

Natalia Cieslar '23

My Italian education began in middle school, where I distinctly remember having to write the conjugation of *andare* fifty times for homework. I did not know then, but I inadvertently signed a contract that day. And so, *sono andata* – I went – and my Italian education took me all the way to college, where as a freshman I was placed into Professor Leisawitz's Advanced Italian Texts/Contexts Course. I remember feeling nervous when I reviewed the syllabus before the first day of classes and noticed the course would be taught strictly in Italian. I thought that no amount of conjugations could have prepared me for that. And yet, I loved that first Italian course at Muhlenberg College – so much so that I took another one next semester. And again the semester after that, until I eventually declared an Italian minor.

Despite not having a drop of Italian blood in me, the connection I felt to the language and the passion I had for the culture and history of the country inspired me to join the Italian club my freshman year. While Covid limited our club meetings to virtual cooking lessons, when we finally returned to campus, much to my surprise, I became the president of the Italian club. Together with the rest of the club, we organized movie nights with pasta, olive oil tasting nights and bocce ball tournaments. I will forever be grateful for the Italian Club and being able to create the community that we had, especially under all the transitions of a largely pandemic-defined college experience.

My junior year of college, I was fortunate enough to study abroad in the beautiful cradle of the Renaissance – Florence, Italy. My years-worth of conjugations were put into play as I navigated my way through town, ordering fresh *schacciata* from the bakery under my

apartment and negotiating prices at the San Lorenzo leather market. I was living, breathing, and eating my way through a city full of historic landmarks I had only read about in textbooks. How lucky I was to walk across the magnificent Ponte Vecchio on my morning route to class, to marvel at Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" at the Uffizi Gallery, and live on the same street that Galileo once lived on! I felt eternally grateful for my Italian education for giving me the tools to prepare for and appreciate this moment.

My Italian Studies experience culminated in a self-designed study under the mentorship of Professor Leisawitz examining housing instability in Italy, largely inspired by speaking with locals about their personal experiences with struggling to find affordable and available housing in the city center of Florence. I further drew upon this theme in an analysis of Elsa Morante's *La Storia*, for my final paper. However, my Italian education did not end when I graduated from Muhlenberg. I currently have an internship with an Italian luxury interior design company, where my Italian knowledge is used for work daily.

I would like to thank the Italian Studies department, the incredible Dr. Leisawitz and Dr. Viale for the community they have helped build and foster, and the continuous support and mentorship throughout my college experience. Your passion for what you teach is contagious. Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous donor of this award. *Grazie mille*. Language is a gift that has opened so many doors for me. I cannot wait to see what's next.