

Mary Teresa Michael and THE MANY MICHELIS

By Dick Davis

Mary Teresa Michael is a hugger. Mary hugs most everyone: friends, neighbors, clients at her Sharon styling salon and especially her Italian family.

I have been on the receiving end or watched many of those hugs during our 26 years of marriage. But I have never seen anything like the 37-to-39-year absence hugs she exchanged with paternal cousins during our recent trip to Italy.

Mary's two-year quest of reconnecting with Micheli cousins in Ceccano, Italy stemmed from loving recollections of previous month-long visits in 1980 and 1982 with her aunt Lucy Michael. Aunt Lucy regularly took Mary, her sister Cindy Michael Avers and several local cousins in the 1960s, 70s and 80s for summer visits among the Micheli family in Ceccano, about 50 miles south of Rome. Sister Patty Michael Maykowski and her

son, Michael Maykowski, accompanied Aunt Lucy during a 1996 visit.

I call them simply "The Cousins" as getting into genealogy specifics of first, second, third cousin, once or twice removed, etc., would resemble the complex formula of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. I would call it Mary's Theory of Relativity but that would be a bad pun.

The Cousins welcomed us into their homes, prepared numerous multi-course meals, never-ending snacks and drinks and picked us up and drove us to local attractions and restaurants. Mixed in were lots of smiles and hugs.

The Cousins were warm and full of fun and laughter — just like Mary.

Our previous week in Rome was busy and exciting. But we received few smiles and no hugs while touring and dining in The Eternal City.

I stepped out of my non-Italian Davis shell and participated as much as I could.

Hugging was a rarity growing up in the Davis family. We loved each other but hugged only on special occasions, such as snow in July.

Sitting for Micheli extended meals was difficult due to my two artificial hips. Frequent stretching and walks around their homes brought generous offers to get me a new body.

The Cousins graciously accepted me not only as Mary's husband but also as their new friend. I did what I could to hug them, if only in self-defense at times. A non-hug may have resulted in snapped shoulders for me.

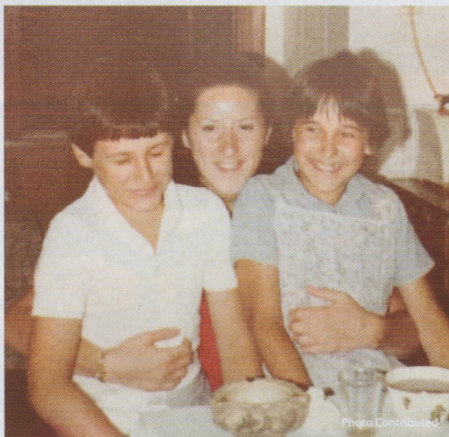
I truly enjoyed my new nicknames of "Deek" and Dicka."

Frequent naps incorporated into the two weeks allowed me to refresh and recharge while trying to keep names straight. Among The Cousins were three Marios (including two Mario Michelis), three Massimos, two Marias, two Francescos, two Angelas and two Felippos, along with Luigi, Pepino, Battista, Angelina, Rocco, Paola, Paolina, Marilena, Rosato and many others.

Mary was fine. She tapped a reservoir of vintage 37- to 39-year-old adrenaline.

The Cousins' relationship stem from Mary's paternal grandfather, Domenico Micheli, and his nine siblings born in Ceccano in the late 1800s. (The family of Mary's late mother, Pasqualena "Lena" Cataldi Michael, is from nearby Castro de Volsci) Domenico came to America in 1913 and settled in Sharpville.

The surname Micheli became Michael at Ellis Island. Like many who emigrated from Italy, their last name was "Americanized." The Cousins are



Left: Mary Michael, center, with Micheli cousins, brother and sister Rosato and Battista in 1982 during Mary's stay with Aunt Lucy at the Micheli homes in Ceccano



Right: Mary Michael, center, with Micheli cousins Rosato and Battista in 2019



Photo by Eleonora Rossi

The Michael/Micheli family and a few friends celebrate a September reunion in Castro de Volsci, Italy. Mary Michael reconnected with her Italy cousins after visiting 37 and 39 years ago.

descendants of those ten children.

As happens with many families, contacts were lost over the years. Aunt Lucy died in 2009.

The key to connecting was dozens of photos Mary snapped of those memorable visits of living among the Michelis and enjoying day-to-day family activities. Mary started a private Facebook page, shared 37- to 39 year-old photos to pages of a few possible cousins, The Cousins responded and shared the photos with other cousins.

Cousin Luigi Villani was the first to spend time with us when we arrived in Ceccano. Luigi quickly connected us with Corrina Panfili, speaker of English and town resident. Because of our very limited Italian, Corrina became our go-to person for translating and like a sister to us within a few days.

She several times unselfishly answered our texts for help and became part of our family. Turned out Corrina and one of the Mario Michelis were in a group of close friends 30 years ago. They, too, reconnected.

Corrina and husband Diego Magliocchetti graciously drove Mary and I to experience the Abruzzo National Park, about an hour from Ceccano. Their pride in the glorious wooded haven showed and we were grateful they shared it with us.

At about 5,000 feet and 60 degrees, the day also was a welcome respite from the stifling heat of Ceccano. The lush, mountainous scenery more resembled Switzerland than Italy. Their familiarity with Le Foci, a mountaintop restaurant of fine local cuisine, added to our pleasure.

Mary and I regret not learning more than basic Italian for our trip. Sign language, facial expressions and a translation app on cell phones only go so far. Frequently the app apparently translated to something resembling Chinese, adding more confusion and laughter to communications.

Only a few of The Cousins spoke English so along with Corrina, brother-in-law Bill Maykowski (husband of Patty), cousin Federica Micheli (daughter of Mario and Maria Micheli), and cousin Mario Tiberia translated for us at various times.

Friend-of-Corrina, Mario Micheli, his wife Maria, and the Tiberia family opened their homes, welcomed us and treated us to plenty of food. Mario Tiberia's mother, Paolina, twice concocted homemade

Taste Test!



Pasqualena "Lena" (Cataldi) Michael's ITALIAN POLENTA AND MEAT SAUCE

Makes 6 servings

ITALIAN POLENTA INGREDIENTS:

6 cups water
1 teaspoon sea salt
2 cups corn grits/polenta
3 tablespoons butter

DIRECTIONS:

In a large, deep pan over high heat, bring water and sea salt to a boil. Gradually stir in polenta. Reduce heat and simmer gently. Stir frequently to prevent sticking until mixture is very thick; usually about 30 minutes. Use a long-handled spoon as mixture pops and bubbles and can burn.

Stir in butter and more salt, if you wish. Oil a deep medium-sized bowl and spoon polenta into bowl. Let set for 10 minutes. Invert onto a hot plate. Mixture will unmold and hold its shape. Cut polenta into thick slices and serve hot, topped with your favorite tomato sauce and freshly grated Parmesan cheese.

MEAT SAUCE INGREDIENTS:

3 cloves garlic, chopped
1 to 2 tablespoons olive oil
1½ pounds loose sausage
(regular, mild or hot; your preference)
3 tablespoons tomato paste
2 (28 ounce) cans crushed tomatoes
2 (28 ounce) cans tomato sauce
3 (28 ounce) cans water
Sugar, salt, parsley, basil and Italian seasoning to your taste

DIRECTIONS:

Place sausage in lightly oiled large, deep pot and brown the sausage. Add raw garlic and sauté only a little. Add tomato paste and again sauté.

Add and mix in crushed tomatoes, tomato sauce and 3 (28 ounce) cans of water and spices to taste. Bring to a boil while frequently stirring, then reduce heat and bring to a simmer while stirring frequently for a few hours.

fettuccini and red sauce as the pasta course among a five-course extravaganza, once for Mary and I and once for Bill, Patty, Mary and I.

Paolina, 84-years-young, is the proud matriarch of the Tiberia household that includes Mario, his wife, Angela, and daughters Marilena and Paola. It was a treat to be among them and feel their family pride and love.

Mario Tiberia and Paolina apparently are the only cousins to visit America — Mario four times between 1989 and 1996 including once in 1992 with his mother. They also have Cerrone and DePofi cousins in Sharpsville, Detroit and Toledo.

A dinner party for 55 Michelis hosted by Mary, Patty, Bill and I was a highlight. We expected about 30 but more reservations were made to Mary in the last days prior to the party. No one wanted to miss the action.

The party quickly morphed to a family reunion. The local Michelis reconnected not only with Mary and Patty, but also among themselves after drifting apart.

After six hours of appetizers, a multi-course Italian banquet, plenty of reminiscing and laughs along with toasts of local wines, we gave in to the early morning hours. No one wanted to leave the action.

Yes, six hours. I have learned many things during our 26 years of marriage, one being that saying goodbye does not necessarily mean anyone is leaving anytime soon. A goodbye merely starts the departure process.

Mary not only overwhelmingly succeeded in reuniting with The Cousins, she succeeded in reuniting Michelis with other Michelis.

Heartfelt hugs to Mary.

It wasn't easy for Mary and I to leave Italy, The Cousins and our new friends. Fifteen visited us throughout our last day, bearing unexpected parting gifts, smiles, tears and more hugs.

Mary and I thought they might kidnap us and keep us in Ceccano. We probably would have cooperated.

Heartfelt hugs to The Cousins. **V**

Photos Contributed

Dick Davis

Dick Davis enjoys touring Italy with wife, Mary Michael, and writing from his Sharpsville casa at writingbyricardo.com.

