you put it. But this is probably due to the fact that I am never totally satisfied with what I do. Therefore, I could describe my professional life as a wheel that cannot stop turning. Even before I bring a given project to completion, I am already ready to start another..."

I try to explain to her that we have heard of her not only in Europe, but also in the United States, where the "Da Vinci" robot was actually invented, which today she handles as if it were her reflected shadow in the operating room, an imaginative and fantastic extension of her hands and eyes onto the diseased part of the patient, but she dampens any emphatic tone at the outset.

"I am only trained to use a machine that allows me to perform what is essentially computer assisted surgery, which helps us, as surgeons, to be more accurate, more precise. You see, this robotic system allows the surgeon to control miniaturized instruments placed inside anatomical cavities through small incisions under one centimeter, with extraordinary precision that is difficult to achieve with other techniques."

Professor, shall we start from the beginning of this adventure of yours?

"The beginnings? A coincidence, as often happens in life. Twenty years have flown by since that day. It was 2001; at that time I was working as an assistant in the Cardiothoracic Department where one of the first Da Vinci robots in Europe was acquired, the second in Italy, with the aim of developing a minimally invasive cardiac surgery program. At that time, I must say robotic systems were quite rudimentary, especially compared to current models, so it was not very easy to perform complex procedures. In any case, for various reasons, our robotic system was soon abandoned."

Professor, it seems to me, however, that it was an unfortunate start?

"Yes, the beginnings were not simple, if only because back then there were no dedicated training programs, especially in thoracic surgery. Nevertheless, having published our first results regarding the application of robotic technology in thoracic surgery in a prestigious scientific journal (Franca M.A. Melfi et Al. *Early Experience With Robotic Technology For Thoracoscopic Surgery*. Eur. J. Cardiothorac. Surg., May 2002; 21: 864 to 868), three years later I was invited to Leipzig to perform a robotic surgery procedure during an international conference. It was at the EACTS Meeting 2004."

May I ask how it turned out on that occasion?

"It went extremely well. It was the beginning of a long journey, at times bumpy, but undoubtedly full of opportunities and often charged with emotions and satisfaction. It was the beginning of what I have achieved over the years, from the tutoring activity I still carry out in Europe as well as in Italy, to the creation of the Center I have the privilege of directing and where I share this extraordinary experience with many colleagues."

A nice recognition for you?

“Yes, I must say that all of this created the conditions for Pisa, and therefore the Robotic Surgery Center, as well as Thoracic Surgery in its robotic component, to become a European Reference Center, attracting great attention from the United States as well. This led to me being recognized as the first authorized European tutor of Robotic Thoracic Surgery in 2012, and the Robotic Surgery Center becoming what is today designated as the first European Epicenter for robotic surgery across all surgical specialties. Thanks to this extraordinary path, it was then possible to launch over 22 robotic thoracic surgery centers throughout Europe.”

For years you fought to expand the use of robotics as much as possible?

“It was natural and, above all, right that I do so. From the beginning I had full certainty and awareness of the potential of this technology, just as I am certain that even today we are only at the beginning of a true revolution in surgery, moving toward digitalized surgery.”

The robot that Franca Melfi knows like the back of her hand and "dominates" with her hands is equipped with a high-definition camera that amplifies images of the surgical field, allowing her to distinguish anatomical details hardly visible even to the naked eye. The technical spec sheet of this machine, to which every day the surgeon entrusts the fate of a seriously ill patient, explains that the "Da Vinci Robot" is equipped with highly sophisticated jointed instruments that allow 360 degree rotation of the end tool. Paradoxically, Franca Melfi smiles, robotic instruments have a wider range of articulation than the human wrist. Thus, the surgeon's hand movements are reproduced inside the surgical field far more precisely than could ever happen naturally, eliminating the "physiological" tremor of the hands.

So, can we trust robots in the operating room?

“This is an extremely sophisticated system capable of executing very complex operations with extreme precision, obviously always guided by the surgeon. All of this translates into a reduction in complications, and international literature data clearly demonstrates this. Performing a procedure with robotic technology offers numerous potential benefits to the patient related to software capable of correcting even the slightest hand tremor with a vision ten times superior to normal human eye vision. All this, together with lower invasiveness, creates conditions for undeniable advantages not only for patients but also for surgeons, who are able to operate with better ergonomics and thus less energy expenditure.”

This, then, is the life philosophy that has accompanied the personal history and extraordinary career of Professor Franca Melfi, who has behind her dozens of National and International conferences, courses, Level II Master's degrees, and live surgeries that have "crowned" her queen of robotic surgery. In the facilities she directs, Minimally Invasive and Robotic Thoracic Surgery at the University of Pisa and the Robotic Surgery Center at the Pisa University Hospital, all surgically relevant pathologies are treated today, even the most complex ones, with special attention to all pulmonary and mediastinal oncological pathologies, preferring, Professor Melfi specifies, the minimally invasive robotic approach.

What are we actually talking about?

“Primarily lung tumors, as well as all pathologies affecting the chest and lungs, both benign and malignant. Mediastinal tumors, pulmonary metastatic disease, all pleural pathologies, up to palmar and axillary hyperhidrosis.”

Pisa Hospital of Excellence, ground floor of Building 30, location of the Multidisciplinary Robotic Center and the Center's Directorate. But here there is also the surgical block, highly sophisticated and technologically advanced. On the first floor of Building 10 is the ward dedicated exclusively to "thoracic" patients, the true jewel in the crown of this quiet world where Franca Melfi now spends an average of ten hours of her workday, with the absolute awareness of directing a "European Reference Center for Robotic Surgery in the Treatment of Lung Tumors and Mediastinal Lesions" that is truly unique in its kind.

On January 24, *Vanity Fair*, for its "Women in the World" section, dedicated a special feature to her, written by Laura Tacconi, in which Professor Melfi explains in detail the future role of the surgeon relative to the machine and the robot operated on.

“Heaven forbid anyone imagine that the machine can proceed on its own without a doctor guiding it,” the professor warns.

Moral of the story: in the operating room, it is unthinkable not to have a surgeon?

“It is absolutely unthinkable. The human factor is decisive, crucial, indispensable. It is always we doctors who guide the machine.”

How much will Artificial Intelligence matter in the future of robotic surgery?

“More than one can imagine. I believe the integration of artificial intelligence into robotic systems can be extremely useful both in preventing potential difficulties during particularly complex surgeries and in preparing for the procedure, which is particularly helpful for our residents or inexperienced young surgeons.”

Can you please translate this concept into simpler terms?

“I will try. If, for example, a certain number of complications linked to a specific surgical maneuver have been recorded worldwide, Artificial Intelligence can help us tremendously. For instance, by signaling to the surgeon at the console that a particular maneuver with that specific instrument carries a high percentage of bleeding. Furthermore, Artificial Intelligence applied to robotic technology and advanced imaging tools gives the surgeon the opportunity to plan the procedure by simulating it, thereby helping to prevent potential complications.”

Professor, are you optimistic about the future?

“I believe the future will be what all of us in the field today call Digitalized Surgery, which cannot exist without Artificial Intelligence.”

In the sense that the robot will do everything?

“The robot is a machine that must be guided, assisted, and directed; without an operator, the machine does not start and goes nowhere. I envision a much broader horizon than our current one. I am certain that in the very near future, in the operating room we will have extremely sophisticated tools that will allow us to evaluate and examine tissues while we operate. In real time we will be able to visualize images, and above all to teach all of this

far more effectively than one can imagine. All of this will be possible thanks to integration with big data, AI, and what our computer scientists and engineers will develop in the coming years. I certainly do not think technology can ever be dispensed with. It is now an integral part of medicine, and even more so of the surgical world.”

When you talk about 'simulation', what benefits to the patient do you have in mind?

“You see, when we surgeons say that being able to 'simulate a surgical intervention' becomes extremely useful, it means above all grasping and seeing its difficulties, even the most intrinsic ones. Being able to plan it means being able to prepare in time for potential difficulties or complications that might arise. Preventing complications through simulation means guaranteeing a safe, high quality surgical intervention.”

Professor, if you could turn back time today, would you do everything exactly the same?

“Not everything, or at least not exactly everything. Perhaps I would take a bit more care of my private life.”

How would you define this life of yours, so full of success, today?

“As a run without stops. A high speed train with a single final destination. But without pauses, or worse yet, without intermediate stops.”

What is the thing you are truly proud of today?

“I am proud of the fact that here, at this historic Italian University where I graduated and later specialized, there now exists a research Center where all possible robotic surgery can be performed.”

And the true secret of success for a great surgeon like you?

“Competence, but also talent...”

But in this story there is also a postscript.

August 2024. Professor Franca Melfi decides to leave her professorship in Thoracic Surgery at the University of Pisa, where she was also director of the Robotic Surgery Center, to return permanently to Calabria and divide her time between the University of Calabria and the Hospital of Cosenza. They call them "returning brains." Rector Nicola Leone does not hide his satisfaction: “I am happy and proud,” he states in an official note from the Calabrian University Campus, “that a specialist of Professor Melfi's caliber, among the foremost experts in the world in robotic surgery, accepted our proposal to move to the University of Calabria and operate at the Cosenza Hospital, demonstrating her belief in the Unical Health Project. Our medical students will have the extraordinary opportunity to learn the most advanced surgical techniques, while new perspectives open up for research in Medicine and AI. I will propose her name to Dr. De Salazar to head the Thoracic Surgery department. I am certain that with her arrival, surgical services at Annunziata Hospital will improve significantly with the expansion of high complexity procedures, including lung cancer treatments that currently cause healthcare migration and many journeys of hope.”

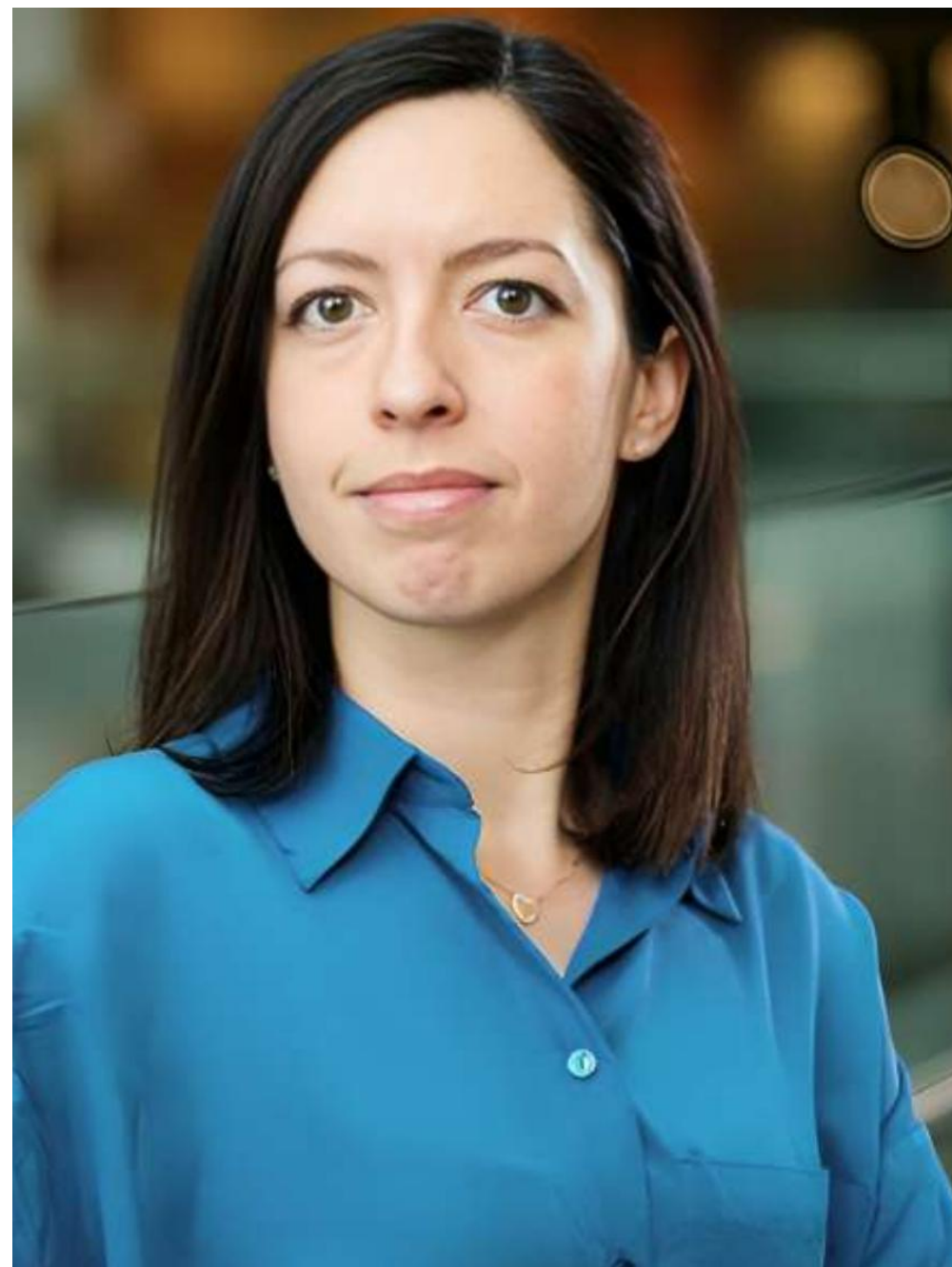
Franca Melfi speaks instead of a new professional challenge in her life as a doctor and researcher: “For me it is a challenge,” she says, “but it is also a way to give something back

to my land. Unical is famous for its distinctiveness in digital technology and artificial intelligence, which is part of my world, given that I have been involved in surgical robotics for 23 years. I convinced myself that accepting this position would be like opening a blank page on which to write another chapter, in which it will be possible to combine the clinical side, which belongs to me, with new challenges in teaching and research, drawing upon Unical's expertise in Artificial Intelligence.”

Franca Melfi lives up to expectations on this occasion as well and aims high:

“I do not believe there are institutions as dynamic and excellent as this university is today; for me it will be a starting point and I am certain that together with the group of researchers at Unical, renowned for their high specialization in artificial intelligence and mechanical or robotic engineering, we will have the opportunity to develop cutting edge research.”

If the researchers Professor Franca Melfi refers to without naming are Gianluigi Greco (now the new Rector of Unical), Georg Gottlob, Francesco Scarcello, Pasquale Rullo, and Nicola Leone himself, then we are certain that the final puzzle will be complete and perfect in all its possible and imaginable dimensions.



ROBERTA MIGALE

The Cutro Scientist

“I am a researcher working at the Francis Crick Institute. I study the morphogenetic processes that lead from the zygote to the formation of a multicellular organism, as well as the cellular and molecular mechanisms through which these events occur. I am particularly interested in understanding the processes that foster the development of the reproductive system, and what happens when this process is non-functional and people develop issues such as infertility. I am passionate about sharing my research interests with the general public and listening to any questions or curiosities they might have.”

In London, people are talking about us once again, and the most important scientific journals in the world are currently reporting on the prestigious award granted to an Italian researcher who carries the vibrant colors of the land of Calabria, and who today works in one of the most exclusive research centers in the United Kingdom.

Her name is Roberta Migale, she is 36 years old, and she originally comes from Cutro, where she attended elementary school, middle school, and then the Filolao scientific high school in Crotone. She is crazy about gelatos that are made only in Italy, and has an insane passion for Subsonica, a famous rock music group formed in Turin in the late 1990s. Degree in Molecular Biology from the University of Padua, Master's in Molecular Biology, then after a brief stint at the Istituto Superiore di Sanità in Rome, a PhD in Clinical Medicine at Imperial College London.

“Currently, I hold the position of Researcher at the Developmental Genetics laboratory led by Professor Robin Lovell-Badge, where my focus is on the genetic mechanisms regulating sex determination, as well as ovarian development and function. The reproductive success of any species depends largely on the correct development and functioning of the gonads (ovaries and testes), and my research is mainly dedicated to the molecular understanding of these organ development processes. I use a combination of transcriptomic and proteomic approaches to address unresolved questions in the field of sex determination and gonad development.”

Today she becomes the Italian “flagbearer” of scientific research in the United Kingdom due to a prestigious award, the SRF Post-Doctoral Award, which was presented to her in Edinburgh during the “Fertility 2024” conference for the research work bearing her name.

“My research focuses on reproductive biology and women's health. During my PhD at Imperial College London, I worked on determining which signals were activated in uterine cells that could induce them to contract, both in the physiological context of full-term labor and in the pathological context of preterm labor. In my current position as a researcher at the Francis Crick Institute, I focus instead on ovarian development and am interested in understanding the molecular mechanisms underlying female infertility, which is often due to defects in the production of healthy eggs in the ovary.”

Roberta, may I ask what kind of family background you come from?

“My mother is a professional nurse, my father is a lawyer, and my sister, after completing her legal studies, won a public competition as an administrative officer at the Ministry of the Environment. My maternal grandparents, both factory workers, were from Veneto, while my paternal grandparents were Calabrian. My paternal grandfather was a furniture merchant and my grandmother took care of a large family of 12 children.”

What kind of childhood did you have in Calabria?

“Very happy, carefree, in close contact with nature, and surrounded by the affection of my family and fellow villagers. My parents always stimulated my curiosity and encouraged my desire to study.”

Do you have any personal memories from that time?

“I cherish many fond memories from my Calabrian years, especially the afternoons spent playing outside near home with my cousins and summer vacations spent by the sea.”

Which schools did you attend and where?

“I attended primary and middle school in Cutro, while for high school I enrolled at the Filolao Scientific High School in Crotone.”

And from high school, which teachers are worth remembering?

“Many left a positive mark on my journey. Prof. Voce was my Italian and Latin teacher. His passion for literature and dedication to teaching were a great source of inspiration; Prof. Cosentino, History and Philosophy teacher, urged us to reason and undoubtedly stimulated my critical thinking; Prof. D’Alfonso, Biology teacher, opened the doors for me to the world of biological science.”

How was your choice of university born?

“In high school I became passionate about biology; it came very easy for me to study this subject because I was so interested in it. I had a fairly precise plan to become a researcher and study something related to human biology that could advance our knowledge. So I enrolled in Molecular Biology at Padua, a university highly renowned for this field.”

Your first position abroad?

“After graduating, I moved to the United Kingdom, where I started a PhD at Imperial College London.”

Your first truly significant experience?

“My doctorate, mainly due to the huge impact it had on my career. I did my PhD at Imperial College London under the supervision of Professors David MacIntyre and Phillip Bennett. The project aimed to study the genetic regulatory networks associated with both premature and full-term activation of uterine contractions during labor. The central question revolved around identifying the genetic triggers for the onset of labor and exploring the possibility of delaying labor by manipulating these signaling pathways. In humans, even a slight delay in the onset of labor could be crucial to allow proper fetal development before birth, making this a critical area of research. Our results revealed the potential to delay inflammation-induced preterm labor by blocking the activation of JNK signaling pathways.”

The research project you are most attached to?

“There isn't one in particular; I am deeply passionate about all the research projects I choose to be involved in.”

Today Roberta Migale is the pride and joy of Italian research in the United Kingdom.

“My main interest, and above all my research work today, is primarily dedicated to the molecular understanding of female fertility. Reproductive success is the single most important event for the survival of any species, and it depends mainly on the proper development and functioning of the gonads. I use a combination of transcriptomic and proteomic approaches to study the genetic regulatory networks that control sex determination and ovarian development.”

Behind her, like all researchers around the world, this very young Calabrian scientist has only immense amounts of work, years of sacrifices and study, long laboratory investigations, and complex readings.

Roberta, has it ever happened to you while traveling around Italy to feel 'ashamed' of being a daughter of Calabria?

“No, never. Belonging to Calabria is an essential part of my identity, and I feel no shame whatsoever about it. In fact, I am grateful for my Calabrian roots. Every place has its unique facets, and I deeply appreciate the cultural and historical identity that Calabria has to offer.”

What advice would you give to a young woman who wants to pursue your career path today?

“I advise pursuing one's passion with determination, taking advantage of study and research opportunities available internationally. The experience of being able to work in different contexts can greatly enrich anyone's professional perspectives and skills.”

What was the true key to your success?

“My passion for scientific research, its rigorous methods, and my absolute dedication. In my profession, you need a lot of patience and a great deal of rigor.”

And what was the most significant difficulty?

“A difficulty that is still present, shared by most male and female researchers, is managing the balance between academic commitments and personal life. That is the real constant challenge.”

In what way has Italian emigration changed?

“I am not an expert in demographics, but I imagine it is now easier to move around given the numerous flight connections and, in general, the globalization that characterizes our times.”

Just to give you an idea of the place where Roberta Migale works today, we searched online for the story of her research institute, which carries a slogan of great impact: “The Crick's mission is discovery without boundaries. We do not limit the direction our research takes. We want to better understand how living things work to help improve the treatment,

diagnosis, and prevention of human diseases and generate economic opportunities for the UK.”

We are talking about an institute with more than 2,000 employees and students who “use their wide-ranging knowledge and expertise to work across disciplines and explore biology at all levels, from molecules to cells to whole organisms.”

“The Crick” is in fact the result of a merger between the MRC’s National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) and CRUK’s London Research Institute (LRI), an institute named after British scientist Francis Crick in recognition of his contribution to understanding the genetic code—the key to understanding how living beings function. Six founding partner organizations: the Medical Research Council (MRC), Cancer Research UK (CRUK), Wellcome, UCL (University College London), Imperial College London, and King’s College London; today the institute boasts more than 100 research groups.

Roberta Migale's team leader is Robin Lovell-Badge, head of the Stem Cell Biology and Developmental Genetics Laboratory, and this is his philosophy: “We are studying how cells make decisions about their fate during embryonic development and in the adult; whether to multiply or not, whether to remain the same or specialize, and what type of cell to become. Animals start life as a single cell: a fertilized egg that grows and multiplies into millions of cells that make up all the tissues and organs of the body. Along the way, cells must decide which actions to take—whether to divide or die, or what to become, such as nerve cells or support cells in the brain. We are particularly interested in stem cells, which correspond to early embryonic cells that have the ability to transform into many different cell types. Our research is revealing detailed information about normal developmental processes. And we are gaining new insights into the role of stem cells in human health and disease, pointing toward potential avenues for future therapies.”

In short, we are at the highest levels of research in the United Kingdom.

It is here that Roberta Migale works, and it is from here today, with her Award, that she tells the rest of the world about the very best of Calabrian traditions. Truly a beautiful success story.

Roberta, what kind of Italy have you encountered around the world?

“A proud Italy, individuals of great capability, happy to be able to fully express their potential and be recognized for their achievements.”



SANDRA MISALE

Leads an International Laboratory

"I have some news, I am thrilled to announce that the Misale lab will open in July at Johns Hopkins Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center in Baltimore! We will work on resistance to therapy in solid tumors and we are hiring. Join us in this journey!"

The protagonist of our story was born in Oppido Mamertina, in the province of Reggio Calabria, but has always lived in Palmi, where she remained until the day she left Palmi for good to enroll at the University of Turin. At 38 years old, she is still a young woman. Yet today, Sandra Misale is a star of American scientific research.

Molecular biologist, researcher, oncologist, geneticist, biotechnologist: she embodies that infinite and complex world revolving around research and the fight against cancer, a world Sandra Misale knows like the back of her hand. At the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC) in New York, they remember her as "First ever." A point of absolute Italian pride.

Here, of course, we are talking about the new frontiers of science and advanced medical research. We are talking above all about absolute excellence, and in the case of this young Italian researcher, we are speaking of a scientist who studies various forms of cancer, including the most aggressive ones, and the direct relationship between the disease and new treatments. Research that, twenty years from now, if we want to be pessimistic, could even earn her one of the most prestigious awards in the world of scientific research.

Today, she lives permanently in the USA. Her family, however, remained in Palmi. Or rather, an important part of her family remained in Palmi.

Dad Michele was a surveyor in the technical office of the municipality of Palmi for a lifetime, and mom Maria Grazia stayed at home to look after the rest of the family. Then there is Claudia, one of her sisters: after graduating in Cosenza and earning a PhD in Turin, she works as a computer scientist at IBM's Watson Institute in Yorktown Heights, a location not far from New York. Luna, her other sister, is a psychiatric rehabilitation technician at the San Luigi Hospital in Orbassano. Her partner lives with her in Baltimore, and at home they have a very young child together, less than three years old, to care for.

The most striking news is that today Sandra Misale is so talented, and the results of her research are so innovative and revolutionary, that the Americans asked her to direct her very own laboratory: the "Misale Lab" at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. It represents the pinnacle of American research, one of the most equipped and sophisticated cancer centers in the world, serving as a benchmark for major university campuses worldwide.

They gave her carte blanche because, in her case more than ever, the lives of millions of cancer patients are at stake.

"Yes, it is true, I confess: it makes a huge impression on me to think that the oncology department of one of the major American hospitals gave me this task, and that, as happens

in the United States, the name of the laboratory coincides with the surname of its founder. But what I know is that I will give it my all to repay the trust placed in me.”

How do you run such an advanced laboratory?

“More than half of our funds are federal. The rest comes from private companies. In the United States, the degree of freedom is the same regardless of the source of funding. The difference is that, for projects funded by federal budgets, you have to compete with other centers. Relationships with private groups, on the other hand, can be more direct. But the working methodologies, procedures, and reporting requirements are identical.”

Sought after and pursued by major European newspapers to better understand how an advanced American research laboratory can bear the name of an Italian researcher, Sandra Misale does not shy away from the fundamental question. In an interview with *Il Sole 24 Ore*, she explains her new mission:

“My laboratory will follow the guidelines of my research: personalized medicine and molecularly targeted therapies. My field is extremely fascinating. The first big question in the background is why the same genetic mutation can produce different types of cancer. The second question is why these different types of cancer respond differently to drugs, which work in some cases and not in others. For a long time I have been working on the KRAS gene. It was discovered forty years ago. It regulates the growth of colon, lung, and pancreatic cancers. For a long time, no one was able to target the KRAS gene with a drug. Ten years ago, a first drug was developed for a certain type of mutation. Initially, the drug worked for lung cancer but not for colon cancer. I found another drug that, in combination with the first, also works for colon cancer. After a certain period, however, this combination loses its effectiveness. Right now, I am preparing another drug mix to give persistence to this effectiveness.”

Her career as a researcher spans the greatest American research centers: first at the IRCC in Turin, an Italian center of excellence, then at the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, and before that at Harvard at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard Medical School in Boston.

Professor Misale, let us set a structure. Shall we start from the beginning of your American adventure? Then, if you like, we can return to your research.

“The beginning of all this is in Calabria. I was born in Oppido Mamertina, but I always lived in Palmi, at least until I was nearly 19, and from Palmi I then set off around the world.”

What kind of family background do you have?

“We are a family of five: my parents, Grazia and Michele, and my sisters, Claudia and Luna. As often happens in Calabria, the extended family is very large. My paternal grandparents, Francesco and Consolata, I carry her name as my middle name, had seven children, two boys and five girls. My maternal grandparents, Salvatore and Angela, had seven children, two girls and five boys. I always liked this symmetry between the two families. And of course, to the many aunts and uncles, you add all the many cousins.”

What kind of childhood do you remember in Calabria?

“I obviously have so many memories of moments spent with my family and with my cousins. It was truly wonderful growing up all together, even with those who, due to moving away, as many of my parents' brothers and sisters live in Germany or Piedmont, I only saw once a year during the summer. Then there was school, which was always a very serious matter for me starting from elementary school.”

Do you have any personal details from that time?

“I remember when I found the best pastime I could ever wish for. One day my father came home with a huge box. Inside was the complete collection of the children's encyclopedia *Once Upon a Time... Life (Esplorando il Corpo Umano)* on VHS tapes. My life changed from that day. I watched only that, and I was completely fascinated by how wonderful and complex our body can be, and how everything we are and do depends on our cells and the molecules they contain. I was 3 or 4 years old, but I remember it as if it were yesterday.”

Which schools did you attend?

“I attended all my schooling in Palmi, from elementary through high school. I attended the experimental linguistic high school because I wanted to study German, a language familiar to me, and because it offered a great curriculum that gave ample room to scientific and classical subjects alongside foreign languages. It seemed very forward looking and oriented toward cultural inclusion.”

From middle school, which teachers do you still remember?

“Definitely Professor Cacciatore and all the other teachers involved in the theater plays, which were a wonderful tradition at our middle school.”

Did you like theater?

“Very much. I loved acting back then. There was a period when I had almost thought of dedicating my future to it. Imagine that during middle school I even won awards two years in a row for my theatrical performances, and it was wonderful sharing those moments with my classmates and teachers at the time.”

An important experience, it seems?

“In hindsight, I can tell you that the things I learned while acting were useful later, many years later, for my professional performances, like conferences and academic seminars. Public speaking is not always easy, so being able to engage your audience while being clear and precise is something you can only learn and perfect by doing theater.”

And from high school, which teachers do you like to remember?

“High school was incredibly important for me. Honestly, all the teachers left something indelible with me. Almost every day I think back to when Professor Rizzo said this phrase to us: 'Everything you do not learn today will be a kick in the behind tomorrow.'”

Professor, I see you have not forgotten that phrase?

“To be completely honest, she did not actually say 'a kick in the behind.' She explicitly used the word 'ass,' but perhaps it is best not to quote her verbatim here.”

What did she teach?

“Italian Literature, and her lessons were masterclasses. Believe me, Professor Rizzo was the epitome of teaching perfection. I do not remember exactly why she changed her tone that day, but it was just for a moment, and when I heard her say that phrase, it struck me deeply.”

May I ask why?

“Because that phrase, so explicit yet so direct, made me reflect on what I needed to do to face my future.”

What do you mean?

“That day I thought and convinced myself that perhaps studying just what was on the syllabus was not enough. Perhaps you needed to do a little extra, not necessarily a lot, but at least a little bit more every day, with consistent dedication.”

Do you still see or talk to your professor?

“Professor Rizzo passed away a few years ago due to cancer. I was not able to say goodbye. It is a shame. I still miss her.”

Professor, how was your choice of university made?

“I had high grades in all subjects. I liked everything and enjoyed connecting different disciplines to get as complete a picture as possible. I took an aptitude test to evaluate which university faculties best suited my characteristics, and diplomatic studies and scientific fields scored the highest.”

Do not tell me you relied strictly on test results?

“Frankly, I already knew what I wanted to do. I had known since I was very little. One day in elementary school, my teacher Alessio explained how academic careers worked, and we counted how many years of study were needed to become a doctor, electrician, engineer, chef, and so on. I was a bit embarrassed to ask my question in front of everyone, so I went up to the desk to ask the teacher directly how many years it took to become a scientist.”

How did that end?

“She replied: ‘A scientist studies for a lifetime.’ I thought that was beautiful, and I replied to my teacher: ‘That is fine, because I love studying anyway.’ It was obvious the choice would fall on something that would lead me into a laboratory. So I chose the Faculty of Biotechnology, specifically intending to specialize in molecular biotechnology.”

Why Turin, so far from your sea?

“Because I did some research at the time, I was actually considering Rome as well. But the Biotechnology faculty in Turin convinced me more, especially because of how it was structured. And my parents liked the idea too, since I would have my aunts and uncles, my father’s brother and sisters, just a few kilometers away. It was a good compromise, do you not think?”

Do you remember the day you left Palmi for university?

“It was the first time I took a train to move far away. I had not turned 19 yet, I remember that very clearly. And I remember my mother weeping uncontrollably.”

Only your mother's tears?

"I also remember a very vivid image from that day that has never left me since: the profile of my dad, mom, my sisters, and everyone who had accompanied me to the station that day, disappearing right after the train took its first turn. It was the first time I was leaving my home in Palmi."

What were your university years like?

"It started terribly. I barely passed the entry tests, and in the first semester, I did not pass a single exam."

How so?

"In all honesty, I do not know exactly what was happening to me, but I had to go through it. The following semester I caught up on everything, and with high grades. When the first 30 arrived, in organic chemistry, what a wonderful feeling! I thought, 'Okay, we are on track now.' I finished my Bachelor's degree strictly on time, and then completed my Master's degree, during which I had so much fun, tons of lab work and intense studying. I graduated with top honors, 110 *cum laude*, alongside my closest friends from those years."

What was your thesis topic?

"I did an experimental thesis in Professor Poli's lab at the Center for Molecular Biotechnology at the University of Turin. We studied a protein that could be aberrantly activated, causing normal cells to transform into tumor cells."

Your first position?

"Even though it is not strictly considered a position, my PhD felt that way to me. A few months after graduating, in January 2010, I began my PhD in Molecular Medicine at the University of Turin, working full time in Professor Alberto Bardelli's laboratory at what was then the IRCC in Candiolo."

An absolute center of excellence, not only in Italy?

"Yes, that is true. I was truly very happy. Shortly before graduating, I knew I wanted to start a PhD, but I did not know where. Things changed when Professor Bardelli was assigned as the reviewer for my thesis defense. We had many discussions, and in the end, he suggested I apply for the competition to join his research group for a PhD. I won the competition, and that moment was the first major milestone and true big start of my career."

And your first truly significant professional experience?

"My PhD, without a doubt. That experience taught me every aspect of the responsibilities tied to my kind of work. It was the experience that truly made me realize what I wanted to do when I grew up."

Which research or study are you most attached to?

"It is hard to answer. Every study I have carried out involves a lot of hard work and many overcome challenges. Many of my projects are evolutions of previous ones, so rather than a single study, I see the continuity of research to which every researcher tries to add a new piece each time."

I sense a lot of pride in you?

“Let us put it this way: I am quite thrilled about my work on the pharmacological blockade of this mutated protein that causes many forms of cancer. The name of this protein is KRAS, and it was discovered about 40 years ago, 30 of which were spent considering it impossible to target pharmacologically.”

Tell me that is no longer the case?

“I can tell you that in the last 10 years, this barrier has been overcome, and today we have drugs targeting certain forms of this mutated protein. I contributed to understanding how to make these new drugs work better, especially in certain tumors where higher efficacy was expected. And this is the type of research I am most passionate about. These are the challenges that someone considers impossible, until someone else proves they are not.”

How was your American adventure born?

“During my PhD, I had the opportunity to explore what it was like to do science abroad, particularly in the United States. Partly indirectly, through the stories of my boss, Bardelli, who did his postdoc at Johns Hopkins in the building right next to where I work now, but above all thanks to trips and attending international conferences. I started meeting current and past colleagues and collaborators, and I began organizing collaborations for my projects. From there, I started developing a long term plan.”

Could you put that in simpler terms?

“Initially it was more of a wish than an actionable plan. The underlying goal was to learn specific techniques that could enrich what I had already absorbed during my PhD years. I wanted to utilize the resources that certain laboratories abroad could offer, so I reached out. I received two offers from the USA and one from the UK, and in the end, I chose Boston.”

I see you did not stop there?

“After Boston came New York, and now Baltimore. In eight years, I have moved across three states, quite an adventure, still ongoing! Work in progress.”

Professor, how do you reconcile your international role with the ties you still maintain in Calabria?

“Personally, these two spheres are not in conflict. My ties in Calabria are with my family. Outside that sphere, I keep in touch with local cultural associations, which gives me great pleasure. Naturally, I hope to dedicate more time to them in the future, even if only for scientific outreach, especially for younger people.”

Has it ever happened to you while traveling around the world to feel 'ashamed' of being a daughter of Calabria?

“No, to be honest, I have never felt ashamed. Often, unfortunately, I have felt very, very sorry about the things that happen and get reported in foreign newspapers. But shame, no, never. I feel no shame because injustice, bad people, and malice exist everywhere, and heaven forbid we consider them defining traits of the good people of Calabria.”

What advice would you give to a young woman wanting to pursue your career today?

“I believe that for a woman, devoting herself to study and science is something completely natural. We have a strong inclination to analyze and organize, and we are very collaborative because we have a great overview of the big picture. I am fortunate to interact and work with wonderful female scientists whom I admire deeply and learn from every day. Unfortunately, I still see some inequality and discrimination. Change is happening, but we have not eliminated the differences yet. For me, the most important aspect is striving to normalize the concept.”

In what sense do you mean that?

“When a female scientist publishes a scientific study and it gets covered by the media, it is often emphasized that she is also a mother. This never happens when it is a male researcher. It is as if in the scientific world, mothers were more 'mothers' than fathers are 'fathers,' which makes little sense. Let us start using names and academic titles instead, and stop bundling together concepts that are not necessarily connected or dependent on one another. It is vital to stay humble, and it helps immensely to challenge yourself rather than look for shortcuts. Another important thing is to listen to advice from those who have walked the path before you, seek out someone who can act as a mentor.”

Do you pay a high personal price?

“Private life sometimes suffers, but you have to understand what is truly important and what is not. From there, you build your path. In most cases, one thing does not exclude another, and balancing the different spheres of life is possible through compromise and the support of those who truly love you.”

What was the real key to your success?

“Probably being able to adapt and evolve over time, depending on the situation. I have goals, and I try to achieve them by organizing myself in the best possible way, but it is not always easy. So it is fine to stop for a moment and reorganize. That kind of flexibility is crucial in our field.”

Do you consider Baltimore a temporary destination or have you chosen it as your permanent home?

“I hope to spend some time here, because it will mean I am doing my job well and enjoying it. But never say never. Maybe one day we will return to Europe or Italy. We do not make long term plans; life is too much of a continuous evolution for that.”

How many times a year do you manage to return to Palmi?

“Like everyone in my situation, I try to go back at least once a year, and sometimes I am lucky because the conferences I attend are in Italy, so I get to see my family an extra time. I am also thrilled when my parents come here to the US. One of my sisters also lives near New York, so we manage to enjoy family time here fairly often.”

One final question: if I say "Varia", what is your response?

“That I will ask my mother to send me the photo from many years ago when I participated in the Varia as an 'angioletto', I think it was 1996. I cherish a very fond memory of that day: seeing behind the scenes and enjoying the best view, especially when at the end of the procession it opens up onto the sea. I practically asked to be the last one to get down! I feel our tradition deeply. Unfortunately, I am missing it this year because I

have to return to work, but I will not miss the next one, especially because I really want to share it with my son.



CARLA MOROGALLO

Ambassador of Italian Art in the World

President Stefano Boeri, an architect, urban planner, architectural theorist, and globally recognized academic, has chosen a woman. Her name is Carla Morogallo. She was born in Gioia Tauro in 1980 and spent her entire childhood in Calabria. Then came the big leap. Hers is the life of a manager with a very high institutional and academic profile, entirely dedicated to art. A multifaceted figure, an eclectic woman, an intellectual of great culture with a strong temperament and the charisma of Mediterranean women, both instinctive and reflective, stubborn and at times exceedingly tender, a mother, a wife, and today the director general of one of Italy's most famous cultural institutions, still deeply in love with the Calabrian sea yet perfectly integrated into the rhythm of her Milan, where every day she interacts with the major figures of the art world. Ever smiling, constantly available, a daughter of art in every sense because she is the daughter of a famous artist, her father Mimmo Morogallo, who captured the magic of the Mediterranean on his canvases across every corner of the world, she arrived at the Triennale almost as a game while still a young girl, and today she knows every corner and every piece of this extraordinary mosaic of Italian art and beauty in the world. A heavy legacy, earned on merit following an international selection process in which she came out absolute first. But it could not have been otherwise. Having arrived at the Triennale for a postgraduate internship, making thousands of photocopies every day, she ultimately won the heart of the great planet that had just welcomed her. Deeply in love with her profession and her role, today Carla Morogallo is an important part of Made in Italy of which Greater Milan is continually proud.

"I am truly happy and honored by this new role within an institution where I grew professionally and which, above all, represents for me a space of discovery and reflection on our present. In line with the public service vocation that characterizes Triennale, my commitment will focus on consolidating our openness to the city, fostering dialogue with institutions, partners, and audiences, with a view to becoming increasingly inclusive and accessible. My work over the coming years will focus in particular on two priorities identified by the Board of Directors: initiating an organizational innovation process and enhancing human resources, as well as developing new strategic projects for the institution on both a national and international scale. I thank President Boeri and the entire Board of Directors for the trust and support they have shown me."

Telling Carla Morogallo's story inevitably means telling the story of the charm and solemnity of Triennale Milano. We are talking about an Italian institution known worldwide, which has deeply marked the life and history of art, not only in Italy and Europe, but also internationally. Since 1923, Triennale Milano has been one of the most important cultural institutions internationally, capable of capturing the complexity of the contemporary world through a plurality of languages: design, architecture, visual, scenic, and performing arts. Its purpose, as stated in the founding proclamation, has always been to expand and innovate individual ways of thinking, bringing experiences of different cultures and languages into a single place and time.

In short, an extraordinary journey that has marked the cultural life of our country. Those who know this reality well remind us that the desire to affirm the unity of the arts was already evident in the 5th Triennale of 1933, with mural paintings by great artists such as De Chirico, Sironi, Campigli, and Carrà. This intense relationship between Triennale Milano and artists developed further over subsequent decades with exhibitions of works by Fontana, Baj, Martini, Pomodoro, De Chirico, Burri, and more recently Merz, Paolini, and Pistoletto. It is clear that we are at the very pinnacle of national artistic and cultural achievement.

Well, as of today Triennale Milano has a new Director General, and the choice strongly advocated by its President, architect Stefano Boeri, is this young female manager of Calabrian origin who over all these years in Milan has become more Milanese than the Madonnina on top of the Duomo.

Doctor, first of all, thank you for finding time for us. Shall we start from the beginning? “Let us try. Where would you like me to start? I was born in Taurianova, but in reality I have always lived in Gioia Tauro, more precisely in a neighborhood right by the sea. In the lighthearted distinction between the city center and the marina, I definitely feel I belong to the latter.”

What kind of family background do you have?

“A solid, loving family. My parents were always present in my life. They followed, supported, and accompanied my every choice, my every desire. They supported and guided me from beginning to end, leaving me free to pursue my passions. Today mom and dad are extraordinary grandparents, always available. They live in Milan as well, and thanks to their physical presence here in Milan and their immense support, my daughters grew up just as I did when I was small and at their age.”

How wonderful what you are telling me.

“More than wonderful, I would say important. Fundamental and essential, because this allowed me to reconcile my daily work commitments with my role as a mother at home and in the family. At this stage of my life, even though it is not as simple as it might seem, I try to give back to them, at least in part, what they gave me. I am also fortunate to have two extraordinary older brothers, which gave me great security. How can I put it? With them at home and around, I always felt protected, and despite the age difference, even as a young girl I was always careful to guard their secrets. And I always shared mine with them. There were never any secrets between us, and that further strengthened our bond. We were always accomplices. Unfortunately, our serenity was shattered the day my older brother passed away prematurely.”

I did not know about this, I imagine it was a great sorrow?

“Death is always a terrible thing, and it is even more so when you do not expect it and when it touches the things dearest to your life. I confess to you that I cannot say I have accepted this loss. Perhaps I have never processed it as I should have, but I managed in some way to live with it. But it was truly hard, a terrible chapter in our family life.”

How much did your grandparents count in your upbringing?

“A great deal. My maternal grandparents were important figures during my childhood; their house was my second home. Unfortunately, I never knew my paternal grandparents, but over the years I listened to many stories about their lives, and thanks to my mother, this allowed me to build a picture of their lives.”

What was your childhood like in Calabria?

“Very peaceful. I was a quiet and reflective child, sometimes even solitary.”

Do you have any personal memories from that time?

“So many memories. The first thing that comes to mind is our summers at the seaside with my grandfather and my cousins, the Christmas holidays with our home always open to friends and relatives. And then the pier in Gioia Tauro, my father Mimmo constantly telling me stories of his childhood, the arguments between my brothers and their laughter, the complicity, the aroma of my mother's cooking, her reading to me, the smell of linseed oil on canvases. And then a dear aunt who lived with us at home and adored me. I could go on at length about my memories. I am not attached to material things; I use them instrumentally while respecting them, but memories, whether good or bad, are part of me. When needed, and in life that happens often, I open my secret drawer and pull them out. Because all of this has a cathartic meaning for me.”

What memories do you have of the schools you attended in Gioia Tauro?

“Equally beautiful and important. I attended Eugenio Montale elementary school and Pentimalli middle school in Gioia Tauro. After middle school, I went to the Pizi Classical High School in Palmi.”

Which middle school teachers do you still carry in your heart?

“I remember my elementary school teacher, Maestra Gemma, sweet and strict at the same time. In middle school, I remember my Italian teacher for her gentle demeanor. She never lost her patience.”

And from high school, which teachers are worth remembering?

“It is incredible, but my philosophy professor interpreted certain passages of the Iliad and the Odyssey in a sublime manner, inviting us to read them with the same involvement he showed, even translating them into dialect. I still have a very vivid memory of the clash between Achilles and Agamemnon over Briseis.”

Don't tell me he translated that into dialect too?

“Absolutely yes, strictly all in Calabrian dialect.”

A top of the class resume, as is always the case when scaling the most complex peaks of the Milanese system. Carla Morogallo earned her degree in Cultural Heritage from the University of Pisa in 2005, and in that same year began her professional journey at Triennale Milano in the Cultural Initiatives office. She started as a simple intern, and today those who know her well describe her as one of the toughest personalities in Italian art. From the moment she joined Triennale, Carla Morogallo held numerous different roles within the institution over the years, taking on steadily increasing responsibilities and managerial functions. In January 2019, she became Operational Director, assuming the organizational and administrative management of Triennale Milano and contributing to the definition of

its strategic and programmatic direction. Previously, from 2017 to 2019, she held the position of Head of Institutional Affairs, supervising the activities and development of general, legal, and institutional affairs, human resources, the technical area, and the archives and library. Day after day, Carla learned to know the Triennale in every detail. She knows everything about everyone, knows the staff individually along with their strengths and flaws, but her affable and warm character transformed the team of the sacred temple in which she operates into a true family. In such cases, you never know whether it is the first or second family of your life, given how much time you dedicate to your work.

Director, do you still have an active relationship with your hometown?

"I visit during the summer for a few weeks, but Gioia Tauro is always present in my life. Do not forget that part of my family still lives in Calabria."

I imagine you also left old friends in Calabria?

"Several friends, some met in school like Antonio, who is also from the marina neighborhood of Gioia Tauro. He was my desk mate in high school, and I owe him the role of mediator at the beginning of the relationship between my husband and me. The three of us were classmates in high school."

And your university years?

"Study and fun together. I remember the curiosity toward the world and the feeling that it was the start of something new and unknown. During those years, which required great commitment and brought great tension, I met extraordinary people who remain a genuine part of my life today."

Any names?

"Antonella, Anna, Peppe, Francesca, Giancola. They are dear friends still today. Unfortunately we see each other too rarely, but our bond is just as intense. And the most important achievement of that period was realizing I had found my life partner in Nino."

How was your choice of university degree born?

"Frankly, I was very interested in a humanities degree, and together with a high school classmate, the choice ultimately fell on a field and faculty that seemed almost intangible at the time: Conservation of Cultural Heritage at the University of Pisa. It was a traditional degree program under the old system, but it allowed me to read fundamental texts that captivated me: Settis, Gombrich, Panofsky, Argan, Zevi. Every now and then I pick them up again with a touch of nostalgia."

If it were not a term already far too overused, and often used in less than flattering ways (which is certainly not our case here), we would say that Carla Morogallo today is the true czarina of the Triennale Palace. Elegant, refined, restrained, austere, almost solemn in the way she moves through her temple, Carla Morogallo is currently working on the program for the upcoming International Exhibition of the Triennale, which will bring the elite of world culture and art to Milan. Material and subject matter that Carla knows like the back of her hand. From 2012 to 2017, as Head of Institutional Projects, she developed collaborations and partnerships on both national and international scales, in addition to drafting the first cultural mediation project between Triennale Milano and the city's universities, making her an indispensable benchmark for academia across Italy. All of this

seemed like an almost impossible challenge at the time, but Carla Morogallo made it workable and immediate, a success that today bears her name alone.

But in her professional and institutional life there is even more. From 2007 to 2012 Carla worked at the Triennale Design Museum, coordinating cultural production and international initiatives, projecting this young Calabrian woman into the grand arena of international art. Who could have ever imagined it? Then, at the beginning of 2022, she was invited by the Ministry of Education to join the Commission for drafting guidelines for new schools funded under the PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan). A strategic role on which the Draghi Government staked much of its future credibility, seeing Carla Morogallo once again on the front lines and more determined than ever. But only a seasoned manager with her natural talents can truly understand how to allocate and direct the funds Europe will provide in coming years for the country's cultural growth.

If one looks into her private life and her childhood in Calabria, a significant detail emerges: the new Director General of Triennale Milano can be considered a true daughter of art, owing to her prominent father, Mimmo Morogallo, one of the great Southern impressionists of recent times, whose canvases and works are now found all across the globe. Mimmo Morogallo is also one of the few contemporary artists widely known across almost every US state due to continuous contact over the past 50 years with Italian communities abroad, particularly through the American MIAF in his official and prestigious capacity as President of the "Calabriamerica" Award: a symbolic yet iconic prize that the artist from Gioia Tauro awarded annually to Italian excellence worldwide. Even as a child, Carla accompanied her father to numerous art exhibitions that eventually made Mimmo Morogallo famous widespread. A daughter of art, therefore, but naturally much more than that.

Director, may I ask how your love for the art world was born? Is it true what they say here at the Triennale, that your father and his painting were responsible for this?

"I followed my father, an artist, from a very young age. I attended his exhibitions and watched the preparations that filled his days. I remember that what surprised me most was the birth process of the artworks taking shape on the easels at home. In the evening I would go into his studio and the canvas was pure white; the next morning I would return and discover that the white canvas had taken on different shapes and colors: in short, it had become a work of art. Believe me, I have always been fascinated by this miracle. An expressive form, whether visual, musical, or poetic, when able to immediately convey an emotion, creates well being for both creator and viewer. I looked at my father's paintings and found in his canvases, in the way he depicted our sea and our sunsets, a serenity that might otherwise be missing."

How did you arrive at Triennale Milano?

"I graduated in February 2005, and by late March I was welcomed as an intern. I immediately felt the charm of Triennale."

I imagine it was quite an emotional experience for a young woman passionate about art?

"You know something? The monumental lobby of the Triennale intimidated me immensely. It did not allow me to immediately see the beating heart of the activity taking

shape inside. I do not know quite how to explain it, but it was like a backdrop waiting to be discovered.”

One cannot deny the grandeur of a place like this?

“It is a beautiful building inside Sempione Park, an austere expression of rationalist architecture where many functions found a home and still do today: a permanent museum dedicated to design, exhibition spaces, a theater, a garden, two cafes, a bookshop, a library, and a rooftop restaurant with a breathtaking panoramic view over Milan. My early days were difficult; I often felt I did not understand everything, but I felt a strong desire to contribute in my small way, and this fascination pushed me to stay and carry out various roles with passion and drive.”

Your first experience abroad?

“A trip to New York with my parents, followed by two months in Dublin for study purposes: a challenging but very formative experience.”

Today Carla Morogallo is a member of the Board of Directors of Federculture, but those who know her well anticipate even more prestigious successes for her in the future. There is a line that catches us by surprise, yet speaks volumes about the role this woman is destined to play in the coming years. On the day I call her on the phone at Triennale, the receptionist asks if I have an appointment with her. I reply that I have never spoken with her before. In a very polite manner, he advises me to call back, but not before receiving confirmation from her, repeating to me: because believe me, I understand the Director's schedule is already completely booked until September.

The true official consecration of Carla Morogallo in her new role as Director General of Triennale comes solemnly from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was a Monday like any other, May 30th, in the International Conference Room at the Farnesina, where Minister Luigi Di Maio presided over the official presentation ceremony for the 23rd International Exhibition of Triennale Milano. The exhibition, titled "Unknown Unknowns. An Introduction to Mysteries", was scheduled in Milan from July 15 to December 11, 2022. A transnational event on which Italy and the Mario Draghi Government placed great emphasis, not least because the International Exhibition of Triennale Milano, celebrating its centenary in 2023, is one of the world's most significant events dedicated to design and architecture, organized by Triennale in collaboration with the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

The setting was truly solemn. Alongside the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Luigi Di Maio were Dimitri S. Kerkentzes, Secretary General of the Bureau International des Expositions (BIE), Stefano Boeri, President of Triennale Milano, Ersilia Vaudo and Francis Kéré, curators of the 23rd International Exhibition, Cecilia Piccioni, Central Director of the Directorate General for Country Promotion, and Carla Morogallo herself, the new Director General of Triennale Milano, the woman carrying the full weight of the organizational machine. Imagine an aircraft carrier fully armed and ready to deploy anywhere in the world, because that is what we are talking about.

Director, excuse me, but let me ask: if one day you were offered an important job, would you return to Calabria today?

"I am deeply grateful for the opportunity Triennale has offered me. I took on this commitment with full awareness and would never put the institution in difficulty by leaving now. Today I could not accept. The future is unpredictable, never say never, and my love for Calabria is unquestionable. From a professional standpoint I am very cautious with choices. I have gained experience and awareness, and I never jump into things lightly because I take the commitments I assume very seriously."

Everyone in life has had a master: who was yours?

"Depending on the period of my life, I have had several. My benchmarks are in music, philosophy, and politics. Today I look to Mario Draghi as an exemplary model."

Has it ever happened to you while traveling around the world to feel 'ashamed' of being a daughter of Calabria?

"I have never felt shame for my origins. I have felt shame for certain attitudes stemming from cultural backwardness and ignorance. I feel sorrow when facing forms of violence, arrogance, and illegality presented as solutions to the social problems of the South. I am proud to be Calabrian. Calabria is full of deserving professionals and extraordinary realities. The true richness lies in these elements. Work needs to be done to bring out the beauty and quality at the expense of ugliness, which unfortunately remains rooted, though not only in Calabria. Let us become aware of our potential and contribute actively to development; paternalism puts us in a position where we are considered inadequate. I cheer in Calabrian and I get angry in Calabrian. I often use Calabrian metaphors and sayings, even with Triennale President Stefano Boeri, who responds in kind with versatility without batting an eye."

What advice would you give to a young woman wanting to pursue your path today?

"Definitely to inform and educate herself to understand which of the many possibilities best aligns with her inclinations. Whatever the field, I believe determination and competence, combined with a positive and curious approach toward opportunities, always pay off. Very often I hear phrases like 'it is not my responsibility', 'I cannot do it', or 'there is a problem'. These are phrases I have rarely uttered, if ever. I believe competence is acquired and there are very few things that truly cannot be done; a solution can always be found."

What was the weapon of your success?

"In the early years, it was certainly availability, the desire to learn, prompt execution of duties, and critical thinking. In recent years, it has been defining development strategies, relational capability, and resolving complex management issues reflecting the intricate nature of Triennale. In general, I believe my approach to executive management as an authoritative reference, to be listened to rather than feared, was key. In any case, success must still be proven through the work awaiting me over the next four years."

The achievement you value most?

"Nino, and then my daughters, Sveva and Bianca. The love and respect binding my husband and me is a certainty making every difficulty surmountable. We still support each other today, perhaps even more than before, as we have always done throughout our journey together, because we see things through the same lens while respecting each other's autonomy. From a professional standpoint, my greatest achievement is undoubtedly my

recent appointment at Triennale. Reaching this milestone is a motivation to prove every day that I am up to the task and to constantly do better.”

Future plans?

“Triennale inaugurates the 23rd International Exhibition on July 15th, one of the most prominent cultural events on the Italian and international scene. My task is to lead the institution as effectively as possible toward this important event. By the end of the year, I would like to present a multi year strategic plan defined with the presidency and scientific committee of Triennale, clarifying our mission and institutional goals. Clarity of purpose and taking responsibility are essential principles for me.”

I gather no Calabria this year?

“I fear not, I do not know yet, but there is so much to do here. I will make it up to my old friends though. I hope to find a free weekend to return to my old pier in Gioia Tauro. You know how it is in our parts: first love is never forgotten, and the sea viewed from the pier was truly the first love of my life. Wonderful Calabrian land.”



MARA PANAJIA

My Life Around the World

Mara Panajia, General Manager of Henkel Italy, is one of the 100 successful women selected by Forbes for 2021.

Every year, Forbes rankings of successful women tell the story of "female power" in all its forms. They are female managers who, in the judgment of Forbes, represent Made in Italy around the world better than any other product in the world could. 100 excellent women, extraordinary protagonists in the world of international industry and marketing.

Among these 100 "excellent" women today is also Mara Panajia, General Manager of Henkel Italy, with a background spent around the world and with Calabria in her heart. Almost an icon. In this ranking of international achievements branded "Forbes 2021," which in recent hours has already traveled around the world, Mara Panajia is in great company. Alongside her and following her on the list are female scientists, economists, managers of varied experience, athletes, entrepreneurs, journalists, actresses, and top tier intellectuals: women leading multi million dollar multinationals, founders of innovative companies, hosts of flagship television shows, and authors of essay dossiers and novels that have won over thousands of people worldwide.

- How does the General Manager of Henkel Italy experience such a prestigious designation?

"It is an immense honor to be included and to find my name and my story among the 100 successful Italian women selected by Forbes for 2021. The selection includes female scientists, athletes, managers, and entrepreneurs of national and international renown. They are 100 women who lead their teams to success with tenacity, ingenuity, and expertise."

- But behind so much success, how much effort and work is there in reality?

"You see, success is never the result of the work or effort of a single individual. Alone, you get nowhere. The success I have been able to achieve is solely due to my team, the Henkel team, to whom I dedicate this milestone today. It is to my team that I say thank you today for the commitment and passion that each of them, that all of us together, invest every day to make our company ever more competitive and successful."

Behind the Forbes selection lies the personal story of a Calabrian girl, born in Calabria and later raised in Milan.

"At ten years old," she relates, "I was reading shampoo and cookie labels, looking for commercials when everyone else skipped them. I already had it in my mind that I wanted to do something like that, even though I did not know if such a job existed or what one had to study to do it."

Martone is the village of her origins, the land of her parents and mother, located in the heart of Locride, while Reggio Calabria is the city of her studies and her first true friendships. After her high school years at the Tommaso Campanella school in Reggio Calabria, Mara finally arrives in Milan, where within a few years she instantly becomes a "rising star."

Radiant, intelligent, determined, stubborn, highly skilled, full of life, with a fascinating, warm, intriguing personality, Mediterranean from head to toe, at times striking, though this matters very little to her professional growth. On May 23rd of this year, the daily newspaper La Repubblica officially crowned her the "national queen of marketing" in an article by Patrizia Capua titled "The Manager Who Dreamed of Becoming an Engineer and Made It Big in Marketing." Even more telling is the summary anticipating her story:

"Women in business. From Calabria to Bocconi, Mara Panajia turned around the fortunes of Henkel Italy: after working abroad, she returned to our country in 2018. Since then, even during the pandemic, she has increased revenue and market share for the group."

Mara Panajia, then. Let us start from here. After earning a brilliant degree in Business Administration with a concentration in marketing at Bocconi University in Milan, Mara Panajia, Calabrian by birth and Milanese by adoption, began her career at Danone, working there for five years from 1995 to 2000 in management control and subsequently in marketing. She arrived at Henkel in 2000 as Brand Manager for the Local Marketing unit of Laundry Care, later becoming Marketing Manager and Marketing Director for Laundry Care, positions she held for seven years. It was during this period that Mara Panajia laid the groundwork for her advancement within the company. She then became Marketing Director for Laundry and Home Care Italy, Greece, and Cyprus, a role she held for four years from 2008 to 2012, and subsequently moved to the sales division in Italy, where she remained until March 2014.

"The product to which I am particularly attached," she relates, "is Dixan. It always makes me laugh because when I was hired I used to say Dìxan, that is how we say it in Calabria. Instead, they corrected me right away. I am fond of it partly because it was the first brand I worked on, and partly because it was the brand from my childhood. The Dixan tub was always at my grandparents' house in the summer; so much so that I remember my cousin from Rome and I would meet there during summer vacations, pick snails in the garden, and put them inside the tub. There is this special bond with Dixan, which is the quintessential Henkel product, even more famous than Henkel itself. The product I probably cannot live without is Pril, the dishwasher detergent. I did not create it myself, as I joined the company right when it was launched, but I participated in the growth of the product, which today has become our second biggest brand."

One success after another, an international achievement that Mara Panajia had built early on at Bocconi in Milan through relentless years of study and dedication, without ever a break, a vacation, or a real distraction, never taking anything for granted, proving herself in every respect to be a true woman of the South: strong willed yet present, determined and visionary at once, capable of dreaming even during the most difficult moments for a global market in systemic crisis. All of this naturally makes her one of the key pillars of her company.

It is worth recalling that Mara Panajia works for Henkel, and today Henkel is a company operating globally with a well balanced and diversified portfolio, a multinational that, with

its three divisions, holds leadership positions in both the industrial and consumer goods sectors thanks to strong brands, innovation, and technology. Above all, we are talking about a company founded in 1876. Today Henkel boasts over 140 years of success, and Henkel preferred shares are listed on the German DAX stock index. We are also talking primarily about a company that today employs nearly 53,000 people worldwide and holds top positions in many international sustainability rankings and ratings, reporting a declared 2020 revenue of 19.3 billion euros and an operating profit of 2.6 billion euros, adjusted for extraordinary charges, income, and restructuring expenses.

This is the general atmosphere that Mara Panajia experiences over these years. As one might say, this is the environment in which this former Calabrian girl grows, matures, and becomes an adult.

In 2014, her big opportunity arrives. Mara leaves Milan and moves to Henkel's German headquarters in Düsseldorf, where she takes on the role of Corporate Vice President of International Marketing. It does not get bigger than that.

However, those five years bring extremely hard work, engagements around the world, unthinkable relationships of the highest international caliber, and meetings that mold her into a complete and highly authoritative manager, respected, appreciated, and envied by major competing industrial groups. But such is the grand game of economics and the market.

During those years, Mara lives divided between work in Germany and her husband and children who remained in Italy, an experience, she acknowledges, that she would treasure years later and in the role she holds today as head of Diversity and Inclusion policies for Henkel Global.

In a recent interview given to Marianna Grazi for Noi di Luce, Mara Panajia recalls that period in this way: "I am sorry to say that, in my opinion, the obstacles are cultural rather than objective and material. During my five years in Germany I was heavily judged; paradoxically, I was looked down upon by women who asked me 'How can you leave two young children in Italy? How can you leave your husband?'. Without knowing that behind it was incredible organization and harmony as a couple. I spent the weekends grocery shopping and preparing meals for them for the week so my husband would not have any issues. Because he works too, and every morning he took the kids to school, returned home, took his motorcycle, and went to the office. It was demanding, but we made it work."

The account Mara Panajia gives of that delicate yet strategic phase of her life as both a mother and a manager is incredibly touching.

"Being a mother is difficult. I realize that in the end there are things I had to give up, so to speak. For example, often when I returned to Italy, I was struck by the bond the kids shared with my husband, and I wondered if I was excluded from it. Of course that was not the case, a mother is always a mother. But I would say that if you want to do both well, it is very, very difficult. In my role as General Manager, I put a lot of myself and my character into it; I am a person who cannot remain detached and who cannot compartmentalize, in the sense of saying 'okay, the day is over, now I am no longer General Manager and I start being a mother.' In the end, the two roles blend together quite a bit anyway."

In 2019, her return to Italy finally came, taking charge of the Laundry and Home Care division at Henkel in the position of General Manager, which she still holds today.

- Mara Panajia, how do you remember today the day you first arrived in Milan dealing with the typical problems of every university freshman?

"I started with great enthusiasm and perhaps a bit of recklessness. I immediately fell in love with this city. Milan welcomed me and never judged me. After many years, I consider it my city. It is here in Milan that I became an adult, started working, met my husband, and had my children. Like me, Milan has grown and evolved, suffered and gone through difficult times, but it came out stronger than before, and above all, perhaps the most beautiful thing, without ever losing its identity."

- When was the last time you returned home to Calabria?

"At the beginning of this month, July 2021. I decided all of a sudden. A few days earlier, while working, I felt the urge to see my sister and brother in law, a few aunts, cousins, and friends. I called my sister and, as soon as I hung up, I bought plane tickets for myself and my daughter. I am deeply attached to my roots. I travel the world for work and pleasure, but the only place that truly moves me to tears is Reggio."

- What do you tell your children about your land of origin?

"I tell Andrea and Emma that Calabria is a wonderful land, but rugged and full of contrasts. As much as possible, we try to go down for at least a week every summer, though in recent years I have not always succeeded. I must say they are often the ones asking me to go or asking me to tell stories from the past. I also try to teach them a few dialect words, despite my limited knowledge, but for them, being half Italian and half French, it is not so simple..."

- Mara Panajia, what family background do you come from?

"My father was an executive at the Calabria Region, and my mother was an elementary school teacher. Unfortunately, both passed away prematurely: my father when I was about to finish university, and my mother exactly ten years ago. They were two incredible people, far ahead in their vision and pioneers in certain ways. They traveled, visiting Europe, Russia, and the United States at a time when traveling abroad was not so common."

- How much did your father influence your final decision to enroll at Bocconi in Milan?

"More than I imagined at first. My father was an extremely cultured man who spoke English and French, with enviable ethics and integrity, yet he was very modest and not overly ambitious. He was the one who suggested I go to Bocconi; I think it was a way of projecting his ambitions onto me. Unfortunately, I did not have the satisfaction of showing him how far I have come. He never met my husband, who is French, even though he adored France and considered Paris the most beautiful city in the world. Sometimes, like right now, I get emotional thinking about how proud he would have been of me, and how much he would have enjoyed chatting with my husband and my children, especially Andrea, who resembles him so much, particularly since he would have loved to have a son."

- And your mother?

"My mother had the chance to see me professionally fulfilled, to meet my husband, my son, and to see my daughter Emma born, but she passed away when the little one was just over six months old. I do not think I ever truly recovered from my mother's death. My mother was a lady, always impeccable and elegant. She put on makeup and dressed nicely even just

to stay at home, which I do not do at all. She was an open woman, a good listener who held many secrets and was present in many people's lives. When people tell me I look like her, it is a great honor for me. It was thanks to her that I decided to do something more and give a turning point to my career, which I already considered successful but thought had reached its peak. I challenged myself again, took risks, and achieved results I never thought I could even try to reach. That is why she is always in my thoughts and I mention her in every interview. I once heard in a TED talk that a mother is our first coach because she sees our talents and pushes us to take the leap. I completely agree with that thought."

- There is no public or private moment where you do not talk about your family as a truly special family...

"My son Andrea often teases me because I taught him the meaning of the word 'breadwinner' very well, which means the person who brings home the bacon. In my family, both my husband and I work, but we both try to do a lot at home too. A fundamental role is also played by the nanny who helps us out, especially during this period of remote work. Let us say that we both cook. My husband focuses a lot on French dishes, but it must be said that he is also becoming great at Italian cuisine. We both do the grocery shopping. I really enjoy shopping for the kids, while he sometimes helps them more with homework since they attend the French school. We like doing things together, contributing to household responsibilities and participating in our children's lives. That is all."

- I know you also have a wonderful relationship with your sister?

"She is my older sister, Lucia, who lives in Reggio. I have always been extremely close to her, and she has always been a central figure in my life. Over the years our relationship has evolved, but since our mother passed away, we have grown even closer. Not a day goes by without us talking, even if just via WhatsApp. We are very close, and so are our families. I adore my nieces, and it is wonderful that they also come to me for advice and conversation."

- Mara, who were your childhood friends?

"My high school classmates, the friends from the Candelora scout group, and my summer friends by the sea when I went to my mother's village in Martone."

- Have you seen them since?

"Of course. With many of them, we see each other whenever possible, call each other on birthdays, and text each other. They are lifelong friends; we shared so much, I could never lose touch with them."

- I imagine you still remember your favorite teacher?

"I have three whom I remember fondly, for different reasons: Rita Monteleone, my elementary school teacher at Pio X, and two high school professors at the Tommaso Campanella classical high school: Professor Sergi for Latin and Greek, who made me fall in love with Greek, and Professor Palamara for Mathematics, who guided me with kindness and professionalism through my final school exams. All from Reggio, all women."

A highly successful female manager across all possible latitudes and perspectives. All of this, and more, is Mara Panajia today: a woman who lives her life and personal story with great courage and immense civic passion, a woman who brings honor to her land of origin,

an executive whom every school in Calabria should invite to get to know better and above all to hear firsthand how she managed to move through every possible stage of international success so quickly.

Mara Panajia is a woman who continues to challenge herself every day, putting herself to the test day by day, questioning herself, starting over to achieve new goals. She holds working women in the highest regard and translates it into an interpretation that we love: "There is an African proverb I like very much that says: 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.' I like this idea of not rushing, of doing things with patience. Acceptance of others, which is very important in the family, must also be applied in the company. We must look at the positive aspects of diversity. When I think about family and the management skills I apply at home, I certainly think of autonomy, delegation, accountability, empowerment. In short, the fact that my children must feel responsible in some way. Mom is not always there. I also believe," Marianna Grazi reports verbatim for Noi di Luce, "that women truly have an extra gear precisely because they have this ability to listen and not rush. Women are more patient, more welcoming of others, and have the ability to put the pieces together. At the same time, a woman needs to gain more confidence in herself because she often underestimates herself, thinks she is not up to the task, and is afraid to challenge herself and put herself forward."

And this is perhaps a mistake, and as such should be avoided. We say this especially to young girls who dream of growing up to experience an exhilarating and extraordinary journey like that of Mara Panajia.



ENZA PETRILLI

“My arms have become my legs”

Women of great success. Women of great character. Women from whom you can only learn. Women who love life beyond all limits and challenge themselves for an almost impossible achievement. Women who still know how to say thank you to life, despite being forced to live their existence in a wheelchair, forever. Record-breaking women who talk about themselves with a modesty so disarming they hardly seem real. Women of world records.

Enza Petrilli is this type of woman, in every sense. Born in 1990—so not yet 32 years old at the time—originally from Taurianova where she lives today with her family, after middle school near her home and the IT technical institute in Oppido Mamertina, she briefly thought about enrolling in university. Her first desire was Modern Literature, aiming to become an elementary school teacher or an educator serving the youth of her hometown. But then one day, almost as a game, she submitted her resume to a company looking for employees. She was called for a first interview, passed it, was called for a second, and was ultimately hired. Suddenly, Enza found herself working at a store in the "Splendidi e Splendenti" chain.

Today, this brown-haired woman with a gaze as fierce as a lynx is an Italian Paralympic archery champion. For experts in this discipline, she is almost a "war machine," a concentration of muscle and sports strategy—just enough to make her a complete champion, capable of wielding her bow as if it were a laser connected to her brain, the material extension of a digitized vision of the target to hit. She never misses a shot. Ten bullseyes out of ten shots at best. Nine out of ten at worst. A bow connected to a computer and guided by an artificial intelligence system could not do better.

A silver medalist at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics, after Tokyo she set her sights on the Paris 2024 Paralympics. Behind her, Enza has an endless, beautiful love story—twelve years together of shared moments and common emotions with a young man who lives for her completely and helped her become one of Italy's brightest archery prospects in the category's most famous competitions. Today, Michelangelo accompanies her everywhere, at least when he can, because he has effectively become the personal trainer of a great Italian athlete. Enza Petrilli is also part of the Fiamme Oro—the State Police sports group whose colors she represents and wears with the Italian national team in major international archery tournaments.

– Enza, I imagine the victory achieved at the Tokyo Olympics was the most beautiful of your life?

“So far, certainly yes. In Tokyo, I brought home a silver medal that shone brighter than gold. An absolutely unexpected victory, one I hadn't calculated, hadn't planned, and never would have expected.”

– Was it your first major competition?

“Tokyo was my second international competition. A beautiful medal, believe me.”

– Is it true that your presence in Tokyo wasn't scheduled?

“No one had ever spoken to me about Tokyo, least of all my coach. I only knew I had to do selection competitions valid for the Olympics, but I also knew that what we call Paralympic quotas—the credits necessary for final participation in the Games—were finished, at least for the Italian national team. But then I was chosen and called suddenly, and I found myself on a direct flight from Rome to Tokyo without even having an idea who my opponents would be.”

– Who informed you that you would soon be going from Taurianova to Tokyo?

“To tell you the truth, no one.”

– What do you mean?

“That no one called me. It seems almost unbelievable, but that's how it was. One morning I woke up, opened the internet, and went to check the CIP website—the Italian Paralympic Committee—and on the homepage I found my name listed as an Italian athlete participating in the Olympics.”

– What did you do at that point?

“I called my coach to ask him what was true about that news, and he confirmed that we were going to Tokyo. At that moment, I confess, I finally felt rewarded for so many sacrifices and so much physical work.”

– How do you remember the Olympic experience?

“Under persistent rain. During those days in Tokyo, a very annoying, continuous, relentless rain fell, but in the end, it seems it brought me luck. I never would have imagined such a Paralympic debut, especially since I had been practicing archery for less than four years. I still consider myself at the beginning of my competitive experience, and I left for Tokyo with zero expectations.”

– May I ask why?

“Because I joined the para-archery national team only in January 2020, and then with the arrival of COVID-19, everything stopped. Only to resume in 2021.”

– How did you manage to train while living in Calabria?

“I worked at home immensely, believe me, following telephone advice or video messages from my coach. Then, once the call-up arrived, I left with the desire to have fun and enjoy my first experience to the fullest. Once the qualification round ended, I pulled out everything I had learned from the national team staff.”

– Who is this silver medal dedicated to this time?

“To my family, to my boyfriend Michelangelo, to my therapist Carmelo Nicotera, and to my great coach, who in the end believed in it more than anyone.”

– May I ask who he is?

“My personal coach is Fabio Fuchsova, son of Guglielmo Fuchsova, an absolute number one. I will never stop thanking him for how he taught me to compete and enter the field. It was a stupendous victory. Imagine that at one point I was down 5 points to 1, but I gave it

my all. In the end I finished second, but for me it was like coming first overall, and the credit for all of this also belongs to Fabio.”

– It seems to me that in Tokyo you were also in good company?

“I’ll give you two names above all, and you’ll better understand the reason for my emotion. Our two flag bearers were Beatrice Vio for fencing and Federico Morlacchi for swimming. And alongside them was me, this Calabrian girl completely unknown to most.”

– Regardless of the final victory, what was the most beautiful moment of your Japanese trip? “Without a doubt, the semifinal. It was a mix of different emotions piled on top of each other, and then the infinite desire to fight until the very last arrow to reach the final. I felt I could do it, but to truly understand it I had to reach the end. Then, once the final shoot-off was over, I saw journalists approaching in crowds and running to get my statements, and in that moment I understood I had truly hit the mark. It’s no coincidence that on my Facebook profile I wrote: ‘The best day of my life? September 2, 2021.’ That was the day of my semifinal.”

– Enza, forgive me for forgetting to ask, but why do you live using a wheelchair? “A road accident—terrible, fatal, sudden.”

– Shall we talk about it?

“If you believe it could be useful for your interview, I have no problem doing so.”

– How did it happen?

“One evening Michelangelo and I decided to go from Taurianova to Gerace for a festival I remember was called ‘Il borgo incantato’ [The Enchanted Village]. There were six of us, all old childhood friends. We envisioned giving ourselves a different, cheerful evening outside the usual main square in Taurianova. When we reached Locri, near the Hotel President at an intersection, it was pitch dark, a van came at us, hit us, the impact was tragic. Fortunately, we were traveling in a Freemont, which is quite a large and solid car. But despite this, some of my friends were injured, while I, due to the violent impact, was thrown out of the car onto a nearby meadow.”

– What do you still remember about that night?

“Absolutely nothing. I only know what others told me later. I was immediately transported to Locri Hospital, I arrived in a coma, and from Locri I was urgently transferred to Reggio Calabria hospital. There, the doctors realized I was in very serious condition.”

– In the sense that you would lose the use of your legs?

“I believe that was the first thing the doctors explained to my mother and father.”

– How did they take it?

“Like a gunshot to the temple.”

– Enza, may I ask what kind of family background you have?

“The best family I could ever dream of having. My father Francesco works at the wholesale markets; we have a warehouse where we sell fruit and vegetables. My mother Immacolata, her friends call her Imma, is a homemaker and above all a mother to four children: I’m the oldest, followed by Antonio, Mario, and Alessia, the youngest—even

though she's twenty today, to us Alessia has always remained 'the baby of the house.' But there are also two nephews, Francesco and Tommaso, Antonio's children.”

– What ultimately truly saved you?

“The love my father and mother showed me in the worst moments of my life. And then the love and solidarity that came to me from my people, from Taurianova, from home friends, from people I didn't know who cheered for me for months, praying that I could finally regain the use of my legs and return home on my own feet.”

– In the end, you returned home in a wheelchair. Was it tough, I imagine?

“That return home was the happiest day of my life. In fact, I'll tell you the truth: the day they put me in a wheelchair to let me see the sky again—which I hadn't seen from my hospital bed for months—was a moment of immense happiness and personal peace. I had finally resumed moving and had finally found my legs again, even if the wheelchair was only a substitute for them. Finally, however, that wheelchair allowed me to fly.”

– How much pain and sacrifice does your true story hide?

“Pain and sacrifice are a component of life; they must be accepted, lived through, and processed—something I hope I have done completely.”

– Have you ever lost hope?

“Initially, yes. I thought God had abandoned me. I was very angry inside. But then in the hospital, you hear so many stories and see so much suffering, and over time my prayers changed. Before, I used to enter church and ask Jesus to let me walk again. But then, seeing the suffering of others—truly so much suffering, like those who could only move their eyes—I stopped asking for anything for myself. They, I thought, needed it much more than I did.”

– In this whole ordeal, what was the most difficult moment?

“When the doctors made me understand that I might stay in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. They advised having me treated in a facility equipped for my condition, but when my father realized I risked ending up in a nursing home for the elderly, he started looking for an alternative that could help me much better.”

– Is that why at a certain point you left Taurianova?

“We all left Calabria together to go to Imola. And not just me. My father did deep research, and they explained to him that the most suitable center for my spinal cord injury was the Spinal Cord Unit Center in Imola, specifically in Montecatone, where I would have to stay for months.”

– And then?

“You won't believe it: my father and mother rented a small house in Imola and came with me. We did six months of therapy together, in the sense that I stayed in the hospital and they came to visit me every single day as if I were in Reggio Calabria and they in Taurianova. Priceless, mom. Unforgettable, dad. But also wonderful was Michelangelo, who left Calabria to join me in Imola and stay with me. Michelangelo was my guardian angel in Imola; he was there for six long months without ever leaving me alone for a single moment.”

– How beautiful what you tell me...

“In this, I was very fortunate, and I will never stop declaring my love for him. Because all of this allowed me to make it through. On my own, I never would have succeeded.”

– Twelve years together with Michelangelo Minutoli: isn't that long enough to consider getting married by now?

“Yes, perhaps the time has come, but before doing so, we set milestones for ourselves.”

– What do you mean?

“That we will do it after the Paris Olympics. I want to reach the Olympics at the peak of my strength and focus. Michelangelo agrees with me. Then we will do it, in the most beautiful way in the world. Although I must tell you that we already live together, so this isn't really a pressing issue for us.”

– In this entire journey, Enza, what was the happiest day of your life?

“The day I returned home, after leaving Imola and that medical facility, which is truly an Italian center of excellence. When I arrived home in Taurianova, I found an entire town waiting for me. A town celebrating, the collective joy of a community welcoming me as if I were everyone's daughter. Beautiful, emotional—never like that day did I feel the weight of responsibility I carry, because every time I step onto the podium to receive an award, I think of my family and the broader family of Taurianova. In that moment, I feel like I'm wearing the banner, expectations, and colors of my town and my people.”

– Proud of all this?

“Are you kidding? Of course I am, and in an absolutely conscious way. Saying proud is an understatement. Absolutely proud to be a daughter of my land. And I say this even though Calabria still lacks the necessary facilities for people in my condition. In Calabria, there isn't much available for adaptive athletes like me.”

– In what sense, Enza?

“In the sense that here we have a great sports culture, but it's difficult—and this must be said courageously—to find a place where you can train as you'd like, and above all in the best way to become competitive.”

– Enza, why do you dedicate so much attention to the youth of the Gioia Tauro Plain today? “Because I discovered through my own experience that young people need help. They have few facilities where they can train, making competitive sports difficult if not impossible. That was the case for me. Before becoming an Italian archery champion, I had no idea what this discipline even was. If Michelangelo and I hadn't imagined and decided to build the first training fields in Taurianova, no one around here would have practiced archery. And I assure you, it is a strict discipline requiring extraordinary physical and athletic preparation. Today, Michelangelo and I finally have kids to teach this sport to, and we hope that sooner or later some of them can aspire to become national champions like me.”

– What did creating the first archery field at the foot of Aspromonte actually entail?

“We had to overcome a thousand doubts, a thousand bureaucratic requirements, but in the end we succeeded. We established a real archery school that is now the envy of many other Italian organizations ahead of us.”

– Enza, what is your biggest dream today?

“So many dreams, but where I come from, dreams are never told aloud.”

– Tell me at least one of them...

“To return to Calabria from Paris as a protagonist in some way. It's a dream that might be unachievable, but I'm preparing for it. I would like to beat the woman who is my idol and point of reference today, Iranian athlete Zahra Nemati, the only archer in the world to win three consecutive Paralympic golds. She is truly fantastic, but sometimes I feel inside that I can manage to beat her. There isn't a moment in my training that I don't think of her class and the rigor with which she prepares. She is perfect in everything, from when she enters the field to when she leaves the podium—impeccable, elegant, fully deserving of her Olympic medals. Who knows, one day...”

– I know that between training sessions you also find time for schools, where you share your life story?

“I always do whenever I can, and with immense pleasure. I feel it's important, not just for them but for me too. I've received so many invitations to speak to students, especially after Tokyo, and I try never to miss any. Talking to kids is important, especially high school students, because you have the opportunity to raise awareness about disability. Not all kids know what it means to live in a wheelchair like mine. I remember being invited to speak to students at the classical high school in Nicotera, and for the first time in my life, I saw a sea of students listening in solemn silence. They looked at me and listened as if I were a star, which made me reflect deeply on the need to talk about disability more and better in schools and universities. On December 3rd, International Day of Persons with Disabilities, I go wherever invited to do archery demonstrations, and to students who ask to try, I explain that they have to hit the target while sitting, just like I do. These are the initiatives that fill my life with joy today.”



SANDRA SAVAGLIO

“Research means overcoming fear thanks to curiosity”

“I know because my work is giving me great satisfaction. Italy? It is where I was born. It is my country. It is where I would like to work. Of course I would return, but to do what?”

For *Time*, one of the world's most authoritative magazines today, which dedicated its prestigious cover to her in January 2004, Sandra Savaglio effectively became the most authentic symbol of Italian emigration across the ocean that year. But above all, this young Calabrian researcher was portrayed and described as an icon of Made in Italy in the world. Which in reality was the world of scientific research, the world of Astronomy, the world of the unknown, of space, the Milky Way, stars, planets, galaxies. But it was also the world of experimentation and the future.

“The woman of the stars,” “The queen of galaxies,” the Americans for whom she worked still call her that, the Italian scientist who day and night observed, studied, followed, and analyzed the hidden secrets of hundreds of different galaxies, and who for seven years now has finally returned to the University of Calabria, where, for her high scientific merits, she was awarded a chair in physics. At Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, in the United States, she left behind a strong and indelible memory and image of a scientist who, through her research, contributed to decoding the mysteries of the universe. And Americans never forget those who worked well for them.

“I certainly cannot be the one to say what the most important result of my professional career is, but the research that perhaps gave me more satisfaction than many others concerns my studies a few years ago on the chemical enrichment of distant galaxies. In very simple terms, the link between the quantity of chemical elements they contain and the mass contained in stars. Immediately after the Big Bang, the universe was composed exclusively of hydrogen, helium, and only tiny traces of other light chemical elements. The planets and all the other celestial objects we observe today, with their wide variety of chemical enrichment, were formed only with the passage of time, thanks to the forge of the stars. Well, through telescopes we have learned that the quantity of a chemical element present in a galaxy, for example iron, tells us how much its stars have worked, and which among the galaxies is the most evolved. It is like looking them in the face and understanding their life story by counting their wrinkles.”

This is Sandra Savaglio today: scientist, astrophysicist, university professor, and recognized researcher followed and admired by the international scientific community. Born under the zodiac sign of Libra, and therefore inclined to live her life in absolute serenity and in continuous pursuit of a balance that benefits her physical and mental well being as well as that of others, Sandra Savaglio is today one of Italy's excellence stories who, at a certain point in her life, following her American experience, decided to leave her prestigious research institute in Germany to return home, to Calabria, to her Marano Marchesato, amidst old memories of a golden, never forgotten childhood filled with cuddles and pure

affection that only the "Souths of the world" still know how to preserve and protect so well.

"I admit I also had a few moments of great bewilderment in my life. At one point I was about to give up everything, matters of the heart, love affairs, but fortunately it was only a passing moment. Do you know what I always tell my students? Never give up on your dreams. Never miss the opportunities life holds for you. My favorite slogan is 'plunge headfirst into the things you truly believe in.' Then a pinch of luck, which never hurts, will do the rest. And the other certainty I feel I can give my students today is closely linked to Calabria. I am certain of it: in twenty years, this land will be the most beautiful place in the universe. Of course, it will also depend on how each of us participates in this grand project of building the future, but the natural resources, landscape beauty, and historical heritage here in Calabria truly make it a rare pearl of our planet."

Seven years after her return to Italy, we go looking for her specifically right in Calabria, at the middle school in Fuscaldo, the Comprehensive Institute where Anna Maria De Luca, the principal at the time, invited her to meet the school's students. Here Sandra Savaglio becomes, as if by magic, the little girl she was in Marano, telling the "fairy tale" of her life with disarming simplicity and the charm of someone who knows the true secrets of the cosmos.

"I was born a stone's throw from here, I grew up in Marano Marchesato, a small town in the province of Cosenza. My father, Calabrian like me, was a postal worker, while my mother had Venetian origins and was an obstetrician, and I am the youngest of four children. I have a sister and two brothers."

The students at the Fuscaldo school give her no breathing room, one question after another, one curiosity after another. First Rebecca, then Noemi, Martina, Marco, Jolanda, Matteo, Dalila, and not a leaf moves in the room. I haven't remembered such a deafening silence in a long time, the students' eyes fixed on the large screen where their new "accidental teacher" shows them stellar explosions, or even better, galaxies millions of light years away from Earth, and finally comets, "in line with the approaching Christmas."

With the kids, she knows how to be warm and confiding. She calls them all by name; she says she doesn't have much memory for last names, but with first names it's easier. In reality, she is a data powerhouse, remembering every detail of their every question and request. She has a sweet word for each of them, joking with the most open ones in a wink and nod manner. When, at a certain point in her lesson, she asks the principal sitting next to her for a "pointer" to use on the monitor to show the students details of the photo of Halley's Comet, and they bring her a long sun dried reed instead, heavy and hard to handle, she smiles with them and lets slip, "Hooray kids, technology advances!"

Professor, how does it feel to know that one of the Barbie dolls on the market in stores worldwide was created in your image and dedicated to your story as a scientist?

"I'll repeat what I already answered a while ago to the editorial team of *Wired*, a widely circulated science magazine. A toy multinational, like Mattel today, which mainly produces the famous Barbie doll, certainly bears a huge responsibility in shaping the adults of the future. Today Mattel makes dolls representing a broad spectrum of social categories, and in this, its management demonstrates extraordinary maturity. Creating dolls that

represent female scientists means placing a new 'role model' in the hands of many young girls, which perhaps will help them make the most suitable choices to build their future. That's why I was delighted to have 'sponsored' Mattel's decision, and I've always hoped to live up to the trust placed in me. Throughout my life, I've invested a lot in diversity: I am a woman scientist and I returned to Italy, to Calabria, to do my work when I could have done it elsewhere. I really love meeting young girls like you who look at me hoping to do when they grow up what I have done, without ever following stereotypes. At least, that is what I wish for all of you."

How many dolls did you have in your life?

"Very few dolls, to be truthful. As a child I didn't like playing with dolls. Instead, I liked boys' games much more: building blocks, bows and arrows, toy cars, playing soccer. In general, I always loved sports immensely, especially swimming. If I hadn't done this job, I think I would have liked to do sports at a competitive level, or at least dedicated a lot of time to practicing sports as an amateur. Something I can no longer do today, except walking on mountain trails with my dogs."

May I ask if you have a secret you can tell us?

"I adore the desert, with its dunes, colors, spaces, enormous distances, clear sky. That's why I love Chile, where the driest desert on the planet is located, the Atacama Desert. But the city that perhaps drove me crazier than any other was Sydney, Australia. I remember that when I was far from Italy, the things I missed most about my land were the food, the sea, my mountains, the Sila, and sometimes even the air we breathe here, which I never found anywhere else in the world."

And the land you loved as much as your Calabria?

"Germany is definitely my second land of heart. If I were ever to decide one day to start my life over far from Calabria, I would have no doubt: I would return to live in Germany, in Munich. Those are the places I adored most, and to which I will remain forever bound."

For a moment, we imagine that behind this overt declaration of love for Munich there might actually lie the distant, or perhaps still present and concrete, memory of a great love between her and her soulmate. On her middle finger she wears a yellow gold band, but perhaps these are such strictly private details that a successful woman prefers to gloss over or even keep quiet about.

"When I was little, numbers and logical analysis fascinated me greatly. I was haunted by curiosity for everything around me. Imagine that my elementary school teacher called me 'Miss Why.' From what I remember, even as a child I dreamed of being a scientist. If you study physics or astrophysics, you must like mathematics. Nature spontaneously gives us wonderful pictures. In our galaxy alone there are about 200 billion stars, and in the entire universe there are hundreds of billions of galaxies: mathematics is the fascinating tool that allows us to understand it all."

After middle school, scientific high school, and from there Sandra's great university adventure began.

"The thing I believe was decisive in my life was meeting good teachers in scientific subjects. This ultimately convinced me, but also helped me, to make a choice that

everyone around me considered courageous: studying physics at university. Many, I remember, told me it would be difficult, but I believed in it and in the end it was easy because I liked what I was studying. Today I cannot fail to recognize that it was the best choice I could ever make.”

Sometimes in everyone's life there are such strong umbilical relationships with one's teachers that they are never severed. So it was for Sandra.

“My high school physics professor, Ottavio Serra, now over eighty years old, and I still talk from time to time, even recently after my latest book. In reality, he and I never lost touch. He was a true master of times gone by, very well prepared and highly skilled in his trade, a truly special and extraordinary person. But I cannot fail to mention another great master of mine. When I started working on my degree thesis in 1990, he advised me to gain experience abroad. He told me, 'If you learn something we don't do here, one day perhaps it will be easier to return.' That was Professor Pierluigi Veltri, one of the founders of the physics department at the University of Arcavacata, where I studied and for which I work today. I returned home after 24 years, and unfortunately he has now retired, a great loss, even though he still keeps an office and often shows up.”

Also contributing to this extraordinary mosaic of Sandra's life was her father, and with him the rest of her family.

“It's true, my family helped me a lot. My father was always a lover of mathematics. I remember very well when, while I was still a child, my father took it upon himself to teach mathematics to all the village kids who needed tutoring during the summer months, something he did absolutely free of charge. For that, everyone appreciated him. Among my childhood friends, I was actually the only one who never took lessons from him, but perhaps because I had no difficulty with math. On the other hand, I didn't like Latin very much, I did the minimum necessary in Italian, in short, I wasn't the token nerd. The other true blessing of my life was the support I had from my parents for my choices. Never an objection, never resistance, never a doubt or reservation about what my early life and work plans were at the time.”

Her professional and academic story knows no stumbles. Her life is a continuous coming and going of assignments, commitments, research projects, trips abroad, missions, and prestigious work, especially international in scope. Marano Marchesato became her "Ithaca," but increasingly distant, and so did Calabria.

“I remember my first 'assignment' abroad was while I was preparing my degree thesis; I was just 22 years old and went to an international institute near Munich. Then again for my PhD, conducted partly in Arcavacata and partly around the world: Germany, France, Australia, Chile, finally obtained in 1995.”

Now a globally beloved and appreciated astrophysicist, Sandra Savaglio specialized in several emerging sectors that brought her immense academic rewards: the astrophysics of "distant galaxies," the chemical enrichment of the universe, and explosive phenomena. She became a scientist of recognized value worldwide in these fields, with over 200 publications in the sector's most accredited international journals.

“In Germany,” she tells *Sudefuturi*, “I had some minor trouble with my bosses. I teased a director, a scientist who a few years later would win the Nobel Prize in Physics, a figure

well known in the environment for his terroristic methods. Well, at the time I knew nothing of all this, and during a very well attended internal meeting where he was attacking the work done by some very bright students, I publicly teased him, playfully 'accusing' him in a cartoon I made specifically for the occasion of being like a Pope during the Catholic Church's Inquisition. I had done it only to lighten the mood a bit, to create the right atmosphere to move forward, but he took it very badly, shouting in front of everyone that I should never dare use his image for such a thing again. I was embarrassed for him. In my great naivety, I thought I could afford a playful joke. Only later did I realize I had made a very naive mistake and an unforgivable act, helped on that occasion by general silence. I remember no one dared say anything. In fact, no one dared breathe because everyone in there was afraid of him. At the end of the meeting, a colleague from Turin came up to me, the only one to talk to me, to congratulate me for the courage I had shown in facing the 'boss.'

But it was her American experience in Baltimore that profoundly marked her life.

"You see, what makes the difference between America and Italy is neither experience, nor age, nor rank, but exclusively your ability to work and achieve the set goals. And little else. I realized that if you work hard, you can go very far, something that unfortunately is by no means obvious in Italy. In fact, sometimes you sacrifice so much, work twice as hard, only to end up alone and abandoned. In America, on the other hand, talent and skill end up being recognized regardless of where you come from, even if you are a foreigner. So, whoever has the courage to jump in and test themselves ultimately gets rewarded. We still have a lot to learn from the American system, believe me."

Professor, but why America? Why Baltimore, and before that, why Munich?

"Because I realized very early on that if I wanted to fulfill my desire to become a scientist, I would have to travel the world to learn the trade, gain experience, participate in international conferences, meet people, and join the network of major projects. I realize this might not be what people want to hear, but our young people must be told with absolute clarity that this is the fate of a researcher: political borders do not exist, the world of science is global. Therefore, the concept of 'brain drain' needs a few words of clarification: leaving one's country to pursue this dream is not wrong in itself; in fact, it is necessary and happens to young people from other countries too. The aggravating factor in Italy, however, is that our country is not very attractive to foreigners, it doesn't offer what Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, or France offer. It pains me to say it, but the most serious issue in Italy is not brain drain, but the lack of brain circulation."

"Thus Europe loses its science stars." On January 14, 2004, her close up photo appeared with this strong title on the cover of the American magazine *Time* as a symbol of the European brain drain to the United States. An emotion no longer just Sandra Savaglio's, but one that directly impacted the rest of the world. An Italian girl whom no one knew before that moment suddenly became the star of international scientific research. A beautiful cover with high media impact, radiating all the pride of this young Italian woman who scrutinizes the stars and knows almost everything about the universe. The American magazine went around the world, and for Sandra Savaglio, previously unthinkable and unimaginable scenarios opened up.

“At the time I lived and worked at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. I remember first a journalist called me from London to interview me. Then later someone called from New York to tell me they were sending a photographer to Baltimore for the cover. At first I was completely bewildered, almost lost, I hadn't perceived the true scale of that publishing project. Learning the news that I would end up on the cover of *Time* was a big surprise for me. Obviously I was very happy about it.”

From every part of Europe, congratulations and official invitations to participate in major international conferences poured in for Sandra, and over time the first major awards of her brilliant career arrived: the "Pitagora International Award," "Calabria in the World Award," "Made in Calabria Award," "Prime Donne Award," "Frescobaldi Award," "Vittorio De Sica Award," and many others. Likewise, the official events to which the Italian scientist was invited to speak about her research were countless.

Among the thousand academic satisfactions earned in the field, Sandra holds one particularly dear: her appointment to international scientific committees that decide on the use of the world's most powerful telescopes. Among these is, of course, the "Hubble Space Telescope", an instrument named after American astronomer Edwin Hubble, one of NASA's Great Observatories along with the Compton Gamma Ray Observatory, the Chandra X ray Observatory, and the Spitzer Space Telescope.

Sandra Savaglio's lesson could go on for hours, and no one would ever dream of interrupting her. But the truth is that this blonde haired woman with an engaging smile gives you the illusion of having become, at least for a day, a protagonist in the great planetary system that towers above us and observes us.

“Yes, true, the old Hubble telescope is considered the most important in human history after the one used by Galileo back in 1609. Operating since 1990, it orbits outside the atmosphere at an altitude of about 540 km above our heads at a speed of over 7 km per second, and is capable of giving us scientific information and details never possible before. We are talking about a truly extraordinary feat and project, beyond all expectations. And I say 'old' also because news of the launch into space of its successor, the Webb Telescope, sent into orbit right on Christmas Day, is recent. From this new instrument we expect great discoveries regarding the universe's past and also the possible existence of habitable planets similar to Earth.”

At the end of 2013 came the great turning point in her life. The young Calabrian scientist received a direct call from the University of Calabria to serve as Full Professor in the Physics Department.

“That is exactly how it went. One day I received this request to return to the Physics Department at the University of Calabria, where I had started my adventure as a scientist more than twenty years earlier. Frankly, I wasn't expecting it. But I sent my resume, and after a year and a half they called me back. It was a very particular moment for me. I was seriously considering leaving the Max Planck Institute where I was to go work in Paris. But I couldn't pass up a full professorship in the land where I grew up. I convinced myself that I had wandered enough around the world, and that the right time to return home had finally arrived.”

Satisfied? Happy with this choice? “Several years have passed now, and I am fully happy with the choice I made. For a thousand different reasons: the food, the climate, the human element, the social environment all around. Today I have the privilege of working at a university that contributes decisively to the growth of the entire region, the country, and the world. Unical graduates today are established professionals everywhere, a very high international context that ought to be talked about more, unfortunately and undeservedly kept far from the spotlight.”

Sandra Savaglio's happiness with the work she does today at the Arcavacata Campus is such that it engages even those who, like me, meet her here in Fuscaldo for the first time.

“Returning home was absolutely not taking a step backward. Today I work at one of the great Italian universities, attended and enjoyed by around 27,000 students, an American style campus that is very active and unique in its kind. A university campus where we carry out major scientific projects, but where we also often have to deal with heavy, longstanding challenges common to all of Italy.”

Educated in American academic culture and trained in prestigious German schools, now constantly connected with many leading institutes and universities around the world, Sandra Savaglio still cannot understand, for example, why in the third millennium so many top tier Italian scientists like her must, in the final analysis, clash and waste precious time with an elephantine machine called "bureaucracy."

“Bureaucracy, it almost sounds like a bad word. In reality, it is a monster that negatively impacts the life of research. It's like having a ball and chain hindering movements and initiatives of every kind. In short, every day time is wasted on silly tasks, and all of this does enormous damage to the country. I've said it a thousand times over the years: Italy spends a lot of money to train scientists, and does so brilliantly, and then part of that knowledge is lost, not utilized to its best potential, because we have to fill out useless paperwork.”

At least 400,000 European scientists currently live in the United States. The paradox is that Europe still needs at least 700,000 more researchers by 2022. And if the situation doesn't change, experts assure, the trend will worsen in the coming years. Which means Italy still has a long way to go.

Is it true that Sandra Savaglio's true grand dream remains the galaxies?

“Yes, true. The study of distant galaxies is what gave me the most satisfaction. In particular, those hosting stellar explosions. For several years I've been very active in this branch. But I've also always believed in the need to promote science in a broader sense, going into schools, speaking with young people, especially encouraging young women who want to dedicate themselves to this work. Do you know what I've realized in all these years? That women tend to have little confidence in their own abilities, and for this reason need to be strongly encouraged. Because in reality they are a great professional resource, and certainly not only in front of the kitchen stove at home.”

In February 2020 came the other great existential turning point for our Calabrian scientist, when she was called to serve on the Regional Government led by Jole Santelli, the first female President of the Calabria Region. A month later, in May 2020, she also joined the

Scientific Council of the National Institute for Astrophysics (INAF), yet another important recognition in her life.

Sandra the astrophysicist, at a certain point in her professional journey, thus became Regional Assessor for Research, University, and Education. From applied research to politics, from "impossible to defend" theses on the theory of the universe to the Regional Citadel, from the primordial, pristine light of distant stars to the organizational machine of a region that remains at the bottom of European development. But Jole Santelli must have been very persuasive, as Sandra did not back down. An adventure unfortunately cut short at its best due to the premature passing of President Jole Santelli. Nevertheless, a challenge within a challenge. For Sandra Savaglio, perhaps also yet another cultural provocation to herself: leaving her university chair for a year and a half to face topics, situations, and protagonists completely different from those she had known for years. A totally new and unknown world for her. For a year and a half, Sandra discovered and experienced a reality far removed from that of a scientist of her stature.

"My first impact with the regional Citadel in Germaneto was very tough. I remember bringing my laptop and asking for the WiFi passwords, but the laconic response I received left me almost speechless: 'No wireless here.' How so? Even the McDonald's down the street has WiFi, and Germaneto doesn't? They explained there were 'cybersecurity issues' involved, but frankly I never understood the point of that justification. I found out later that the storage rooms below were full of routers that had never been installed. I had one installed specifically for me. Now fortunately they've installed routers throughout the building. But how can one talk about a digital agenda under those conditions?"

But what is actually behind the engaging success of this Calabrian woman, so fascinating and delicate in her features and movements?

"There is a massive amount of work. There is a life entirely dedicated to the cause. There is an insane passion for science and research. That is what my life has been: a collection of achievements and sacrifices, a mix of joys and sorrows, a blender of emotions and stumbles, of waiting and giving things up, of fresh starts and farewells, of moments of pure euphoria and vast islands of solitude."



MARIAELENA SENESE

The "pasionaria" of Curinga

If one day someone decided to open a debate on female trade union leaders in Italy, they could not fail to come to Calabria to meet Mariaelena Senese, Secretary General of the Calabrian UIL since April 4, 2025, because I find her story to have a strength and fascination that are truly unimaginable.

Born in 1972, originally from Curinga where she lives, a lawyer by profession, brilliant and a deep connoisseur of the most pressing social issues in the country, a strict mother who is deeply attentive to her children's education as all southern women know how to be, Mariaelena Senese is today a leading protagonist in the Italian trade union debate, in every sense.

A true icon of feminism in Calabria and a strong, completely convincing image of a modern trade union leader who made it on her own, with the traditional stubbornness of women who do union work in these parts, and who often find it impossible to break the glass ceiling above them. In short, a "town girl" who today leads the Calabrian UIL with the style and charisma of an intellectual loaned to the world of work. That is why I could not refrain from seeking her out.

Good morning Mariaelena, may I ask what kind of family background you come from? "My mother was a primary school teacher; my father, on the other hand, was a trade unionist. Public service was his mission for a lifetime."

I gather you are following in family footsteps?

"First let me tell you that my parents were truly a beautiful couple. They loved each other so much. Destiny took them away from us three children in 2016, just three months apart from each other."

I am very sorry...

"Dad died three months after my mother passed away. He could not overcome the grief of losing the great love of his life."

What you are telling me is very beautiful...

"I remember them with infinite tenderness and great melancholy. A life made of smiles, complicity, and that subtle humor that came through in the most difficult moments of everyone's life."

What did they teach you?

"To them I owe the search for beauty and a deep sense of family, which live on in me with the same intensity and passion. Let me continue telling you about my family: my brother and my sister. The former is a lawyer practicing in Rome; the latter lives in Curinga and manages the local patronato and tax assistance center."

What was your childhood like?

“Let me premise that I have always been curious about life, so from an early age I was drawn to things that gave me emotions. In the end, I confess, satisfying this need led me to be in constant search of new and continuous stimuli.”

What was your little old world?

“I grew up in a peaceful, serene environment where my parents' affection was never lacking, but I will tell you more: I would like to remember two important figures who contributed to our upbringing, mine, my brother's, and my sister's. The first is Aunt Vanna, my mother's sister, and the other is my maternal grandmother, a sort of pragmatic, decisive disciplinarian, but a fantastic woman because of the love she knew how to instill.”

Tell me about your mother instead...

“My mother? Pillar, guide, point of reference of my existence. From her I learned to give value to important things. My mother taught me a sense of respect and the discipline of responsibility. A wise woman for whom life exists in the noise of living and in knowing how to recognize good and evil. I was very fortunate to have had her by my side, always. A true privilege to have held her hand in mine, intercepted her glances, nourished myself on her words, and enjoyed her embraces.”

A wild love, it seems to me?

“You know what? In her eyes I always found the strength to react on sunless days, and in her smile the hope of a new dawn. She taught me to love, to respect, not to give up. With patience and sweetness. She guided my every step, leaving me free but never alone, also because I was always the revolutionary daughter who loved going against the current.”

I see you have a life full of passionate memories?

“Do you want one above all? Yes, the smell of freshly baked cookies. It happened every Sunday in my grandmother's house, not to mention baked pasta, or bread with nduja. If I close my eyes, I smell those scents, I relive the scene, and I hear the joyful noise of laughter in the dining room. Nostalgia overcomes me, but let us move forward...”

What schools did you attend and where?

“Elementary and middle school in Curinga, and scientific high school in Vibo.”

Which middle school teachers do you still remember?

“The mathematics teacher, gruff yet at the same time sweet.”

And from high school, which teachers are worth remembering?

“Here too, mathematics leads the way. I remember Professor Staropoli, a genius! But I cannot fail to mention Professor Restuccia, she was the Italian teacher, also because it was always my favorite subject. How marvelous our language is; you can say everything in a thousand different ways, even if the words we choose tell the world who we are.”

Many of your union friends tell me that you love writing...

“Writing and literature are a journey into the human soul. Every author, every work carries a fragment of life, an era, an emotion. Reading the verses of Dante, the passions of Leopardi, or the thoughts of Pirandello means confronting the great themes of existence. How can one not be moved reading a verse, a story, a tale written by the fathers of our literature. Time passes, but the great thinkers, believe me, remain shockingly relevant.”

As a lawyer, how was your union choice born?

“A bit by chance, or perhaps not. In the sense that something inside me was already there. I was teaching, so I was confronting the problems of the school world. Chance had it, however, that one evening while I was in the town square chatting with a dear friend, national secretary for the construction workers category, over a granita and a glass of lemon water, he proposed that I begin a trade union path.”

From school to the union seems like quite a leap into the dark?

“At first I was a bit dazed, amazed, frightened... I had never thought I could undertake such a path. The proposal, however, I confess, immediately resonated with me; after all, by character I always love to challenge myself.”

What intrigued you most about this new job offer?

“I really liked the idea of being able to dedicate myself to helping those fighting for their rights.”

How do you remember this initiation?

“I started my new life by first doing a trial period, which quickly turned into lifelong activism, in the sense that I began taking an interest in the category's problems with increasing passion.”

A completely different life compared to teaching, I imagine?

“A completely different dimension. As time passed, I began to feel the choice I had just made as mine. Daily contact with workers transmitted energy to me, and every extra day I felt the weight of responsibility and the high value of trust placed in me.”

Must it have been a great chapter in your life? “

It is the same drive I still live with today, constantly! You see, taking on workers' expectations, protecting their jobs, never leaving them alone is a duty for anyone who chooses the union and interprets the role as a social mission.”

Your first major experience?

“My first assembly with construction workers!”

Can you tell me about it?

“It was a moment I will never forget. I came from another world, that of school, accustomed to dealing with colleagues, students, and families. That day, instead, I found

myself facing faces marked by work, rough hands of hard labor, wary glances. I attended that first meeting knowing I had to earn their trust, be part of that world, feel their exact emotions, share their expectations.”

How did it end up?

“I remember the silence that dominated the room that day. I remember the amazed looks, the diffidence I read on their faces, and I confess that for a moment I felt I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

What was your first real disappointment?

“Understanding that social justice is not a collective value!”

And the most complex trade union dispute?

“Definitely the Southern Question!”

May I ask you why?

“Not because it is a single dispute, but because it contains all of them. The lack of jobs, the work that exists but is precarious or poorly paid, the infrastructure that never arrives, the young people who leave, the resignation growing in silence.”

A lot on your plate?

“Believe me, the Southern Question is the most complex dispute right now, because it does not have a single negotiation table, but a thousand angles from which to start.”

The big limitation in all this?

“The real big limitation is that the South is too often treated as a territory to be assisted rather than valued. Yet the South has extraordinary energy, it has intelligence, creativity, skills. But it needs to be put in a position to grow, to have equal opportunities, not to be forced to beg for normality.”

I imagine it is not easy to do union work with this perspective?

“The truth is that the union is called to a double challenge. It must not only defend work, but it must imagine the future, holding together rights, development, and dignity. The union must create conditions so that young people are not forced to leave to fulfill themselves.”

A complex battle, wouldn't you say?

“What I believe is that the South is the hardest dispute right now, but it is the one most worth fighting for today. Because when you manage to snatch a result here, when you manage to give an answer among these people and in these territories, then not only does an economic condition change, but the history of a territory changes. A community changes. A generation changes.”

Let me ask you a tough question: how were you accepted in the union by the men in the union? “Let us say it was a human journey that was exhausting at times, but deeply transformative.”

That is not enough for me...

“You see, it was not just about learning new rules, contracts, technical jargon. It was above all about entering a world where for years, by tradition, by culture, certain roles were occupied almost exclusively by men.”

Did you ever feel uncomfortable?

“I remember some observed me in silence, others with curiosity, someone with open skepticism. And even when no one said anything, the unsaid was felt strongly. It was as if, before truly accepting me, I had to pass an invisible test: proving that I deserved that place.”

How did you position yourself regarding this problem?

“I never wanted to prove anything by force. I simply chose to be present. To listen. Not to back down. To remain true to myself even in a context where, at times, it would have been easier to adapt or blend in.”

In the end, was it a winning choice?

“I learned that true authority does not need to shout, but arises from respect, competence, consistency. And over time, that initial wall began to yield. Diffidence gave way to dialogue. Prejudices melted away in shared everyday life. Some colleagues became friends, traveling companions, capable of recognizing and appreciating a different voice that did not want to replace, but enrich their experience. And in this process I realized I was not just searching for my space. I was opening a possibility for all those women who, too often, feel out of place even before starting.”

How does it feel to be called a "pasionaria"?

“Today, when I look back at that path, frankly I do not see it as a solitary struggle. I see it as part of a larger change concerning the union, work, society as a whole. A change made of small gestures, presence, patience. And also courage: the courage to be there, even when it seems uncomfortable. To stay, even when leaving would be easier. To believe in it, even when everything around seems to say the opposite.”

In short, a "pasionaria"?

“Being a woman in the union, for me, is not just a role. It is a way of being in the world. Of fighting for rights, but also for the humanity of work. And doing so with a clear voice, with passion, and above all with deep roots.”

Did you ever feel out of place just for being a woman?

“No, and I say this without any hesitation. Not because I did not encounter obstacles, skeptical looks, or situations where I could have felt out of place. But because I always

knew who I was, what I wanted to do, and what my place was. And I never allowed my gender to define it.”

Can we call it a cultural provocation?

“Yes, certainly, being a woman in a traditionally male union environment might have seemed like a challenge. But I never felt less suited. I always experienced my presence as an extra voice, a different perspective to bring with authenticity and respect. Of course, I had to face initial diffidence, like anyone entering a context not yet fully accustomed to seeing you there. But I never felt the need to justify myself or make myself small so as not to cause trouble. On the contrary: I walked with my head held high, convinced that value has no gender, but substance. And that competence, seriousness, and passion speak much louder than any stereotype.”

In short, a battle won?

“Being a woman is a different lens through which to observe work dynamics, listen to people's needs, act with a sensitivity that does not mean weakness, but depth. And every time I entered an assembly, an office, a construction site, I felt I had something to give. That I had the right, and the duty, to be there.”

May I ask how you reconcile your union role with being a woman, daughter, mother?

“The truth is that there is no perfect formula. Every day is a delicate balance between the sense of duty toward others and the need to be there for those I love. It is a continuous dance between responsibilities, feelings, physical and emotional distances that life puts in front of you. I am a woman, and I never put this part of me in parentheses. I bring with me the sensitivity, the strength, and sometimes the fatigue that this entails. But above all, I am a mother!”

Can we talk about your children then?

“I have a son studying at university in Turin, and a daughter who is a doctor doing her specialization in plastic surgery in Salerno. Two distant cities, two different paths, two lives being built day by day with courage. And I am there, always, even from afar, with a phone call, with continuous messages, with an imagined caress while facing a meeting or an assembly. Physical distance does not erase emotional closeness.”

Still a mother, strongly a mother?

“Motherhood adapts, changes shape, but never loses its core.”

I must admit that is beautiful...

“It is not easy. There are days when I feel divided, when I would like to be in multiple places at once. But there is also so much satisfaction in knowing that my children see an example in me: a mother who works, who fights for rights, who does not give up. And I think that, in the end, this is the strongest message I can leave them. Reconciling everything is not a matter of having time. It is a matter of giving meaning to the time you have.”

You will admit it is not easy?

“As long as I can do it with love, even in fatigue, then I know I am in the right place, as a woman, as a mother, and as a trade unionist.”

Has it ever happened to you around Italy to feel ashamed of being a daughter of the South?

“No. Never. And I say this with a firm voice, a heart full of pride, as well as a straight back. Because being a daughter of the South, for me, has never been a cause for embarrassment. On the contrary, it is my deepest root. It is the part of me that taught me to resist, to work hard, never to give up.”

I read the address you delivered on the day of your inauguration at the top of the UIL. Can I tell you? It overflowed with southern pride.

“Perhaps simply because you carry the South inside you, even when you are far away. You recognize the South in glances, in silences, in the tenacity of those who learned to do much with little. Of those who do not wait, but roll up their sleeves. And even when you compare yourself with more modern, more structured realities, you do not feel inferior. You feel different, perhaps, but with the awareness of having something extra.”

What exactly?

“A visceral bond with your land, with its wounds but also with its beauty, with its shortcomings. With its courage, too.”

Can you tell me about a moment of deep sadness for you?

“It often happened that I found myself in contexts where the South was mocked.”

And your reaction?

“Every time I responded with example. With my voice. Because I am the South, and I am proud of it. Because from that difficult land I learned the value of commitment, of listening, of community. And precisely for this reason I chose to return, to stay, to invest energy where it is needed most.”

In this, you must admit, a daughter of the South to the core?

“I was never ashamed of being a daughter of the South, quite the opposite.”

Quite the opposite, what?

“It is a medal I wear on my heart. Because I know that every milestone I reach, every word I utter, every person I represent is also a small piece of redemption for my land. And for me, that is worth more than any stereotype.”

What advice would you give to a young woman who wanted to embark on your career today?

“I would tell her not to expect things to be handed to her, but to know with pride that when they arrive, it will be because she earned them with courage, competence, and determination.”

And what else?

“I would tell her not to change to please others. Not to hide her voice, her sensitivity, her vision. To bring them into every meeting, every discussion, every decision, even when it seems no one is listening.”

All smooth sailing?

“Far from it. I would tell her there will be exhausting days when she feels alone or out of place. But also that those moments will strengthen her, and that the meaning of her work will return every time she sees real change, every time she gives voice to someone who has none.”

Woman forever?

“I would tell her much more. I would tell her that being a woman is a resource. Being a woman is an added value.”

Don't you think that is excessive?

“Then let me explain it better. Being a woman is a different look at the world, often more attentive, more empathetic, deeper. And a woman should never be ashamed of it, nor feel obliged to be like a man just to gain respect. She must simply be herself, fully.”

And the last piece of advice you would give her?

“Finally, I would tell her not to be afraid to return or stay in her territory. That making a difference is not just a matter of places, but of choices. That even from the South one can start, stay, change. And that if she does so with love and consistency, she will leave a mark.”

Which has been your life?

“Just as I have tried to do.”

What was the real weapon of your success?

“Without any doubt, listening. That which makes you tune in with people, which makes you feel the weight of their words, their hardships, their denied rights. Everything starts from there: standing beside, not above. Understanding before speaking. Walking together, not ahead.”

And was all that enough?

“Listening allowed me to earn trust, even when I started uphill, even when I was the new one, the woman, the one to be observed with caution. I tried to understand, to ask questions, to build true relationships. And above all, to be there with consistency.”

How much does character count in the end?

“A lot. Another weapon of mine was silent determination. That which does not need to raise its voice, but continues moving forward even when everything seems difficult. I learned not to give up, not to retreat, not to surrender what I believe in. Even when it

would have been more comfortable to take a step back. And finally, I believe much is linked to the fact that I never forgot who I am: a woman, a mother, a daughter of the South, a worker who chose to put her energy at the service of others.”

Has the fact that you are a very charming woman mattered in your life?

“My path was not built on shortcuts, but on presence, empathy, study, and passion. And perhaps that is my strongest weapon: having chosen every day to remain real.”

Do you still manage to have a private life?

“Mine is not just a job: it is a continuous responsibility. The union absorbs you, flows through you, brings you inside the stories and lives of others, and does not turn off with a schedule. There are days when I return late, my head still full of thoughts.”

Zero quality of private life, it seems to me?

“I confess that despite everything, I never give up my private life. I protect it in my own way, in the simplest things.”

Which are?

“A walk at sunset, a getaway to see my children, the company of a book... Small fragments of time that become oxygen. Sure, there is guilt at times. The fatigue of always being there for everyone, and a bit less for oneself. But I learned to live with this tension. To make peace with the idea that I cannot do everything, but I can do well what truly matters. And then there is a deep truth: no sharp line exists between my personal life and my union life. Because what I do arises from who I am. And if I choose every day to be there with passion, commitment, and heart, it is also to give meaning to all the rest. Even to my private life, which is perhaps less organized, but full of love and meaning.”

Then tell me, what was the last book you read to the end?

“Attilio Sabato's book, *Power and Powers*. It is the backstage of Calabrian politics.”

I imagine you liked it?

“The book is not just chronicle, but a deep reflection on the meaning of power in a region strongly marked by events, choices, hopes, and disappointments. Reading Attilio Sabato, I felt the weight but also the privilege of being part of a change. Those pages tell of a past that belongs to us, but must no longer belong to us. If today I chose to stay in Calabria, it is also to break that chain of resignation that often keeps everything still. Power today must change its face: it must be more transparent, more participatory, more human, and also more feminine.”

Do you have a song close to your heart?

“I have more than one, actually! I love Italian music, from Pooh to Negramaro, from Tiromancino to Tiziano Ferro, from Renato Zero to Giorgia.”

Give me one title, please

"The songs that represent me most are *La cura* by Battiato and *Combattente* by Mannoia. 'Whoever fights for something will never have lost.' And I see myself in that."

I imagine you at least remember the chorus?

"The lyrics of this song are a beautiful manifesto. It goes like this: 'Perhaps it is true, I have softened a bit / life has smoothed my edges / removed some rough spots. Time has stitched up some wounds / and perhaps taken away a bit of flexibility from my muscles / but do not underestimate my desire to fight / because it has stayed the same / do not underestimate anything about me...'"

I sense a pride in the things you say that is not common, believe me...

"You see, even on the hardest days, even when results do not come, I know why I am there. I know who I am talking to. And I know the meaning. Do you know how Mannoia's song continues?"

Frankly I do not know.

"I will tell you. It says: 'I am still always a fighter. / It is a rule that applies across the universe / whoever does not fight for something has already lost anyway / and even if fear makes me tremble / I never stopped fighting. For everything that is right / for everything I desired / for whoever asked me for help / for whoever truly loved me / and even if sometimes I made mistakes with someone / no one ever thanked me / I know that in the end everything you give comes back. / Because it is a rule that applies across the universe / whoever does not fight for something has already lost anyway / and even if the world can hurt / I never stopped fighting.'"

I will send this interview to Mannoia, I am sure I will be giving her a fine gift...

"Believe me, this song does not recount victory. It recounts the choice not to give up, even when you are tired, even when you are alone. It is a song for all women who get up every day and hold together family, work, commitment. For those who fight in silence. For those who choose to stay in their territory, even when everyone tells them it is useless."

I confess that many had already spoken to me about you as a "pasionaria", but I did not imagine finding so much drive in you.

"Do you know what the truth is? Every time I listen to this song, it reminds me that I am not the only one. That there are many of us. That hope, justice, dignity are also built like this: with a straight back and a heart always alight."

What place does the UIL occupy on your scale of values?

"The UIL is the union of the Third Millennium, with an ancient heart!"

The last rock concert you saw?

"I am not a rocker."

And the last movie seen at the cinema?

“There's Still Tomorrow by Paola Cortellesi.”

Why did you like it so much?

“It is not just a movie, and therefore a story, but above all a promise and a responsibility, namely that of building that tomorrow with courage and love.”

What, on the other hand, is Maria Senese's secret dream?

“My dream is for power to become a tool at the service of people. Because true change arises from those who do not resign themselves to power that divides, but dream of power that unites!”

You could not have told me anything more beautiful today; thank you so much for all the patience you dedicated to me.

“It was a pleasure for me to retrace my life. It is always good, don't you think?”



ELENA SODANO

"Where emotions become home" She is called the "Covid Heroine." Born in Catanzaro 60 years ago, on February 21, 1965, married and mother of two children, Rachele and Giuseppe, today Elena Sodano is awarded in squares across half of Italy as a "witness of our time." Someone would like her to be "Woman of the Year," but in Catanzaro there are already those who show us perhaps the most emblematic photo portraying her next to Public Prosecutor Nicola Gratteri, to whom Elena ideally hands over the keys to her beautiful "Therapeutic Community." I have known Elena Sodano for at least 40 years, back when she was an all around journalist, first at "Vuellesette Cinquestelle" then at "Gazzetta del Sud," where she still works dealing mainly with social issues. If back then I had had to imagine Elena's future, I would have said "she will become a great reporter."

A modern, well prepared, fast, thoughtful journalist, capable of major TV investigations but also skilled in reconstructing major events and news stories in print, it seemed her future was already marked, almost forced, especially in a region where it was not easy to reconcile good writing with a strong presence such as hers on television. I remember she was so determined and immediate that someone in those years even thought of running her in politics, but back then the parties were so well structured and monolithic that they did not allow "pindaric and bizarre flights." And so Elena continued for years to write, and above all to tell the story of Calabria from the screens of the Grandinetti television in Lamezia Terme.

Elena, what kind of family background do you come from? "My husband works as an educator in a rehabilitation center for drug addicts, and I have shared my life with him for 27 years. 24 years of marriage alone. I am the only daughter of two parents who, although elderly, are always busy with a thousand things. My mother is consumed by her passion for plants, animals, and sewing, while my father is passionate about cars, motorcycles, engines, carpentry, you know how people live around here. On little, and on a thousand things all at once. I live at home with three dogs, including a Czechoslovakian Wolfdog and a completely blind crossbreed. I have a great passion for succulents, I care for my beloved orchids like children, and then my books, which nurtured my dreams as a child and later as a young girl."

From a highly talented journalist, to what else? "After my degree in Literature and Philosophy, DAMS branch at the University of Calabria in Cosenza, I obtained a master's degree in Work and Organizational Psychology in Rome. But I am not a psychologist, as I chose never to take the State Licensing Exam. Deep down, I wanted to do what I am actually doing now. I wanted to create 'Ideal Places' to better care for complex patients."

Behind her, Elena Sodano has a highly respectable CV. A three year specialization course in Communication Sciences at the University of Camerino, two second level Master's degrees (the first in "Healthcare Governance and Management," the second in "Clinical Neuropsychology"), and in 2010 she also found the time to earn a diploma as a "Dance Therapist." Seven years later, she debuted with an essay titled *The Body in Dementia*:

Integrated Corporeal Expressive Therapy in Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias (Maggioli Editore Sanità, 2017), which effectively established her as the "Creator of the TECI nonpharmacological therapeutic method for the treatment of dementia (Integrated Corporeal Expressive Therapy)."

Elena, where shall we start?

"From the first thing people might want to know. What do I do in life? Well, I like to define myself as an 'Entrepreneur of Soul Care.' Because every sick person would want and should be an object of care, and the world would be a much better place if all of us cared more for one another. My slogan is this: 'Care protects life and cultivates the possibility of existing.'"

Is it true that your approach with patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia marked your life?

"In an unimaginable way. In front of people, and I ask you to write *people* with a capital P, affected by dementia, I did not resign myself to what was once erroneously said about them and their aggressive, hostile behaviors."

What are the fundamental questions that justify your social commitment in recent years?

"First, what does it mean to live inside a body whose brain slowly atrophies due to the progression of Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia? Second, is it a body that manages to coexist with dementia, or one that must relentlessly bear its weight? These are precisely the questions I asked myself in 2008 when one of our patients, whose name I could even tell you, but perhaps we would violate his privacy, walked through the door of our day centers."

The first of a long series, I imagine?

"After him, many other sick people came to us. People who were experiencing dementia in their own body and soul in an individual way; people, bodies moving alongside other bodies, relating to one another through unusual languages, erratic speech, caresses, innate gestures belonging to their past, to a gestural repertoire that, like fingerprints, represented unique and indelible legacies that no brain degeneration had yet erased. But that body represented the only tool they had available to still feel like protagonists of their own existence. Yet that body, at the moment of final diagnosis, was no longer taken into consideration, because it was as if the diagnosis of dementia suddenly pulled the plug on all physical, emotional, and affective contact."

But in the end, are we talking only about bodies? Matter, and nothing else?

"A very serious mistake. I knew that there is not just one memory, and that among the many, there was also body memory, a universal memory that transformed that living, emotional body into an immediately expressive life biography going beyond the pathology. And that is where my journey began. It was a search mixed with a strong dose of curiosity that led me to cross regional and national borders, meet specialists in the field, compare notes with them, draw upon experiences, and above all feel comforted by the fact

that the body of people with dementia, from a fragmented element, could become a recognized and appreciated body despite its quirks.”

In your book, you talk about long periods of "individual observations." What does that mean? “For months and months, I began observing the movements and gestures of patients affected by various dementias that came to life in slow bodies, because activities taken for granted became slowed and hesitant. Empty bodies, as acquired habits and practices were lost. Lost bodies, because disoriented in an unfamiliar world. Silent bodies, because over time a sort of bodily evanescence manifests, and ultimately one stops perceiving one's own physical boundaries. But in front of me were actually living, lived bodies. Expressive bodies, not organisms devoid of impulses. Needs, gestures, symbols. People to be understood, in short, and gestures to be decoded. But it was in this dimension that I chose to remain, because I was convinced that therapeutic defeat occurs wherever there is a refusal to give meaning to the most mortified existence. It happens every day with Alzheimer's patients.”

And in 2002, what you called "RaGi" was born?

“Ra.Gi., which stands for the initials of my children's names, was born with a precise objective. I wanted to make known in Calabria, right in my home, in the land of my life, the importance of bodily relationship and communication in places of care. I am talking about psychiatric illnesses, oncology, ALS, and multiple sclerosis. All of this, I told myself, had to reach schools, correctional facilities, and the heart of civil society across the entire region. And the common thread was to look behind appearances, stereotypes, and prejudices to uncover 'the false myths of an imperfect dementia.'”

What was the most important year of your growth?

“Without a doubt, 2007. It was the year in which, thanks to the approval of the 'Soli Mai Più' (Never Alone Again) project by the Ministry of the Interior, we gave life in Calabria to the first and only Day Center for the care of neurodegenerative diseases. We called it 'Spazio Al.Pa.De.', which stands for Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and Dementia, shifting the focus of care from a strictly caregiving aspect to a more 'existential' vision of the disease, devising, despite a thousand difficulties, the best strategies to safeguard the integrity of people with dementia and promote a meaningful, healthy *modus vivendi*. Because in my view, community care carried out in synergy with natural riches can become, for people with dementia, that necessary therapeutic safeguard to satisfy their needs. Thanks to this project, we created Calabria's first Alzheimer's Café, now Dementia Café, a meeting point for numerous families who receive support, information, and training every month inside our day center on how to manage their family member at home as well.”

If you had to thank someone today, who comes to mind first?

“I created TECI after years of observing the people with dementia we hosted in our Center, supported by the studies of Dr. Pia Kontos, health anthropologist at the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, and Dr. Deborah Barnes of the University of California, San Francisco. But I also owe thanks to the president of the 'School of Dance Therapy Expressive Relational Method,' Vincenzo Bellia, psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and group

analyst, an intense journey that allowed me to reach better bodily awareness and further deepen, in this specific case, the applications of the body in dementias.”

May I ask what lies at the foundation of all this research work?

“Above all, my love for Philosophy, mainly linked to Greek myths. Philosophical studies encouraged me to love the word *therapeía*, understood as that inner journey human beings take to find the path to their personal well-being in the absolute normality of living. For us, a hug given to patients is therapeutic. Seeing them in their soul is therapeutic. Touching their skin is therapeutic. Looking them in the eye, paying attention to them, and observing them with the full importance they deserve is therapeutic. For a thirsty man, drinking a glass of water is the most natural therapy there is, because water represents the tool that slakes his thirst and makes him feel good. From this comes the concept of embodied individuality in people with dementia, believing that, in the face of brain devastation, the body is the only tool a person with dementia has to show themselves to the world as a living, lived person full of experiences, emotions, sensations, and emotional memories. Not an inactive body, but a body as a source of an individuality waiting to be discovered.”

Where are we located exactly?

“Cicala is a small village in the Catanzaro Presila with barely 900 souls, with a funny name perhaps, but with a very important story to tell. It is a story of welcoming, humanity, and solidarity ever since 2018, when newspapers identified it as the first 'Dementia Friendly Village', what Americans would call a 'Dementia Friendly Community.' Ours is an innovative spirit speaking of true social and community inclusion, thanks also to a training program launched among all the village shopkeepers focused on positive relationships and communication to be established with sick people.”

How did the idea of the "Casa Paese"

(Home Village) come about? “The idea of the Casa Paese was born during the lockdown in recent months, when we had to modify our therapeutic interventions, which moved from the Catanzaro Day Center, a facility specific to people with dementia, directly into our guests' homes. It was then, in speaking with their families, that we realized the greatest pain in these 'cases' was not so much the progression of the disease, but rather no longer being able to manage their loved ones' behavioral disturbances, naturally fearing they would have to give up and decide to place these patients in facilities where people with dementia are often accepted but viewed as seriously problematic elements.”

In what sense, Elena?

“You see, a person with dementia respects no rules. It is unthinkable that they can live without causing disruption. A person with dementia wakes up at night convinced they have to shave to go to work. Often, if it is a woman, due to her hallucinations, she hears the cries of a newborn baby she needs to breastfeed. A patient in these conditions is truly difficult to manage. They wander around the house aimlessly, ask and repeat the same things over and over, sometimes run away, other times want to go back to their mother. But there is worse. They do not contain their instincts, they are disinhibited, they soil

everywhere. A condition almost impossible to manage, especially for family members living with them, and this generates an emotional storm that is very often met with completely inadequate tools.”

How do you think we can overcome this, Elena?

“Let us start from a fundamental premise. Facilities that accommodate people with dementia today are almost all detached from the world, because it is as if the society we live in needs to defend and protect itself from those who represent, erroneously, an unintentional danger. Often, daily activities take place in close contact with many other people who are, however, incompatible with Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia. Everyone is often forced to do the exact same thing; there are pre-established schedules, activities are imposed from above and usually never reflect the wishes of the sick person. And so people fade away. They are deprived of their identity and consciousness. All this while, everywhere else, places of entertainment, freedom, and refreshment are increasingly provided for human beings.”

Easy to say, but perhaps not so simple to do?

“In our daily commitment, we have no intention of manipulating the needs of people affected by dementia. They are people, mind you, not just elderly. This is a false cliché. Our youngest patient today is 40 years old, having entered the day center at 38. There are very young women with early onset Alzheimer's and frontotemporal dementia in whom I see myself. They are the real big challenge for me. Being close to them, you ultimately become convinced that if you truly love them, you must offer them a comfortable environment where they can live.”

And is that enough?

“My belief is that if an 'environment' is capable of destroying an individual, an 'environment' can also reorganize and heal them. That is why, and thanks to winning a municipal tender for an 800 square meter building provided by the Municipality of Cicala, the Casa Paese project was born. A House, which is the living environment par excellence, inside of which a Village will then be built: a core of cohabitation and public sharing. Do you know how we envisioned it? As a simple environment, a domestic corner enriched with familiar, personal objects, where the real activities of the village are recreated through specific cabinets that, when opened, transform into actual shops, from the newsstand to the cafe, passing through the square, the train station, the greengrocer, and the flower shop, which can be easily enjoyed by people with dementia. There will be no common rooms, but sun terraces and squares. There will be no cafeteria, but an actual restaurant and pizzeria where guests can enjoy desired dishes, even in the company of their families.”

Put like that, it almost sounds like a fairytale...

“I see you continue to be skeptical. Follow me, please. The Casa Paese we designed here in Cicala will have a layout, a configuration, different from what we find today in public healthcare facilities. Each room will be occupied by two people, and all spaces will be ritualized and reconfigured into a model of past life. The area outside the structure will become a large 'Memory Garden' with a sensory path enriched with medicinal plants,

herbs, and essences typical of Calabria. What's more, we have also envisioned an animal therapy path through the setup of protected areas featuring domestic and farm animals, and our guests will be the ones taking care of them.”

So, horticultural therapy and gardening?

“To say that trivializes everything. You see, even the passage of time inside the Casa Paese will respect the inverted rhythms created by the progression of the disease, from the moment the patient wakes up to morning hygiene, breakfast, early activities, lunch, and all those ritual and personal moments that mark the passage of the day for them. In all of this, we must not forget the 'Wall of Giving' surrounding the building, which will be tiled with the names of those who are actively lending a hand to this fantastic undertaking of ours.”

No public funding, no state agreements. How do you build a Casa Paese like this one in Cicala? “To achieve all this, we launched a fundraising campaign designed to cover the expenses for furnishing the Casa Paese, because careful, targeted environmental design focused on these spheres of fragility is required, considering the progressive changes brought by the disease. Reaching the final goal requires everyone's help, because even a small donation can change the lives of dozens of people and their families. In our view, 'readaptive environment design' certainly does not heal dementia on its own, because dementia cannot be cured, but if we succeed in making these people live in a pleasant habitat, then perhaps in the end we will have managed to mitigate the inner anger every patient carries, helping them bear their hardship and desperation with greater dignity and comfort.”

Elena, couldn't this seem like pure utopia?

“I assure you that the Cicala Casa Paese for dementia is not just a project, but fundamentally a cultural shift toward a disease like dementia, which must assume social and not merely medical dimensions. A project speaking of inclusion, community care, and local support. How can I explain it better? Above all, this is a cultural challenge for us that means 'not resigning ourselves' to a sterile label that defines a person with dementia as irreversibly ill and capable of nothing more. Too often, the final diagnosis carries a discriminatory weight, excluding the person with dementia from the world of the so called healthy, freeing society from its critical and, if you will, 'disruptive' elements, as people with dementia are considered to be. Through the Casa Paese, instead, we hope to draw a deep line between the concept of segregation and discrimination, and the solid foundations of inclusion and normal life in a natural environment. A truly beautiful story.”



GIUSY STAROPOLI CALAFATI

"Corrado Alvaro's biographer" Briatico, where the sea makes its noise looking toward the Aeolian Islands. With "My life starts from a small town on the Calabrian coast, an inner joy that has truly irrepressible dimensions." It happens in Calabria, where new writers grow. New writers step into the outside world, new writers find themselves at the top of bestseller lists, new writers return to the common ground of the old masters of Southern literature and focus their attention on the great magic of our mountains and our sea, from Aspromonte to the Strait of Messina, from Costa Viola to the Mediterranean Sea, so wonderfully recounted over these years by a journalist and writer who goes by the name of Mimmo Nunnari.

The difference this time is one of gender. Because, this time, trying her hand at telling the story of this land, which is always very complicated, and of its people, who still seem condemned to eternal resignation, is a young woman whom we will hear a lot about in the coming years, and who today possesses a rare gift, that of writing. Writing as a denuncia. Never as in this case. Writing as an instrument of social redemption, writing as a quest for beauty, writing as an ideological and moral testament to one's own pain and suffering. Writing, above all, as a beacon of hope for an entire community. Woman and writing, together. In this case, they are the same thing. They are the reflection of the same image, where the woman has a precise name, Giusy Staropoli Calafati, and where writing is the emotional part that belongs to her the most. Writing as a modern language, writing as a tool for dialogue, writing in some cases as a mass provocation, which she also uses daily to tell her own story, her life, her 43 years carried in a brazen and almost arrogant manner. But she does so just as well with all the rest of her life, starting from the magic of her paternal grandfather's memories, and the complicated yet sweet encounter with her maternal grandmother. She, the daughter of a couple who to fulfill their dream of love resorted to the classic "fuitina" of times past, she today dealing with four children still to raise who cannot wait to realize their dreams probably elsewhere, far from the land that their mother loves so passionately.

She, with a business behind her to think about to help her husband, and then again, always her, dealing with the thousand existential doubts of small Italian provinces and the beautiful memories of many different Christmases past and lived with her grandparents, when in winter they waited for the frost to slaughter the pig, because that back then was the real celebration of the family and the town that gathered closely around it. Perhaps the strongest memory that Giusy Staropoli Calafati has today of her past is the olive green color of her grandparents' car, a first model 127, in which her grandparents every now and then drove down to the marina from the countryside and came to visit her, in this house of hers where there was always so much work to do, especially in the summer, and this still weighs on her for the simple fact of not having gone for as many swims in the sea as her playmates did.

Denied summers, or rather, deeply desired and impossible summers. A film could even be made out of this personal and intimate story of hers.

“I was born in September weighing barely three kilos. My mother always says I had eyes like two olives. Big and bright. I grew up fast. My mother claims I was in a continuous race against time. One step for time, one step behind for me. And by goodness, I beat it! I became a lively and spirited child in a flash. And, abracadabra, I found myself a woman just as, once evening passes, one already finds oneself in the morning. From lively to stubborn; from docile to obstinate, resistant and resilient at the same time. My name is Giusy. In town, I am Giusina to everyone. I am 43 years old, have four children, and a mountain of dreams to realize. Which, mind you, is not garbage but dreams. I am a wife, mother, aunt, and since I was born I continue to be a daughter and sister. I am a good friend, at least I think so. Just ask my best friend Cetty, but do not take advantage, she might tell you everything about me.”

Giusy Staropoli Calafati is today the most modern provocation of herself. You grasp this firsthand when you meet her for the first time, and the first thing she throws in your face is the basic outlook of her life: “Being born in Calabria is not a choice. Being Calabrian is.”

A courageous woman, without any ornaments, with no hesitation in saying what she thinks, not fearful of anything or anyone, not even of the Neapolitan writer Roberto Saviano who just a few days ago, regarding Alberto Angela's special “Stanotte a Napoli” broadcast in prime time on RAI Uno on Christmas night, used very harsh words against his hometown.

“The beauty of Naples,” this was Roberto Saviano's comment, “is not sparkling, but full of cracks and scars... Naples is like the Christ in the Sansevero Chapel which, although veiled, reveals every vein, every spasm, proving that covering is not enough to forget, hide, or erase. Using the beauty of a city to delegitimize the narrative of what happens is not a sign of ignorance or superficiality, but of bad faith...”

Giusy, your reaction against Roberto Saviano was quite striking...

“I only wrote what I thought. Roberto Saviano, who by now has eyes only for his Gomorrah, while Naples is a thousand cultures, did nothing other than make himself complicit in a further harm against his own land. A people does not become morally poor to be recognized as prophets within it. Naples is Italy. Naples is beauty. It is art, it is culture. It is national identity.”

Giusy, can you explain to me what writing actually represents for a woman, mother, debut and yet successful writer like you?

“Writing is my life. It is everything most beautiful I could hope to have and cultivate. Writing for me is truly a thousand different things all together. It is freedom, it is revolution, it is provocation, it is a declaration of the most reserved and intimate feelings, it is a form of public confession without a net, without useless ornaments, without limits, transparent, strict, real, as much a mirror of myself and the things I believe in as ever. Writing is like daydreaming, because language leads you to discover the soul, and when you find the courage to tell the story of your soul then you have reached the maximum degree of your freedom. And writing is like feeling one step ahead of others, I do not mean 'better', but one step ahead of whoever is beside you, yes, because of a sensitivity and a responsibility that, if you write for others, you cannot fail to have.”

What was your first author's test? Your first book?

“My first real book was a poetry book. It was published by Edizioni Sabine and was titled 'La mia Terra'. Several other works followed this first one, until in 2015 I participated in a RAI competition, the famous Premio La Giara literary prize, where I participated with my first real novel. 'La terra del ritorno' was the title of that first work of mine. With this book, I must admit, I lived an extraordinary experience. Many other awards and recognitions. Read and studied in many schools, and not only in Calabria. 'La Terra del Ritorno', published by Pellegrini of Cosenza, dedicated to the writer Saverio Strati, allowed me to realize a great dream: getting to know Calabria by becoming a true writer, allowing me to visit and touch firsthand the most remote and forgotten realities of Calabria as a recognized Calabrian. I presented this novel everywhere, from Aspromonte to Pollino, hamlet after hamlet, neighborhood by neighborhood, I met truly everything and everyone, I spoke with thousands of young people, I finally understood what my land of origin really is today, and today I am proud to be its daughter and an integral part of it.”

What does Giusy carry inside her?

“At the end of this long and endless journey, I put everything inside my backpack. From the very different dialects encountered along the way, to the traditions and customs of our peasant land, to the stories of many men and women of Calabria. Believe me, a dream that became reality. A powerful experience that both I and my Calabria needed, and that we deeply shared. You see, as a child and then as a young girl, beyond my school books I did not like reading very much, and novels back then did not interest me at all. Then, once I graduated, I began devouring books of every kind, and I understood and experienced firsthand that reading a book means traveling the world while remaining seated in one single physical or geographical place. Reading opens your heart, opens your mind, opens your spirit; it is a window continuously open to people and their thousand different stories.”

Is it true that at a certain point in your life, a passion for dance also entered forcefully?

“Yes, it is very true, I danced on point shoes for many years, wrapped in the veils of a tutu. My mother always tells me, even now, that I was beautiful. After my passion for Italian essays, dance was my greatest passion. I started at nine years old, and I continued until Raffaele, my firstborn, was about two. Then I quit. There was something else I felt drawn to. And not that I did not love dance anymore, quite the contrary. It remained my primal spark, an intimate feeling, I just need to listen again, even now, to Bizet's Carmen or Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker, and immediately the desire to return to dancing is reborn inside me. With the same force as when I was nine. Since I stopped dancing I have not changed, I have simply evolved, I have matured. I am a woman with balls, my father says. And when I contradict him, he smiles. I am a provincial writer, I say, living in Briatico, in the province of Vibo Valentia. But never provincial, someone else adds. You cannot depart from truth. I do not drink to get drunk, except for a good glass of wine made from an indigenous Calabrian vine. I do not smoke, I do not gamble except at the betting center of life.”

Not just dance in your life, though?

“It is true, I have many new passions. I sing so as not to forget, when the mood strikes me, and I love with the boldness of a teenager the sea in front of my house, into which I immerse myself like Scilla and Charybdis. In summer and winter. When it is gloomy and alone. This is indeed a passion and a vice for which I could be prosecuted and convicted. Like when I feel my veins tremble as soon as the sound of the tarantella reaches me clearly.

Wherever it comes from. From Aspromonte or Pollino. I have done many things, I have certainly done 43 things. One thing for every year of my life. Some good, others terrible.”

Giusy, how do you manage to write so much as you do, with a heavy family like yours, four children and a thousand problems to solve for each of them?

“I became a mother for the first time when I was only 22 years old. 'Who cares', someone might say. But what can I say? Raffaele had chosen me at the speed of light, and I welcomed him, reckless of course, but making him immediately the most precious part of my body first, and my life later. At 25 I had Roberta. In the flower of my youth she joined me too. I was becoming a mother for the second time. Instead of playing with dolls, I played with children. The satisfaction of the flesh. I had chosen them over a career. There is always time to achieve success, I told myself, but not to have children. *Carpe Diem!*”

Four children, a life full of so many things, but did you expect a life like this?

“I had never been able to give a precise face to my children, not even at night in my dreams, yet they always matched my desires exactly. They were perfect, in short, just as I would have wanted them. With Roberta it was extraordinary. I was living what my mother had lived with me. The same nature, above all. At 28, without ifs or buts, Antonino was born. Very stylish. A trio of hearts. Mother for the third time. My friends were not even married yet, many are still not now, while I already had a six year old son, a three year old daughter, and another newborn. It is not that I had imagined my life seeing myself only as a mother in this world, far from it, but a mother once she begins this strange yet extraordinary adventure never stops participating in her children's game, not even when dead. Whether it is one or three.”

We said four children, not three?

“I was not sure I was born to be a mother, but I was certainly on a special mission on Earth. Among humans. At 32, and this time suddenly, by chance, an unexpected turn, Nazareno arrived as well, definitively marking 'my' cycle of children. 32 years old and 4 children. Becoming a mother is not taken for granted, it does not always happen. To me it happened. Thank goodness. I had not become a teacher as I wrote in my fifth grade essay, but a mother. And it was super wonderful. Beyond the dream.”

You seem like a very happy mother?

“I grew up with my children. We grew mutually, together. Today the kids are respectively 21, 18, 15, and 11 years old. I am 43. The right age to do today what my friends did at 22, knowing that at 43 they cannot do anymore what I did back then. I do not know well if life is more a coincidence or more a destiny. Maybe it is simply a destined coincidence. The one whose story I like to write today. The only one that begins, as my grandmother used to say, with an eye lock.”

One of your most beautiful books in my opinion is “Terra Santissima”

“‘Terra Santissima’ is an important book, one I care about particularly, which I dedicate to anyone who feels they belong to a piece of a town or a slice of land, to a very high mountain peak, or to a sea shore, anywhere in the world. Presenting Aspromonte as the center of the world was truly exciting, making known the journey of Simona Giunta and her love for her secret identity was a necessity.”

Giusy, how does it feel to read that your book is loved so much, especially by young people? “I had never participated in a contest with one of my novels. 'Terra Santissima' unexpectedly found itself included among the books to be voted Best Calabria Book 2021. It all started like that, by chance. In very little time all hell broke loose, as someone might say. I instead say a kind of magic circle that, on the verge of closing, continuously reopened. One vote after another, like cormorants in flight. A crescendo of numbers that, in these days, besides keeping me company, has grown in me the strong awareness of having succeeded over time, through my writing, in diving straight into the hearts of so many people. Men and women, young and old from every part of Calabria, Italy, and the world. And believe me, there is no prize that can give greater gratification than the one coming directly from the community of readers.”

What was Giusy like as a young girl?

“Until I was seventeen I loved runways very much. I was Miss Province Vibo Valentia in 1998. Then I was reborn. In the sense that I grew up. I embarked on the road toward the life that brought me up to here. Up to maturity. I am many things together today, but above all, among all, before all others, I am a woman. A free woman, with too many ideas and strong ideals, projects, struggles, thoughts, and also enough courage. To write about certain things it really takes a lot of courage.”

What is the thing you miss most today?

“I miss my grandparents, it might seem strange to you but that is how it is. I miss above all grandmother Peppa, my paternal grandmother whom I never knew. On the other hand, I grew up with my grandfather and his eternal lectures, his infinite advice, a charismatic and unforgettable man. An irreplaceable, omnipresent, persistent, enveloping reference point in every sense. He had remained a widower while still young, my grandmother died when she was 59, and he remained alone all these years waiting for his children to return from Germany where they had emigrated and where they worked with asphalt. Grandparents, what a wonder, life could not give us anything better.”

What kind of childhood does Giusy remember?

“A beautiful childhood. If I could go back I would relive it just as I lived it. With my eyes always full of my sea, and my best life spent in the countryside. My grandparents before leaving for Germany had taken a plot of land, which they resumed cultivating once they returned to Briatico. And my father had done the same thing. At lunchtime they closed the clothing shop we had and until four thirty they went to the countryside, our land was called 'Gaio', and from here came the nickname given in town to my family, the 'Gaioti'. It almost sounded like an insult, sure it was a nickname, but one I never felt offended by. All of this was my native land, all of this belonged to me deeply, and nothing would have been any other way. I think of the many Christmases spent all together in the countryside, I think of the pig slaughtered all together during the winter frosts, I think of the holidays spent entirely with family and many people around, I think of the pain of grief and funerals that in a town like this are still communal and belong to everyone.”

Not a day goes by where on your social media channels or in the magazines where you write you do not praise Calabrian literature...

“I simply do so because I am increasingly convinced that literature can save Calabria.”

In what sense, Giusy?

“No one is finished as long as they have a book to read in their hands. And in the books of Southern authors, the greatest truths of the country are collected. That is where the right directions to follow are recorded to fully reclaim, with an unmistakable vision from North to South, our identity. With wisdom, with awareness, and above all with a great sense of responsibility.”

Do you not believe that this is a wishful or risky choice?

“I absolutely believe the opposite. Culture is a precious, collective good, for which it is necessary that everyone invests everything that can be spent. It is on knowledge that the present and future of a generation are played out. Knowing Alvaro, Strati, Perri, La Cava, Seminara, Repaci, Calogero, Costabile, De Angelis, Zappone, and many others could be a true turning point for all of Italy.”

Is it true that Saverio Strati was the anchor of your great passion for literature?

“Absolutely yes. I was a young girl when I met Saverio Strati for the first time. It happened at school. I was in roughly fifth grade. A new master, our teacher told us. Short stature, white hair, leather soled shoes, and an overcoat the color of sea sand. And under his arm a leather pouch. That was where he pulled out 'Fiabe Calabresi e Lucane', which my classmates and I had already read in class, and of which he was the author, together with the professor, our fellow townsman, Luigi Maria Lombardi Satriani. From then on I never saw him again. In fact, I completely lost track of him, but only until destiny put us back on the same road, and finding each other again we never left each other. I dedicate my literary journey to Strati. He is my greatest master of letters. And as long as I have a voice I will speak of the master to young people, I will recommend his books, I will spread his thought and his poetry.”

Is there another Calabrian writer you would have liked to meet in your life and get to know better?

“I would have very much liked to meet Mario La Cava, the lawyer, the writer originally from Bovalino. If I had met him I am certain I would have spent hours and hours talking about the Calabria that he described so well in his books and with which I fell deeply in love. In all his writings one senses this feeling of redemption, of social growth for his land, something that did not come to pass, but in which La Cava believed immensely.”

Is there a person in your life and in your memories whom you consider your true great master? “Without any shadow of a doubt, my father. I have a strange relationship with him. I am not capable of expressing my feelings, but with my father I have a special, different, visceral relationship. Believe me, I do not know how to explain it well to you. But my father was my first reader, my first fan, my first judge, even strict and uncompromising, but he is the one who pushes me to go forward, he is the one who convinced me not to give up, to believe in my abilities and in my desire to write about everything and anything. He is a force of nature, he taught me what life is, whose side to be on, and from which side to look at the outside world, my guide, my icon, my most insane passion, my conscience most of the time, he first explained to me what work, sacrifice, pain, suffering, hardship, and death are. And if I have a strong and healthy family like the one I believe I have, the credit goes to him, for

having passed on to me the fundamental values of home, community, sharing, solidarity, the essential nature of family, all of this bears my father's name.”



MARIA TRIPODI

A woman of the Republic "I am deeply grateful to President Silvio Berlusconi, for the trust he has placed in me. It is truly a great honor to be part of the government team in the prestigious role of Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. I assure my party, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and my colleagues in government of my total commitment to serving our extraordinary country with selflessness, discipline and honor."

The voice and images of this young Woman of the Republic come to us from very far away. More precisely from Baghdad, where delegated by the Vice President of the Council and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Antonio Tajani, Maria Tripodi, newly appointed Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs in the government led by Giorgia Meloni, is taking part in the VI Ministerial Meeting of the Ancient Civilizations Forum. It is one of the most solemn Italian events of the year, a genuine platform for cultural dialogue and cooperation aimed at enhancing the heritage of ancient civilizations in the contemporary world through the tools of cultural diplomacy.

Petite, elegant, with an understated all Italian elegance, the austere posture of a woman of State, and above all the proud character of a woman who lives the world day to day, who knows international dynamics as if she had always done this job, with a distinctly Mediterranean flair and the awareness of having to give her absolute best always and everywhere, because wherever she goes, as she now understands completely, she represents the image of modern Italy.

My goodness, what an emotion it must be for a young woman like her, born and raised in one of the most remote places in the world, to know she is in Baghdad and know she must represent her country in the best possible way. A natural daughter of the South, South of the South, South south of Calabria, between Melito Porto Salvo and San Lorenzo, or even better between San Lorenzo and Chorio, Chorio with the stress strictly on the i, the heart of the Grecanico area of the province of Reggio Calabria, where once people spoke ancient Greek alongside the local dialect, and where street names are still written and indicated in ancient Greek. A piece of the world far from everything, which only a few people still know really well, because to know it you have to travel all the way down here, and once arrived you must journey through hills and waterways to learn to love it. I believe it is truly one of the most evocative and beautiful natural paradises in Calabria. A territory marked and touched by the waters of the legendary Amendolea riverbed, the riverbed of Melito, known to the Arabs as "wadi al asal", "the river of honey" which was produced in large quantities in the surrounding areas. In its upper part, near the source, one can still admire the characteristic granite gorges, the wonders of the Tuccio Valley, a valley created and shaped by the path of the river, surrounding small villages and rural communities named Bagaladi, Ielasi, Lanzena, Cappella Vecchia, San Fantino, Chorio di San Lorenzo, Ravazzana, Musupuniti (or Musopuniti), Caredia, Lacco, Prunella, Pallica, and at the mouth, Melito di Porto Salvo. Our Woman of the Republic was born right around here, someone we went

looking for at the Farnesina for days, whom we chased for weeks, because her real office since becoming Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs is no longer so much at the Farnesina near the Olympic Stadium in Rome, but aboard airplanes carrying her continuously from one part of the world to another, day and night, as required by her institutional role and foreign policy dynamics.

The best thing people tell us about Maria Tripodi at the Farnesina is that she never strays from her true self, an exceptionally polite woman, rigorous, disarmingly modest, stubborn, determined, intelligent, yet there is not a single person inside this solemn and austere palace who could say "I run into her and she does not greet me." The greatness of this Woman of the Republic lies precisely in her sense of hospitality, in the style she reserves for anyone she happens to meet, in her endless willingness for dialogue and discussion, in her clear and open warmth, and in this sense of respect and politeness that goes beyond institutionality, shown even to the most junior usher in the building. A rare woman in this regard. Consider that the first time she arrived at the Ministry, because in truth the Farnesina feels like a real Royal Palace, someone mistook her for one of Minister Tajani's personal assistants, and many others assumed she was a new intern. Instead she was the new Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs. Behind Maria Tripodi's personal story there is actually a serious, important, constant parliamentary commitment worthy of a top tier political figure, proving how hard this young woman of government worked before becoming number two at the Farnesina. We requested her official parliamentary record from the Quartermasters of the Chamber of Deputies, which reveals the immense volume of work the Calabrian undersecretary accomplished over all these years.

Steeped in international culture, fluent in foreign languages, meticulously documented and punctual in every public appearance, an expert in European laws and regulations like few others at the Farnesina, passionate about good music and fine reading, Maria Tripodi is considered today by Italian diplomacy as the ideal person to send on behalf of the State to the hottest and most challenging regions of the world, because sometimes a simple smile is enough to restore ancient diplomatic relations, perhaps compromised by the games of international politics, back to more cordial and accessible human interactions. In these first weeks of institutional commitment, Maria Tripodi has shown herself to be at the top of the internal ranking within Antonio Tajani's ministry. It is pointless to try to imagine what a man like Vice President of the Council Antonio Tajani thinks of her, having known Maria Tripodi since she was a very young university student and the most dynamic and brilliant soul of the Forza Italia youth movement, a tireless young activist, always present, deeply in love with the visionary philosophy of Silvio Berlusconi, whom she considers her absolute reference point regarding her political foundation. Party politics was almost a faith for her, or rather a religion, which saw her grow full of civic passion, rich in meaningful values, full of enthusiasm and vitality, and this above all else must have pleased the party leadership. In this regard, Maria Tripodi owes thanks to no one; she reached these heights solely on merit, recognized today across international diplomatic circles by those who have met her personally.

Her latest official speech in Baghdad brings her back to the full exercise of her official duties as a member of the Italian government, reminding us how Italy is at the forefront so that Culture and the defense of Heritage gain greater prominence on the international agenda: "Working together for the protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage, which as UNESCO teaches us," she says, "is always everyone's heritage, can help heal wounds, overcome misunderstandings, restore dialogue and rebuild conditions for peace." But the Italian undersecretary goes beyond this concept, adding that "Italy's firm commitment to multilateral cooperation is also expressed bilaterally through sharing the expertise our country has developed in the field for over half a century." And here Maria Tripodi shares with the world of international diplomacy the fundamental role of the Carabinieri Corps.

"The activities of the Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage," Maria Tripodi emphasizes, "now work alongside the Blue Helmets for Culture and the training activities of the International School of Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Culture, whose 2022 Program is specifically dedicated to Technologies for Archaeology." It is the formal celebration of the increasingly central and pervasive role of Culture in economic and social systems, and consequently in international relations, a true masterclass in International Law. This culminated, after meeting Prime Minister Mohamed Shia Al Soudani, in an even more solemn ceremony: an official visit to the Italian military contingent in Baghdad, accompanied by Ambassador Greganti and welcomed by the commander, General Iannucci.

Born in 1982, having turned 40 on July 21st, under the zodiac sign of Cancer, known for the strong influence of the Moon, an important zodiac sign that accompanies highly sensitive and emotional people throughout their lives, endowed with a high level of empathy. This, experts repeat, connects us with true dreamers, men and women immediately recognizable by their romantic nature and artistic flair, individuals with strong imaginations, dynamic, lovers of travel and new world discoveries. Yet one must never forget that Cancer is the quintessential sign of family and home, reflecting the most intimate and reserved side of our cover story today. Here too, in her case, a top student background.

Maria Tripodi graduated in International and European Political Studies, specializing in International Relations at Sapienza University of Rome. In July 2022, she completed her Master in Economic Security, Geopolitics and Intelligence at SIOI, the Italian Society for International Organization. A member of the Italian Society of Military History (SISM) and a high profile consultant for public and private institutions, she was appointed as an Expert for the PDL group at the Chamber of Deputies during the XVI Legislature to draft legislative bills and legal opinions. One could say Maria Tripodi was born ready, prepared from a very young age for prestigious roles. Over the years, she held various coordination roles bridging Regional Administration structures such as the Regional Executive, Legislative Assembly, Departments, and the Community and International Affairs Commission, handling sensitive matters including International Relations with the European Union, European Funds, Maritime and Mediterranean Regions, Cooperation with Developing Countries, and Migration Flows within the State Regions Conference, the key arena for political negotiation between Italy's Central Administrations and the system of Regional Autonomies.

Passionate about politics from an early age, in January 2005, when she was barely in her twenties, she joined Forza Italia Youth, serving in various roles coordinating all election

campaigns. In 2007 she was elected to the Youth Forum of the Lazio Region, a representative body for young people under 35 that issues opinions upon request from the Executive or Council regarding initiatives affecting the living and working conditions of youth and contributes to developing regional policies in their favor.

On March 27, 2010, she was appointed National Head of Organization for the center right youth movement, a position she held continuously until the Youth Congress on November 11, 2018. On December 14, 2011, she was elected in Brussels as National Vice Secretary of the Italian Youth of the European People's Party, a political platform awarded the European Charlemagne Youth Prize for projects aimed at engaging young people with EU institutions. In the 2014 European Elections, she ran as a representative of the youth movement for the European Parliament in the Southern Italy constituency, securing 15,923 votes on the Forza Italia Berlusconi President list.

Since 2015, she has been a member of the Council of Presidents of YEPP (Youth of the European People's Party), which includes 64 youth organizations from center right political parties across 40 European countries. In the 2018 general elections, she was elected to the Chamber of Deputies on the Forza Italia list for the Calabria 02 multi member constituency. On June 21, 2018, she was elected Forza Italia Group Leader in the IV Standing Committee on Defense at Montecitorio. On November 19, 2019, she was appointed by the President of the Chamber of Deputies Roberto Fico as a member of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the death of Giulio Regeni. A woman of records in every sense. In the general election of September 25, 2022, she was among the youngest candidates for the Senate of the Republic, emerging as the first non elected candidate on the Forza Italia list in the Calabria multi member constituency. On October 31, 2022, the Council of Ministers appointed her Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in the Meloni Government.

- Shall we start from the beginning? Where exactly were you born, and where did you grow up?

"I was born in Melito Porto Salvo and grew up between the hamlets of Musoponiti and Chorio di San Lorenzo, where I attended elementary and middle school."

- What kind of family background do you come from?

"A close knit family that taught me the value of sacrifice and how to appreciate simple daily things: the Sunday walk with mom and dad, a day at the beach with my cousins, and the surprise of an unexpected gift. I will never stop thanking my parents who, despite having an only child, never spoiled me, but instead made me feel deeply loved. I had a special relationship with my maternal grandmother Paola, the only grandmother I knew. She was always ready to cover up my mischief and teach me how to make homemade pasta with a wire pin. Our Sunday morning practice focused on macaroni."

- What kind of childhood do you remember in Calabria?

"A wonderful and carefree childhood, filled with solid friendships that still withstand distance and busy schedules today."

- Do you have any special memories from that period?

"Many beautiful ones. Soccer games before the school bell in the courtyard, bicycle rides on summer afternoons, and early secrets shared on the village bench with my friends."

- What schools did you attend?

"I studied accounting with a focus on business legal and economic studies at the Giovanni Familiari High School in Melito."

- Which middle school teachers do you still remember?

"I certainly remember my History teacher, my favorite subject. And also the math professor who went above and beyond during those three years to try to make me like it. But I already knew it would never be my calling."

- And from high school, which teachers are worth remembering?

"All of them, because they were extraordinary in their humanity and knowledge. There was joy and positivity in class, and the professors brought out the best in each of us. If I met them again today, I would hug them one by one. They left a lasting impression."

- How did your choice of university degree come about?

"From a great passion for history and politics, and an endless love for public institutions. Passions born very early on."

- What were your university years like?

"Years of sacrifice. To be in class in Messina between 2001 and 2004 during my bachelor's degree, I woke up every morning at 5:00 AM. Then a bus and ferry ride to arrive on time for the 8:00 AM lecture, attend subsequent classes, and return home on the last hydrofoil at 7:00 PM. But they were also wonderful years of personal growth and experiences, just like my master's studies at Sapienza, where I radically changed my life, moving from family comforts to the capital of my heart, which eventually became my home."

- Which subjects did you enjoy the most?

"History of Treaties, International Politics, and European Union Law."

- What were the titles of your theses?

"The first was on 'Albania's Democratic Transition'. The second was on 'The Origin of Political Parties in Multiparty Europe'."

- How much did your father's guidance influence your life?

"Tremendously. My father is a man who dedicated his entire life to our family, working every day so that I lacked nothing, and he did it with a smile, without ever complaining. A man who, despite being born in a different era, always encouraged me and trusted my drive to succeed."

- How was your passion for politics born?

"In 1994, watching Silvio Berlusconi's political entry speech. I was barely 12 years old. It gave me hope. I understood that this would be my party. Over 18 years have passed since that day. That Forza Italia jingle and that vision for Italy still accompany my life today."

- Today you are Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, a major achievement: to whom do you dedicate it?

"I dedicated the day of my oath to Luca Attanasio, Vittorio Iacovacci, and all the servants of the state who sacrificed their lives for Italy."

- What price does one pay on the altar of political commitment?

"One sacrifices a great deal in daily life. But it is absolutely worth it, because it is done to contribute to making one's country better. These are choices, and I chose to dedicate myself to my country."

- What was your first major experience as a deputy?

"There were several, but I will mention those that brought me the greatest satisfaction: counting amendments bearing my primary signature in the budget law or other legislation, which by the end of the legislature totaled 100 million euros. These included contract renewals for military healthcare personnel during Covid, armed forces, firefighters, and the protection of Made in Italy."

- I imagine your political schedule leaves no room for a private life?

"As someone once said, with good organization one can always find time."

- Which goal are you most attached to?

"I am not attached to goals themselves, but to the results that can follow for the community."

- Who helped you grow in the world of politics?

"Silvio Berlusconi. A man who believed in a simple young woman without political godfathers, who only possessed immense enthusiasm and determination. He saw proof of this through my direct activism in 20 election campaigns, first as a grassroots member and later as head of organization for Forza Italia Youth. He was the one who nominated me for the 2014 European Elections, wanted me as a deputy in 2018, and recommended me as Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs today. I do not think words exist to express all the gratitude I feel. I can only repay his trust by dedicating all my energy to honoring the role I hold."

- Has it ever happened while traveling around Italy that you felt ashamed of being a daughter of Calabria?

"Never. I will tell you more: for me it is a badge of honor to be born in the land of Pythagoras, of Magna Graecia, in a land that even before being called Calabria was called Italy. I can travel the world and live away for 20 years, but being Calabrian is a state of mind that accompanies you everywhere."

- What advice would you give to a young woman who wants to pursue your career today?

"I would tell her to adopt a motto of the Amerigo Vespucci training ship: 'Not he who begins, but he who perseveres'."

- What has been the real secret to your success?

"Sometimes humor, other times a good sense of self-control when facing the difficulties that life and politics present."

- What future do you imagine for your life?

"I have always liked living in the present."

- Best wishes then, Undersecretary...

"Best wishes to you, but allow me to extend my best wishes to my land and to the Calabrian people who live there. I think of the children of Calabria who remained in Calabria, but I also think of the many children of Calabria spread across the world. Believe me, the Calabrian diaspora living overseas is a people of whom we all can and must be proud."





Afterword

GIUSEPPE GALATI

Scientific Director of the Association “I Sud del Mondo ETS”

Every book, when authentic, leaves behind a trace that goes beyond the pages that compose it. It does not merely conclude a path: often it inaugurates new ones. *Women of the South* belongs to this category of works. It is a book that is not exhausted in its reading, because it continues to question, to suggest, to provoke thoughts, to prompt new questions. And it is precisely in this generative capacity that one of its deepest merits lies.

The value of this work does not consist solely in having collected a significant set of prominent Calabrian female biographies. Its importance lies above all in having constructed, through the narrative of real and concrete lives, a different key to interpreting the South, Calabria, and the role of women in the processes of transformation in contemporary society. We are not facing a simple gallery of successful figures, nor a celebratory narrative for its own sake. We are standing before a human and cultural mosaic that restores complexity, depth, and perspective.

The women described in these pages, despite the diversity of their personal and professional paths, form a common thread: that of a female protagonism that is not born by chance, but asserts itself through study, sacrifice, intelligence, discipline, inner freedom, and vision. In each of them, their roots in their native land do not appear as a limitation, but as an identity matrix that continues to generate meaning, memory, and responsibility, even when life has taken them elsewhere, to major decision making centers, universities, institutions, research centers, arts, businesses, and public representation.

From a cultural standpoint, this collection offers a valuable contribution because it counters, with the quiet strength of facts, the tendency to read the Mezzogiorno exclusively through categories of marginality, backwardness, or dependence. It is true: problems exist, contradictions are real, structural difficulties cannot be removed. But alongside this dimension, there is a human and value based capital that deserves to be investigated more systematically. *Women of the South* reminds us that even from the most fragile contexts, personalities capable of producing excellence, innovation, thought, care, and change can emerge.

For this reason, the book also takes on a significance that I would define as scientific, in the broadest and most noble sense of the term. It delivers to the Association I Sud del Mondo ETS not only a publication of undisputed civic value, but also a foundation for reflection and future work. Every story collected here is both individual testimony and social document. Every personal story illuminates larger dynamics: the relationship between periphery and center, gender and opportunity, education and social mobility, local identity and international openness, affective memory and the construction of merit.

In this sense, the book suggests a line of work that we consider particularly fruitful: moving from testimony to research, from narrative to analysis, from memory to planning. The pages by Pino Nano do not close a conversation; on the contrary, they open it. They invite us to go deeper, to document better, to study more organically the contribution of

women of the South to the cultural, economic, institutional, and social growth processes of the country. They also invite us to question the conditions that still hinder many other women on their path to full self fulfillment today.

Right here lies, in my view, one of the strongest meanings of this work: having cast light on a human heritage that cannot remain episodic or scattered. The challenge now is to ensure that these stories do not remain isolated cases to be admired, but become living material for public discussion, cultural elaboration, and social initiative. For an association like ours, whose goals include promoting the value of territories, communities, and people, this represents a precise duty.

It is therefore desirable that Women of the South be considered as the first step in a broader journey. A journey that the Association I Sud del Mondo ETS can develop in the coming years through new publications, thematic studies, public meetings, educational programs, workshops in schools, and moments of study and discussion dedicated to female presence in various spheres of collective life. The topic is too important, and too rich, to be confined to a single publishing experience.

There are still many stories to gather, many voices to listen to, many paths to document. There are women of the South who have made an impact in medicine, the judiciary, research, cooperation, social economy, education, culture, professions, institutions, and volunteering, and who are still waiting to be known in their entirety.

But there is also another frontier, equally important: that of the younger generations. Understanding how a young woman from the South builds her path today, what obstacles she encounters, what tools she needs, what models can support her, is a question that challenges us and deserves serious, continuous, shared answers.

In this sense, Women of the South is not just a book about the present and the recent past. It is also, implicitly, a book about the future. About the future of Southern communities, the future of education, the future of female leadership, the future of a South that wants to be described not as a periphery of the impossible, but as a space of energy, intelligence, and concrete possibilities.

For this reason, the author deserves credit for giving shape to a work that possesses narrative, documentarian, and directional value all at once. The journalist's sensitivity here has merged with the patience of listening and the intuition of someone who understood that telling certain lives actually means telling a worldview. And the vision that emerges from these pages is clear: the South is not only the place from which one departs; it can and must also become the place from which to rethink the meaning of modern life, rights, opportunities, and human dignity.

As Scientific Director of the Association, I consider this work an important contribution toward consolidating a cultural approach that places the quality of experiences, depth of analysis, and the ability to turn insights into lasting projects at the center. It is not merely a matter of preserving the memory of these women, but of ensuring that their example produces new knowledge, new awareness, and where possible, new opportunities for growth for others.

It is in this spirit that we entrust Women of the South to its readers: not as an arrival point, but as a significant landmark in an ongoing journey. A journey that the Association

I Sud del Mondo ETS intends to continue, deepening and expanding this line of work with seriousness, passion, and a sense of cultural responsibility.

Because the stories collected in this volume teach us one essential thing: value, when recognized, narrated, and shared, never remains still. It becomes a seed. And the task of those who work in culture is precisely this: to safeguard the best seeds and create the conditions for them to generate further thought, further freedom, and further hope.

Giuseppe Galati Scientific Director Association “I Sud del Mondo ETS”

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