

A Functioning Workaholic

An Ethnographic Project by Michael Lamberti

My father, Joe Lamberti, was the first born son in America, and grew up with three siblings and two parents who were all born and raised in Italy. I know it sounds boring to interview your own father; seems like the easy way to complete an assignment, right? Well my father and I have never really spoke in depth about his childhood and how he became one of the hardest workers I know. I never inquired a lot about his past mostly because his mother, my Nonna, died when I was ten, and his father, my Nonno, was too elderly and did not speak English well enough to have these conversations. Most people would claim their father is a hard worker—it even stirs up some confrontation among men of all ages who love to be competitive representatives of their fathers. I’m not saying he’s the hardest worker I know or have heard of, but he works hard enough for me to wonder why or how he became that hard worker.

“I was a mistake...kinda...” He answers after I asked why he was the first born in America. I asked him to explain further, and he replied, “Well, long story short, Nonna came to America in 1955 while Nonno stayed back in Italy with the children because of work. Due to the immigration policies and restrictions, your Nonno wasn’t able to make his way to Italy until 1958. Well, once he got there...keep in mind three years had passed since he had seen his wife...he wanted to make sure that he was staying...” You can probably see where this is going, “...so they had me, their ‘insurance policy’ to insure our family could stay in the States.” Clearly I was shocked. To think I had gone this long without knowing that my father was conceived for insurance purposes.

You might be wondering what all of this has to do with being a hard worker. Well, it might help to mention that my Nonno was forty-four years old when he had my father. Forty-four is considered old to have a child today, let alone in 1961. Needless to say, my Nonno expected a lot from my father. My Nonno was not hard on my father, he just knew he had a limited amount of time to teach my father the essentials for entering adulthood and becoming a man. Luckily, my Nonno was in good enough shape to work with and teach my father valuable skills. He was the head carpenter for the city of White Plains, New York, which was also what he worked as back in Italy. These skills have clearly transferred to my father, along with the work ethic that comes with being a contracting worker.

My father has been in the work force since he was twenty-four years old, and worked his way up quickly through the companies he worked for. “The 90s were my glory years.” I asked him what his motivation was. He explained how “...having a wife and a two kids by thirty was rough and you’d think it’d slow me down, but it was the absolute opposite. I was fueled by the fact that I had my wife to work hard for and you and your brother. I was responsible for two other lives, so I had to kick ass.” We both exchanged a chuckle. My father now runs his own company which is still making its way off the ground, but it gives me a chance to actually see how hard he works. My parents also just bought a foreclosed house that, for lack of explanation, needs a ton of work, and my father utilizes the skills gained from his father’s teaching. He is awake, nonstop working, whether it be on the house or his business, from 6:00am until 8:00pm at the earliest. He is usually still communicating with clients until 11:00pm sometimes.

I asked what he considered his biggest influence, knowing it was most likely my Nonno, but I made him explain in more detail. “Nonno obviously. He just pushed and pushed me to the extent of my abilities. You think you have it rough working for me sometimes. Try being ten

years old and installing a roof with your old man... yeah exactly.” He smiled. “It was the way he taught me though. Your Nonno didn’t have a lot of time to sit me down and explain things to me the way I do for you, he just made me his apprentice. I watched everything he did and it helped me learn. I listened good and hard anytime he spoke or explained anything, because it was rare. He always used his carpentry work as analogies for life. That’s how I learned how to be a man.” I then replied, “So that’s why everything I do, you have some carpentry related analogy.” Again we both laughed. It made me realize that no matter what you do, as long as you take in as much as you can from each experience, the lessons learned become universal to an extent. Basically, whatever I do in life can help me learn general life lessons.

I asked my father what keeps him going these days, now that he’s fifty-four years old and has the house and the business. You would think I would have learned by now what his response was going to be. “Nonno.” He chuckled as I asked for him to elaborate. “Your Nonno worked as hard as he did when I was a young boy up until he retired.” I replied, “When did he retire?” He answered, “When he was about 75, and the funny part was he didn’t really have to. He was old and bored so he kept working any way he could. And even after he retired he’d help me with projects around the house if you remember.” See, my father was lucky. His other siblings were much older than he and for the most part were off starting their own lives by the time my father was ten. Sure, his siblings got to know their father when they were young and more energetic, but my father got to know him when he was becoming wise in his mid-life age. “He was smart by then. He had made all the mistakes he could have, so he’d form his advice around those experiences. Don’t get me wrong, he let me fail, but it was controlled. He may have seen me doing something wrong and let me, but he was always right there to explain to me what I did

wrong and how to avoid getting it wrong in the future. The learning experiences were instant, and it made me the hard worker I am today.

My Nonno, died last October, so of course the interview ended slightly emotionally for the both of us. We both stopped countless times throughout the interview saying “How have we not talked about all of this until now.” He added jokingly, “Probably because no one likes the kid who uses their parents for their project.” My father has taught me everything I know, and now I know a lot of it came from his father. I felt more connected to my Nonno, and even though he was too elderly to teach me things, and have talks like this one I had with my father, it was like he was the one teaching me the whole time. Twenty-two years later and I finally got to know what was behind my father’s work ethic, life lessons, and analogies. My father is a functioning workaholic and it’s all because of his father.



My father
and my
Nonno on
their roof top
in 1971