

CELEBRATING OUR 2025 SCHOLARS AND THEIR STORIES

Reflecting on the Thoughtful Essays of Our Scholarship Recipients

Each year, the Italian American Heritage Foundation proudly supports the next generation of scholars who embody our shared values of heritage, community, and perseverance. The IAHF Scholarship Program not only helps deserving students pursue their educational goals but also invites them to reflect on what their Italian heritage means to them.

This year's recipients once again impressed us with their heartfelt essays—each one a window into the pride, gratitude, and determination that define our Italian community. Through their words, we are reminded of the strength of our cultural roots and the enduring influence of family traditions, language, and values passed down through generations.

As you read their essays, we encourage you to pause and reflect on your own story—how your heritage has shaped who you are and how it continues to inspire you today. The voices of these students remind us that our mission to preserve and celebrate Italian culture is alive and thriving in the hearts of young people.

The IAHF Scholarship Fund welcomes donations year-round, but Giving Tuesday is a wonderful opportunity to make your gift count even more. Your contributions make it possible for more students to pursue higher education while staying connected to their heritage. Every donation—large or small—helps ensure that future generations will continue to celebrate, honor, and share the Italian American story.

Let us take pride in these thoughtful essays and in the community that makes them possible. Together, we nurture the next generation of Italian American leaders—one scholarship, one story, and one tradition at a time.

~~ Marie Rose Peirano Dalldorf, IAHF Scholarship Chair ~~



Dream & Believe & Achieve

Scholars essays were in answer to this prompt:

Reflecting upon your heritage and life experiences, share how your personal memories of an inspiring individual or event that significantly impacted the development of your character and your aspirations.

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Julieana C. Caleca

Frances & Joseph Borelli Memorial Scholarship



When reflecting on who has impacted my life, I'm grateful for the many inspiring individuals I've met. Learning about their journeys broadens my perspective, motivates me to overcome challenges, and deepens my understanding of the world, helping me grow. Each person - family, friends, teachers, or celebrities - offers unique insights that help shape who I want to be.

Among those who have significantly influenced my future is my Grandma Marianne. To me my grandma isn't just my grandma, she's my role model, my mentor, my best friend, and a constant source of support. Through her I have learned the value of hard work, the importance of kindness and the power of inclusivity. My grandma's influence on me has played a crucial role in shaping my character and aspirations as she continues to inspire me to make a difference in my community.

I can always count on my grandma for advice, no matter how big or small the issue is. Her wisdom transcends generations and despite the age gap she consistently offers guidance that resonates with me. She is the person I turn to when I need someone to listen and offer advice without judgment. Her soul is kind and her heart is full of love for everyone around her. I admire how deeply she cares for those she loves as it has helped me understand the importance of supporting others in any way I can.

She has taught me the importance of hard work and dedication as she has spent her life working tirelessly to build the life she has. Her selflessness, always caring for others when it's challenging especially inspired me. It was one of her valuable traits that motivated me to start the Donation Closet Club at my high school, a club that makes school events accessible to all students regardless of their financial background by providing school dance attire to those in need, promoting inclusivity. This club has fostered a sense of equality in our school and helped students feel supported much like how my Grandma makes me feel.

A trait that people often point out is how much I resemble my grandma. Many have told me that I am a younger version of her reincarnated. This comparison always warms my heart, as it signifies how much I have inherited from her. In terms of both personality and outlook on life reminding me that it's our own destiny, and it's what we do with the things we have that create our own path. She constantly reminds me that we are in this together no matter the challenges I face which was exemplified when at seven, due to my sister's diagnosis of Cancer cells, I spent a year with my grandparents.

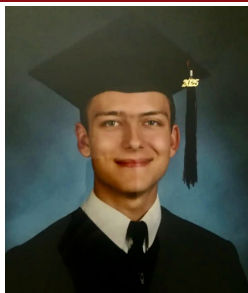
I can still hear Andrea Bocelli's song "Time to say Goodbye" playing in the living room as I fall asleep in my childhood home. Although I grew up in California, my roots trace back to Italy. My grandma shared that our Italian heritage was about preserving family names, fueling her curiosity about our culture. My middle name, Capri, honors the island in Italy where my parents fell in love with our culture. She recounted how her maiden name, Afflixio, was phonetically altered upon her great-grandfather's arrival in America, leaving her to wonder about our true name, knowing there's no "x" in the Italian language. This mystery led her to hire a genealogist, confirming our roots were in Italy.

While my family embraced their Italian culture internally, they also sought to be seen as proud Americans, often hiding their heritage. My grandparents never learned Italian, but my grandma took initiative and learned as an adult passing down her love for the language, history and culture to me. My grandma and I spent countless hours learning about the fifty states in the fifth grade but I was more eager to explore beyond the U.S. She collected books about the historical wonders of Rome, igniting my passion for Italy's rich heritage, cuisine, fashion, music, art and landscapes.

Last fall, I visited Italy firsthand, deepening my love for Italy's rich heritage, cuisine, fashion, and art. From the plane, I marveled at the vibrant colors of coastal towns like Cinque Terre. Making California feel more like home, my family still makes raviolis from scratch each holiday, served on Caleca pottery once sold in Italy. They speak of Italy with utmost respect and love, allowing me to connect with my roots. As I learn of old memories and build my own, my pride and sense of community continues to grow. Inspired by my great-great-grandfather's journey to California at fifteen, I strive to honor our Italian legacy and celebrate the community my family built.

Marco Antonio Palik

Dr. Anthony and Clare Cedolini Family Scholarship



Greetings. My name is Marco Palik. I'm a senior at Los Gatos High School, eagerly wrapping up my high school years as a top student, ready to dive into my higher education adventure. I've always felt proud to be a Sicilian, learning about the rich history of the Mediterranean island as well as my family's Sicilian roots.

Learning about the ancient, classical, and modern history of Sicily at a young age, I asked my family any question I could think of to learn whatever possible of my family's Sicilian ancestry. My grandfather, Thomas Ferrito, has been a member of the Italian American Heritage Foundation for at least fifty years. All four of my great-great grandparents immigrated from Sicily to New York City in the first decade of the twentieth century.

During World War II, they all moved to San Jose. Gaetano Ferrito, a cigar maker, married Fillipa Sparacio, who worked in the San Jose canneries. Their son, my great-grandfather Joseph Ferrito, served in the US Army during World War II. Salvatore Governanti, a diligent grocer, married Anna Morales, who worked in the family grocery store by his side. Their daughter, my great-grandmother Josephine Governanti, married Joseph Ferrito and gave birth to my grandfather in New York. As a young army wife, Josephine traveled across the country during Joseph's military service, eventually settling in San Jose.

From a young age, my grandfather always stressed the importance of working for the things I desire in life. Whether I'm looking to enroll at a prestigious university, finding a good career, or striving to accomplish any goal I set my mind to, the most important factor to succeeding is giving what you desire to earn. When I began high school, I wasn't entirely certain what my plans were for the future, but I've developed and shaped who I am as a person and discovered my strengths.

It all started with a spark. That day when an overwhelming feeling sparked within me one average afternoon at the Los Gatos Public Library. Growing up in California, I know it doesn't take long for a tiny spark to gain energy, using any surrounding sources of kindling to gain strength, and before long begins to spread uncontrollable flames. However, my story isn't about wildfire and destruction. That day at the library my freshman year helped to light my path to a future of helping others.

For me, the library has always been a treasured destination. I fondly remember story times with my mother and older sister every summer. I've always loved to read and recall dabbling in "writing" little stories that sounded like the books I asked my mother to read. Over the years the library has become much like a second home to complete assignments, collaborate with peers in class project research, and learn new concepts in my favorite subject: mathematics.

Mathematics, with all its forms and functions, is one of my love languages. For others, it can create feelings of anxiety and become a difficult barrier to cross. Thinking back to that day at the library three years ago, enthusiastically completing a geometry assignment, I notice a younger boy sitting alone. From the expression on his face, I can tell he's upset.

"May I help you with anything?" I ask. He shakes his head and hides his head. Even in his despair, it's clear from his body language that he is perplexed by my enjoyment of solving one proof after another and tries to hide his curiosity.

After a while, he exclaims, "Hey! You're really good at that!"

"Good at what? Math?" I respond with a smile.

"Yeah! I wish I could be as good as you." he says as he smiles back. I could feel his emotional guard lessening a bit.

"Well, it took a lot of practice and perseverance to thoroughly learn everything I understand about math. Do you need some help?"

Without hesitation, the boy replies, "YES!" and practically leaps out of his chair exclaiming, "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

This wouldn't be the first time I've helped somebody, but it is definitely one of the most significant. As I begin teaching him memorization tricks, continuously check for comprehension, and give so many high-fives that I can't feel my hand, it hits me...the spark. As I help this boy more and more, the embers of my self-confidence burn and grow to a level I've never known. This boy's excitement and gratitude are like fuel to my inner fire, and before long it has engulfed me with good-heartedness and joy.

(Continues on page 12)

Antonio Pistaferri

Ficalini Memorial Scholarship



Every year, my family here in California has a tradition. We spend one day, usually around winter break, cooking Italian food together. Each of us, my parents, my two sisters, and me, choose our favorite Italian recipe and we organize a cooking competition. My parents, both from the Italian city of Naples, decided to start this family tradition when we kids were old enough to learn more about Italian food and culture. It is a day of fun and coziness, and I still remember my first performance as a “pizzaiolo” when I was eight years old.

The first time I overcooked a margherita pizza, I was in despair. Instead of the soft, pillowy crust I’d expected, what emerged from the oven felt like a concrete puck. Even my carefully prepared tomato sauce and hand-torn mozzarella couldn’t soften the dough-saster. As I sat there, watching my family politely trying to chew without breaking their teeth, embarrassment crept down my neck. That was until my dad, ever the comedian, speared a slice on his fork and said, “This could survive re-entry from space!”

Everyone laughed, including me. This was only one of many nights my family taught me that even when things go wrong, they don’t have to be catastrophic. Mistakes can become stories, and failures can be shared – even celebrated. Growing up in a family with deep Italian roots, I often heard my grandfather, Nonno Peppino, advising us to *Non fare un dramma* (“Don’t make a drama”). His philosophy of *sdrammatizzare*, or to “take the drama out,” has shaped how I approach challenges and setbacks, both big and small.

This mindset was essential during the pandemic when I started a family competition for who could come up with the funniest caption for the cartoon on the last page of the New Yorker. My greatest hit: A slice of bread shows up at a fancy restaurant with a bowtie. The maître d’ tells him, “I’m sorry. You’re late; toasts were at midnight.” These moments of shared humor reminded me that even in difficult times, laughter can bring people together.

Finding humor in the face of adversity has taught me an important lesson: If you treat a mistake like a crisis, that’s all it will ever be. But if you step back, take a breath, and maybe even laugh, you open the door to new possibilities. This perspective has been invaluable, not only in my home but also at school. When miscommunication left my group scrambling to finish our APUSH project in the 11th hour, I resisted the urge to panic. Instead, I told my groupmates, “I’ve always wanted to see how pizza tastes at midnight– I guess today’s the day!” Reassigning tasks and even finding ways to incorporate our mistakes during a productive and pizza-driven night, we not only met the deadline but also learned more about collaboration than we would have if everything had gone smoothly.

In my life, starting in my years in college, I hope to bring this philosophy of *sdrammatizzare* to future communities known for academic excellence and weighty expectations. I’ve learned that it’s not only okay to make mistakes, but that those failures often lead to growth in ways success never could. Whether it’s encouraging a classmate who’s anxious about an upcoming test, sharing a laugh over late-night study mishaps, or accidentally burning yet another pizza in one of the communal kitchens, I want to be the kind of person who can help others see that challenges—even charred and burnt ones—are opportunities in disguise. Together, we can create a community that thrives not in spite of our imperfections, but because of them.

Isabella Marilyn Maggetti

II Cenacolo Scholarship



At the ripe age of ten months old, a picture was taken of my Nonno holding me as I held a glass of wine to my lips. Some people may find that a bit alarming, but any Italian I know would laugh and find the picture cute. Of course, I would not have drunk any of the wine, seeing I was ten months old, but that picture is a small glimpse of the culture I would grow up immersed in. I have that photo as one of my lock screens because it is a beautiful reminder of my Nonno's humor and Italian roots. As I grew up, I recognized a difference in how I was raised compared to my friends; whenever I went to my Nonno and Ava's house (Ava is Portuguese for grandma), I could argue I left with more wisdom than I arrived with. My Nonno always corrects me from saying "yea" to "yes"; he never fails to call me out if I'm caught with my hands in my pockets because it demonstrates that I am not ready to help if help is needed; and that I always should greet people whenever I enter any room. To some people, it is just etiquette, but to others, little quirks like that are often disregarded

in today's modern times. From my Nonno's example, I learned respect, discipline, and how to infuse whatever I do with love.

I chose to dedicate part of my essay to my Nonno and all he has taught me, but honestly, he deserves to be written about. Ever since I can remember, he has shown me right and wrong in ways my parents couldn't; although he has tough love, he knows when to show emotion, which I recognize in myself. Whenever I went to my Nonno's house, I was able to drink some wine (with a bit of water, of course), and I was taught to always drink with dinner & enjoy and never drink to get drunk, which in its roots is a Catholic belief as well. When I was able to go to Mass with my Nonno, it was always the Saturday Vigil. To this day, I find myself going to the Saturday Vigil because of his influence, and one day, as I participated in Mass when it came time for us to say, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the words and my soul shall be healed," I remember noticing the true repentance that was in my Nonno's voice. As time went by, that specific part of Mass became my favorite part because I had the example of my Nonno, who exemplified the importance of true repentance and humility before Jesus in the most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Not only did my Nonno affect me morally, but he also affected other aspects of my personality; I learned to love opera music, Patsy Cline, and some of Hank Williams. In the mornings, he would blast opera music downstairs, ultimately waking up the whole house to the vocals of Luciano Pavarotti. His love for gardening, wine, cooking, and dogs soon rubbed off on me, and as time went on, he never failed to put a smile on my face, even through the phone. Unfortunately, I do not have the luxury of living close to my Nonno; I live eight hours away from sunny Morgan Hill, which sometimes can be difficult when I find myself missing his company. Although we are distant, it only makes our time together more valuable.

The influence of my Nonno's faith, as I mentioned, had an effect on me. As I became more involved with my home parish, Saint Thomas More, I loved learning and questioning the faith I believed in. I learned about all the Saints and the Catholic Church's teachings, which inspired me to become a Catechist, further enriching my learning and love for the Catholic faith. By God's grace, I was given the position of Assistant youth minister, which has taught me many things about leadership and team effort. In many ways, I learned my work ethic from my Nonno, who gets up at dawn and sometimes does not come home till late. I adopted some of his qualities regarding hard work because he reminded me of my great Noni and Nonno, who worked very hard to start the family winery we still have today. If I had not learned the importance of hard work from my Nonno and the strength God has granted me, I do not believe I would have been able to get through the six months in which I did not have a boss and was ultimately working full time at Church and also being a full-time student at the community college I attend.

As I began to think of the job I wanted to have in the future, I first thought of a social worker because I longed to help those who could not help themselves, but after lots of prayer, I declared my major to be Theology. I plan on attending arguably the best Catholic College for Theology, Franciscan University. As I begin my journey to earn a degree in Theology, I plan on becoming a chaplain, specifically for those in prison or teenagers who find themselves in Juvenile Hall. I feel that society often looks down upon those who are in prison, but no matter what they have done, Jesus Christ still endured death on the cross for every one of them, so they ought to know the truth about the love and forgiveness that Jesus offers to those who seek Him.

As Catholics, we are called to visit those who are in jail, and I feel that God has called me to become one of those visitors. Ultimately, my goal is to do God's plan for my life and lead as many people to Christ as possible through my speech and actions. I came upon Franciscan University because of the thriving Catholic atmosphere it fosters and the Franciscan values it holds at its core. Saint Anthony of Padua is my Patron Saint, and he was a part of the Franciscan order; I constantly ask for his intercession, and I believe that it is God's will that I attend this college. I know that God will provide for me financially because I trust in Him just as Mary did when she, in humility, said yes to being the Mother of God. All this being said, throughout my life, my Nonno has inspired me in my actions, morals, personality, work ethic, and, most importantly, my faith in Jesus. §

Thaddeus C. Binkley

II Cenacolo Scholarship



Growing up, I was fortunate to witness firsthand how the values of family, faith, and hard work pay off. These values have shaped my priorities in life and have taught me the importance of connection, the strength of community, and the significance of kindness and respect in all of my relationships. Like most Americans, I come from a blend of backgrounds. In my case, that includes Irish, Swiss-German, and Italian. While all of my ancestry has shaped who I am, it's my Italian heritage that has had the most profound impact on me. This influence has been passed down through generations, particularly through my grandparents, whose values of family, faith, and hard work have become the foundation of my character. My Nana, Linda Gaudio Binkley, has been the most significant source of this inspiration. She proudly carries her Italian roots, and through her stories, traditions, and the way she lives her life. She has instilled in me a deep pride in my heritage.

One of the most memorable experiences I've had with my Nana are those spent working alongside her in the vineyard. Together, we have harvested grapes, crushed them, and worked together to care for the land and the wine. These moments taught me about the connection to our ancestry, the pride in hard work, and the importance of preserving something that's bigger than yourself. This understanding of working the land also helped inspire my passion for sustainability and green initiatives, which are central to my goals for how to live life.

I also grew up hearing stories from Nana about how her grandparents would cook the same meals with her that she now shares with me and how they would use the same phrases to express themselves as she uses with me, meals and phrases that still resonate in our family today. It was through those moments that I developed an appreciation not just for Italian food or language, but for the deeper values they represent. The importance of family and making others feel welcome were lessons that went beyond the kitchen table. I came to understand that family isn't just about blood. It's about inclusion, care, and ensuring everyone feels valued. In other words, my Nana's hospitality wasn't just about the shared meal and conversation. In Italian culture, hospitality goes beyond simply providing food or shelter. It's about making people feel truly at home. It's about ensuring that everyone feels seen and cared for.

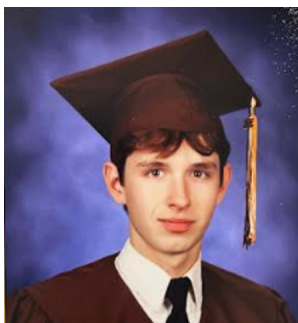
Because of this, I learned that hospitality is not just about serving people, but about making them feel like part of something larger than themselves. These are the values that formed the core of the hospitality I experienced growing up and the ones I aim to bring to my future career. They are the cornerstone of the work I want to do in the hospitality field. I want to create a hotel business that combines sustainable practices with that same welcoming atmosphere I experienced as a child, where guests feel like part of the family. These lessons are what have inspired me to pursue a career in Hospitality Management. I want to create spaces where people feel safe, welcome, and cared for, whether that's through providing a warm meal, a comfy bed, or a helping hand. My goal is to use my experiences to give back to my community, whether through offering a space for those in need or helping others.

As I move on to pursue my higher education, this scholarship will relieve some of the financial stress that comes along with that and allow me to focus on acquiring the skills and experiences I need to succeed in this field of study. It will also support my long-term vision of creating a business that values sustainability and the kind of hospitality that makes people feel welcomed, loved, and respected. One of my aspirations is to eventually manage a space where people who are looking for a place to celebrate or retreat can find a safe haven—one where they feel welcomed and valued, where they know that people around them are there to support and care for them in practical ways, just like I've experienced in my own family's home growing up.

Because the lessons I've learned from my Nana about my Italian heritage have taught me to work hard, see the value in others, and embrace them as family, I am committed to using those lessons to make a meaningful impact on this world. I'm excited about the opportunity to continue my education with your support and to one day use the values of my heritage to contribute to a better and welcoming world where the foundational ideas of Italian hospitality are used in every situation we find ourselves in life—in our families and in every community we find ourselves a part of, both big and small.

Adrian Smith Grantz

Olander Family Foundation Inc. Scholarship



I hardly recognize Nonna's home, except for her basil plants, their fragrant leaves filling the air with a familiar aroma. Each time I make the trek to Montreal, she is living somewhere new. I see the sadness in Mom's eyes when she says it has been like this forever. Nonna's basil plants follow her, a consistent thread of stability amid chaos.

I amble, for Nonna's sake. Full sun helps basil plants thrive and germinate, so I place them on the south-facing balcony. Before moves, I gingerly tuck the basil in boxes, their earthy scent clinging to my fingers, knowing I'm cradling her signature of a 'home.' In the weeks after, Nonna's assurance echoes over phone calls- each plant is "sprouting once again," reminding me that she, too, will settle in again after being uprooted.

I cherish Nonna's childhood stories of immigrating with twelve siblings from Larino, Italy, to Montreal; their home shifted with farming seasons. As I pack boxes, I re-discover the book *Une Ville De Pionniers*, featuring a photograph of our family bringing crops by horse and wagon over the Champlain Bridge to sell at the Jean-Talon market. I am awed by what it took, physically and emotionally, to support a family of fourteen—a constant fight for stability.

Nonna's nomadic life fueled Mom's determination to stabilize my brother, Alec, and me, germinating a path for us to thrive. Continuity is its own labor of love; for seventeen years, friendships, cultural identity, and language skills took root for me, whereas Mom jumped between English and French-speaking provinces each year. One small house, one neighborhood, one familiar cast of friends sprouted into many, allowing me to be a strong stalk for others. Just like basil plants, human relationships also flourish in nurturing environments.

This proved challenging when a friend I've known since birth, "Mike," started struggling with anxiety. Despite our different interests—sports versus coding—we had always eaten lunch together, but after a period of sporadic absences, Mike dropped out of school. I felt frozen, unsure of how to help. When I texted, his responses were sparse. Through missed calls, canceled plans, and hospitalizations, I didn't let myself falter, offering gentle and steady support through simple gestures like ice cream outings and gym sessions. Slowly but surely, working out all summer at the YMCA together helped Mike build confidence, and ultimately, regain his footing. I realized that the bonds between people may sometimes wilt under stress, but with patience and understanding, they can regrow stronger than before. In the ecosystem of human connections, every person plays a vital role - sometimes as the supportive soil, other times as the plant reaching for sunlight.

As a school ambassador, I've extended this nurturing approach to others. I especially enjoy leading freshmen and exchange students at summer orientation, creating a safe space for them to reach out about their unique struggles. One student, "Marie," still regularly seeks my advice on the computer science path. I help her navigate the 4-year course requirements, tutoring her in fundamental algorithms and programming. Today, seeing her skip happily off to lunch with her friends brings me warmth. I also listen to Alec's highs and lows as a freshman, his voice wavering between excitement and uncertainty, like a basil plant adjusting to new soil. It is easy to get lost in a large high school; I once did too.

Change is inevitable, but with strong roots, repotting a plant has a greater chance of success. For others in transitional times, I understand that I cannot always be a "stake," providing support at their side forever, but I can strive to help them grow strong roots for their future endeavors. With my basil plant in hand, I'm ready to explore new frontiers, making any place feel like home. My labor of love is to offer such roots to others- to nurture my relationships, and help others unearth their potential in new soil.

Christopher Willian von Barloewen

Italian American Heritage Foundation Scholarship



A pot of rich tomato sauce simmers on the stove, filling the kitchen with the scent of basil and garlic, just like it has in my Nana's home for decades. But beyond her recipes, my Nana has seasoned my life with resilience, wisdom, and love. My Italian American Grandma Kathy (Parrinello) has been a rock in my life ever since I was a small child.

Nana volunteers at her church, reads to kids at schools, and raises money for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. This inspired me to volunteer as well in order to help build my community. I caught wind of a promotion at my local YMCA that offered free use of facilities for high schoolers during June and July. I saw the program as an opportunity to immerse myself in a community of other kids interested in weightlifting, and with my newfound confidence from being voted captain of both my football and baseball teams, I became a mentor for young kids who were

unsure of their journey-- just as I once was. I knew that this was my opportunity to help my peers expedite their journey to leading a healthier and happier lifestyle.

During my experience at the YMCA, I made sure the kids I volunteered for knew that everybody starts at a different point and moves at a different pace. As a young lifter, I made the mistake of over-lifting, which I discovered only leads to injury and overall loss of progression. I carefully passed down lessons such as these that I learned throughout my journey, guaranteeing that my kids at the YMCA were able to achieve all of their goals safely and efficiently. I embraced my role, utilizing my expertise to progress the message of the YMCA, serving the members and youth in order to help shape the next generation of athletes.

With Nana, family always comes first. Everyone gathers at Nana's house for the holidays. She makes big meals and invites all of the extended family, just like her mom, my great-grandma Susan Parrinello used to do. This sense of togetherness has been passed down to my family. We invite everyone over for New Year's Eve and other smaller holidays to the extent that it is now expected. Seeing how great this is, I invite all of my friends to my house for swimming, football in the street, or a good game of poker. My family always has food to share and my friends now feel a sense of family at my house inspired by the ways of my Nana.

Despite all this, the most important thing I have retained from my Italian heritage is an unwavering work-ethic and immense discipline--values that were first modeled to me by my grandmother. Discipline can be defined in many ways. I define discipline as the willingness to do what needs to be done even if there is a distractor. I work to eliminate distractors like my phone by shutting it off during homework time and give full effort to my academia even when my friends are at a party. This is why it is so vital to be mentally strong and as a person who takes pride in being a student-athlete, this was not always easy. It meant doing assignments days in advance while other students were procrastinating and going to the gym in the morning so I would have time to do my homework at night. My grandmother's relentless dedication in her work, her family, or her traditions continues to remind me that success is also built on consistency, sacrifice, and perseverance.

While discipline is a vital trait, it is nothing without the consistency to fight through those same challenges over and over again. The comfort of my bed in the morning before 7am film study and the temptation to collapse and call it a day before a big test only grew larger by the day. If I was unable to extend my self-discipline over my four years of high school I would be nowhere close to the person I am today. Modeling my work ethic after my Nana has helped me seize my opportunity through the American Dream, just as her parents did. In their small home in Rochester, New York, they carried out their dreams after they took the chance of immigrating to America. Whenever I feel unmotivated or tired, I think of them: the couple who scratched and clawed to create any opportunity for their family.

All of these vital attributes have led to me succeeding academically and athletically throughout highschool; however, it is the caring nature for the common good that my family has taught me that has inspired my career aspirations. I plan to use these traits to become a deputy district attorney and fight for what is right. My nana, through her actions and wisdom, has taught me that true significance is not only personal achievement, but the impact we leave on others. In particular, her work with the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation has shown me the power of service and the impact it can have on your community. In essence, in my future career as a deputy district attorney the values my family has impressed on me such as resilience, discipline, and consistency, will continue to guide me in my journey to create meaningful change. If I am qualified enough to earn the Italian American Heritage Foundation Scholarship it will help catapult me into a collegiate career to further my education and support my aspirations.

Gabriella M. Ahern

Italian American Heritage Foundation Scholarship



Reflection On My Heritage and Life

My heritage is something that makes my family come together. The traditions my family share are important to me because the best memories come from my traditions. Every year, I look forward to the holiday Christmas, it brings a feeling like a light on me. When I think of Christmas, I think of going to spend a week in San Francisco, remembering that delicious smell of the freshly baked Christmas cookies that we produce and give every year, and do a gift exchange with my family members on Christmas Eve.

To start our Christmas traditions, my grandma, aunt, mom, and I go on our week long, annual holiday trip to San Francisco. We would go shopping and see The Nutcracker ballet. We have been doing this tradition since I was about five years old. The beautiful Christmas decorations, Macy's Union Square, people ice skating around the giant tree lit up, being with my mom, aunt, and grandma, these were notable images of my childhood. As a kid, all of us went to tea in our fanciest attire. We all wear nice dresses, and mine is always the most sparkly. My family never fails to make me feel so special. We would go out to dinner and talk about our favorite parts of the trip. This holiday tradition has a special place in my heart, because it gives me so many amazing memories of my childhood. It reminds me of the importance of spending time with family. I have always fostered this tradition in my heart.

When the thought of Christmas pops in my head, the scent of freshly baked cookies comes to mind. About two weeks before Christmas, my mom, aunt, grandma, and I work together and bake batches and batches of cookies. We have always done this tradition since I was four. In fact, this tradition has led me to be able to bake good treats for not only myself but for others as well. After we finish the cookies, we hand them to all of our friends and family and, of course, enjoy some for ourselves as well. Everyone enjoys our homemade cookies. I was taught to always show appreciation for my teachers, especially during finals season. Every year, I deliver a plate to my teachers and it always brings a smile to their face. That fresh smell of cookies stays in my house for days. The scent is such a warm feeling knowing that I get to spend these wonderful moments with my loved ones every holiday.

One of the last traditions I have for Christmas is giving and receiving presents to our family on Christmas Eve. Every year, my mom hosts a party for my entire family. They all come down to keep company and eat a delicious lunch cooked by my uncle. We open gifts and spend the whole day together. Everybody is always so happy to be with each other. I love Christmas Eve because it gives me the chance to connect with my cousins. Since we are all older, it's not as easy to get together. I am always excited to get the opportunity to see my cousins. I always was super close with them when I was younger. We reminisce about funny stories on trips we were on together. Quality family time always brings us closer.

Overall, my culture is not about the holidays, but the special traditions, and the amazing memories made with family. As I grow older, my traditions have shaped my character. Family is one of the most important parts of my life. If it weren't for my family, I wouldn't be able to have these heartfelt traditions. The gatherings have given me strength that lead me to cherish the present, and the important aspect of giving back. Whether it is giving cookies to my teachers, or exchanging presents to my family I always respect the idea of how giving is just as good, if not better than receiving. On a deeper level, these traditions have made me family oriented, learn acts of kindness, and self-sufficient. My heritage is something that made me who I am today, and I hope to pass these traditions on to future generations. If it weren't for these amazing traditions we have, I wouldn't be able to appreciate this holiday as much.

Sophia Maria Urias

Richard Zamar Memorial Scholarship



Fogged up windows, a hot kitchen, and steamy sugo on the table is what feels like home to me. A kind of comfort and sense of safety only my mom can cook up with tomatoes, carrots and basil. My Italian heritage is interwoven in my life from my philosophy, how I love, to how I think, and it starts at the table, with my family- especially my mom. My mom takes pride in being “FBI,” Full Blooded Italian, as one of her shirts depicts. From filling my childhood with sugo and classic Italian love songs to annual Italian festivals and holidays, she taught me to carry our heritage with pride and embrace our culture, not just through tradition but through philosophy.

My earliest memories are decorated with red, white, and green, in my house the colors of pride and passion for our Italian culture. Running around in the hot summer days of the fairgrounds, live music, vibrant tents with keychains and “Ciao bella” shirts, rich smells of sauce and meat. Nothing was more satisfying than sitting surrounded by my family and music while biting into hot sfingi. The annual Italian festival was something to get excited for but wasn’t the only time I celebrated my culture. From my mom sitting me down with a learning Italian for kids book or watching old movies like House Boat with Sophia Loren, I was raised on the classics and values of my culture. This celebration wasn’t just for the happy memories of my childhood, it built the foundation of appreciation, love, and pride I have not just for my Italian heritage- but all aspects of my identity, even my other half-Spanish heritage. The values of family, tradition, generosity and togetherness are embedded within my cultural upbringing; woven into the little gestures between family members, the tough and gentle love, or the playfulness. Values that are rooted in how I witnessed the way my mom and grandmother interact with life spiritually and with grace. Instilling lessons into my young mind of forgiveness over revenge, release rather than jealousy, and confidence instead of insecurity. My mom’s cultured upbringing of me wasn’t just for my observation but my absorption, my inheritance of it is the lifelong values, appreciation and love.

My favorite thing about my heritage is the tradition. The unique ways of celebration that every family has but no matter how different still connect us all to the same roots. My family has several, my mom’s sugo and Italian festivals being a couple but there are a few more that are special. Like cuccidati, the signature figgy and zesty holiday cookie of my family. Every year, in the weeks before Christmas my cousins, aunt, my mom, and I spend the entire day making the stuffing and dough, baking and then sitting down to decorate hundreds of cookies, and do some quality control taste testing. Our red and green sprinkled cuccidati don’t stay in the family, coworkers, neighbors, teachers and friends are gifted them to share our love and culture. Due to conflicting schedules some years we make our cuccidati separately. My mom and I laugh and play late into the night when we finally sit down to frost our cookies, seeing who can come up with the most unique patterns or make the straightest sprinkle lines. When we finally finish cleaning and all the cookies are wrapped, we sit at the table and share one to celebrate our hard work and the delicious flavors of Sicily. Cuccidati are an affair, from baking to decorating, to packing, to delivering, the process is long and meticulous leaving your body tired and fingers smelling like citrus and fig. It’s the careful attention and time that makes them so special. A handcrafted and from scratch symbol of love and appreciation, handing a loved one a tin full while saying “Buon Natale” is more than giving cookies. It’s our way of showing that person how valuable we hold them, how much we think of them, how happy they make us. The act of giving is love, but so is the act of creating. My mom has shown me that giving to others is just as and even more fulfilling than receiving, and that making someone feel special and thought of is a gift to yourself. Behind the scenes is where we gift love to ourselves, the reminiscing, the conversation, and the laughter when creating cuccidati, or any gift is the prize. My mom stirred in the importance of generosity and tradition in our fig mix and into my character. A value that I carry daily even after we have eaten all the cuccidati.

My family, my heritage and all of their teachings have blended within me to help me become the person I am today and who I continue to grow into. My culture fueled values and traditions have tremendously influenced my philosophy, spirituality and identity. When I am going through something difficult I think of my grandma, a woman who I was constantly around in my childhood. She taught me that everything happens for a reason and to not condone a situation you don’t like, but know that it will work out. This acceptance has gotten me through the stress of balancing academics, extracurriculars and my personal life, making me resilient under pressure and at peace with the unknown. She would often say “Life is a school of learning,” meaning that learning is more than in classrooms, but in everyday experiences, human connections and the novelties of this life. It’s her saying that inspires me to be ambitious and to take risks, not just to learn about life, but myself too. This ambition and resilience give me the courage to put myself into spaces I may not be sure I belong in but make a seat for myself anyway.

Like with potential employers, who often times said my inexperience was concerning but if she taught me anything, persistence is key. The day I had my interview and was hired on the spot at Eataly for a hostess position, I got her, my grandpa’s, and my great grandma’s signs all day long. They said my inexperience was a valuable foundation for teaching. Another thing she taught me, is that death is never the end and that constantly they’re around me guiding me. After my grandma’s death in 2015, my mom carried on her teachings and kept her alive. I’m incredibly blessed to have this generational wisdom passed down to me. It’s this endless support and philosophy that gives me the strength to be who I am. Pushing me to take risks to pursue my aspirations, from a job to going for a journalism internship, and eventually getting published in the Mercury News local newspaper. My accomplishments stemming from my mom’s and grandma’s wisdom give me the confidence to reach for bigger things and explore my potential while teaching me the important balance of humility. I strive to lead my life with these morals and values of generosity, acceptance, spirituality and humility, to guide me and give me strength.

Life is a school of learning, so I’m committed to growing. I have my foundations rooted in the vibrant colors of my Italian culture. I’m excited to learn more about myself as I continue to develop into my identity and to continue to use my heritage as a starting point, from learning Italian to hopefully studying abroad in college. There is no single memory of my mom, my family or my heritage that I can pinpoint to have solely altered my character or aspirations. I’m fortunate enough to say that they’re infinitely impactful, and thankfully, like sugo, is continuous.

Tenley E. Flahavan

Scrivano Scholarship



Ever since I could jump in the waves of the Pacific Ocean, run down the grassy California foothills, and grow native Poppies in my garden, I have been captivated by nature. My deep appreciation of the outdoors is rooted in my innate curiosity and lifetime of memories exploring. Growing up, I have spent hours outside: tidepooling in Monterey, kayaking in Oregon, and playing in the creek at my neighborhood park. Every experience, whether it was sand or dirt under my feet, revealed my growing affinity for the environment. My awe of the physical beauty of Earth prompted me to start asking questions: what is this creature called? Why does it behave this way? Growing up in a family of teachers, my insatiably curious mind was embraced and at the ripe age of 5, my desire to spread awareness of ocean conservation was born!

While my grades and test scores indicate that I have thrived in high school, I've sensed my love for learning diminishing as the focus shifted towards achievement and performance. I found myself craving the passion for learning that I experienced as a child. Digging into my innate, childlike love for nature has re-established my zealous curiosity. With my Italian Heritage, I have been conditioned to value perseverance; my family has taught me to believe that the best way to handle a learning challenge is to seek another. The saying, "*Chi la dura, la vince*," translating to "Whoever perseveres, wins" is a testament to my story because determination has been critical to my success.

Some of my fondest memories take place at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, where I have always been mesmerized by the massive tanks and unique ocean creatures. Little did I know, my childlike spark would be reignited when I became a Teen Conservation Leader at the aquarium during the summer of 2023, an event that has clarified my passion for sustainability and significantly impacted my future trajectory. In my two years volunteering, I have been able to inspire conservation of the ocean by developing content for their social media channels and volunteering on a biweekly guide shift. As a Guide, I am an expert on over 20 exhibits, allowing me to educate guests about marine life, with an emphasis on conservation. My soul lights up with enthusiasm every time I enter the aquarium because each volunteer shift provides an opportunity to learn new things and directly teach guests about topics for which I'm passionate. Each interaction, from a guest smiling when they hold a hermit crab, to an Instagram comment from a fellow teen, reinforces my passion for promoting ocean awareness. Despite my two hour commute to Monterey, I am deeply grateful for this program because it has re-invigorated my zest for knowledge, fueling my decision to pursue a career in environmental sustainability. It also revealed that I am most engaged in learning when I am able to share my passions with others; thus revealing why I find so much joy in my work as a creative small business owner and sports camp counselor. The aquarium has unleashed my childlike wonder and validated the importance of understanding my learning style.

Furthermore, this program has challenged me to reflect on how I can apply my love for experiential learning to other facets of my life such as my experience with travel. I am so grateful for my Nona because she has instilled in me an affinity for travel and exploration. Through our trips together, I have not only had time to bond with her and my Italian heritage, but our adventures have broadened my perspective on the world. By visiting other places, my passion for a thriving Earth has increased tenfold. Snorkeling has allowed me to see the devastation of coral bleaching firsthand. Hiking in the mountains showed me the impact of being surrounded by natural beauty as I noticed the sense of calm that my whole family felt. Sitting on the beach in Tahoe, makes me appreciate the true meaning of "Keep Tahoe Blue." Each of our family vacations brings me a greater sense of purpose because I come home even more empowered to fight for environmental justice. I feel so blessed that my Nona has prioritized adventure and exploration in our family. I know that she did so to carry on the legacy of her parents who so bravely immigrated from Italy to the US. Every time I travel, I am reminded of the courage demanded of my ancestors when they immigrated to the United States! I cannot wait for college which will unleash even more learning options such as studying abroad, something that I am eager to pursue. I hope to visit all of my bucket list places in Italy, including my family in Finale Ligure while also learning about the rich culture and sustainable practices that I can hopefully apply to my life in the US.

As I look to college, I am interested in double majoring in marine science and education to better equip myself to effectively communicate ocean conservation with future generations. I am deserving of this scholarship because I am dedicated to this cause and ready to work. I am enthusiastic to acquire a college degree with the help of this scholarship because it will position me at the forefront of environmental empowerment and grant me the knowledge to truly make an impact.

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After that day, I realized there's no way to prevent this feeling from spreading to other opportunities for me to help others as it jumped the line to become uncontained. I joined the Cats Homework Help club where I tutored students in math and science. I created the Applied Mathematics Club, where I could foster a more profound interest in math by teaching others how it applies to real-world problems in topics such as physics, economics, finance, and cryptography. At the same time, I successfully helped other students in need. I founded the Hunger at Home Club, pairing with the Hunger at Home nonprofit organization in San Jose, organizing fundraisers and food drives around campus to serve local food banks and increase awareness of worldwide food waste and starvation. I became the Brass Officer for my school's Tri-M Music Honors Society and Marching Band, implementing my music and leadership proficiency to help growing musicians improve their performance skills.

The fire grew bigger each and every year. I mentored as a Link Crew Leader at Los Gatos High School, assisting and mentoring incoming freshmen through the challenges of their first high school year. I advocated for others as a Wellness Ambassador, working to promote positive mental health awareness and positivity around campus. I served in the Helping Hearts Club, dedicating time every month to read to disabled patients at the Children's Hospital Of Northern California.

Still, I wasn't satisfied with my progress. I felt I could expand my positive influence on the world in other areas. Thus, my enthusiasm for math and its practical applications took me further into the field of medicine. I became a delegate for the National Congress of Future Medical Leaders, gaining skills from Nobel prize winners to achieve the Laureate Certification, becoming a proficient scientific researcher at sixteen! After achieving the Laureate Certification, I joined the Inspirit AI Scholar program, collaborating with peers and graduate students from Stanford and MIT on an AI project to detect pneumonia using computational mathematics. At one point during this project, a mentor guided my introduction to neurology, which sparked my growing interest in how mathematics methods—like Fourier analysis, fractal geometry, and linear algebra are applied in the vocation of neuroscience. Now, the spark that has started it all has exploded into the massive realization that is telling me exactly what I'm destined to do in life.

All of these experiences have prepared me to excel in the field of mathematics and science, continuing on to become a neuroscientist someday. I can't help but think that perhaps my future work discovering new aspects of brain science may allow for the creation of better medical treatments to save lives and give back to the world. Just think, it all started with a spark. To that, I thank my family for encouraging me to pursue my dreams. I thank my grandfather's Sicilian legacy: that hard work and honesty will take me far in life. Without his sagacious advice and encouragement, I wouldn't be where I am today. That's what makes me feel proud to be a Sicilian.

We'd love your help reading the 2026 scholarship essays.

Volunteers work approximately 10-15 hours in total, meeting to learn about the application process, reading and scoring the submissions, then participating in the scholarship luncheon.

The fun begins February 2026, so write this down as a New Years Resolution!



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