

# LUISA PARROTTA CANNITO

## PROFILE:

Born:	August 30, 1938
Married:	October 24, 1959
Died:	August 14, 2013
Arrived in Canada at age:	21
Children:	All born in Toronto- Anna Maria, Giuseppina, Domenico & Patricia
Grandchildren:	Frank, Fabio, Lia, Michael, Daniel, Claudia, Anthony, Raphael, Nicholas
Great Grandchildren:	Violet, Matteo, August, Gabriel, Stefano

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## Stories/Memories about Luisa that showed strength, significant moments, or particular life moments:

As recounted by **Nicholas & Raphael Cannito** – 2 grandsons

It didn't matter if there were 2 or 20 people at her table, if you were at Nonna Luisa's, you knew you were loved.

Nonna Luisa had a large family much like any other Italian immigrant. She raised four children and helped them raise nine grandchildren. Including spouses, nieces, and nephews, one would think it would be easy to be lost in all the noise - to be forgotten. But she had a way of making everyone feel special, of taking care of you in her own unique way, because of the traditional values she was instilled with. Those values were love, hard work, and the importance of family.

Her way of life was a stark contrast to the average Canadian. As an Italian immigrant, she took great pride in her culture – a culture of self-sustenance, of utilizing the limited resources available to create beauty out of the ordinary. Already a master cook in a league of her own, her meals were heightened by her insistence on making things from scratch. Turning her backyard into a miniature farmland she harvested countless vegetables. Her garden was stocked, but so was her cantina. Both were filled to the brim with ingredients at the ready, able to whip up a delicious meal at the drop of a hat. The ingredients she couldn't grow herself she would buy in the rawest form to create home cooked original meals. She was never short on flour or eggs.

Her skilled cooking technique was a direct result of the love she had for each and every member of her large family, from her eldest daughter to her youngest grandson. Her meals were a way of showing her deep and enduring love for the people that she loved the most while staying true to her Italian heritage. If she knew you had a favourite meal, it would be ready made for you as soon as you entered her house, no matter how much effort was required.

It was this immense effort that was the foundation of everything Nonna Luisa did for her family. She instilled it into each and every person that was lucky enough to meet her. As the two youngest grandchildren of nine, she made us feel incredibly loved every time we were together. We miss those Friday morning impromptu breakfasts and can't wait to tell our children how lucky we were to be loved by Nonna Luisa.

As recounted by **Claudia Marsili** - granddaughter

When I think back to my childhood, some of my fondest memories are with my Nonna Luisa in her and my Nonna Ralph's home. Whenever I think about her, three significant moments come into my mind and always put a smile on my face. From her taking care of me when I was sick by making a fresh pot of soup and teaching me how to embroider, to sitting by her side as she made homemade pasta dough and her giving me a small piece to "make" my own pasta creations. The most significant memory I have, however, took place outside the house, when she would take my brother and I on adventures. They would always start with a walk to the local park, followed by a stop at the library to read books together. We would then make our way to Walmart, where I would help my Nonna find the best deals by comparing the prices of single role tinfoil and the jumbo pack. We would end the day by eating at McDonald's and then make our way back home. Those days were some of my favourites, and when I think about my Nonna Luisa, those are the happy moments that I am brought back to.

As recounted by **Patricia Marsili** – daughter

I always remember mommy working hard and keeping busy. Very rarely did I see her sitting down doing nothing – one of the only guilty pleasures she had was watching *The Young and Restless*. Whether it was working in the factory, grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, taking care of the children she was always busy making sure everyone was taken care of but rarely took time for herself. Never did you hear "lets go out for dinner" – always with the mindset that she could feed everyone with a package of pasta and homemade sauce rather than spend the money on dining out. Again, not treating herself but rather thinking about how to save money. The only travel that was done was to go back home to see family and even then, it wasn't truly a vacation it was cooking and cleaning with a little of fun on the side. Days that stick in my head are the hot summer days when she would be working in the factory and would come home and would drop her bags and sit down and all she wanted was for one of us to have a glass of iced tea ready for her. She would sit in the lawn chair and gulp the drink down and then jump into cooking and taking care of everyone else.

My mother is probably one of the strongest people I know. Anything she put her hands on she could tackle – not scared to learn new things. Vividly remember how when she got older she insisted on cutting the grass herself and shoveling the snow and when the time came that she just couldn't do it anymore she would rather pay someone than inconvenience her children. We of course stepped in and took care of it for her. When radiation was required, she used to say she could go downtown by herself on the subway all because she didn't want to inconvenience her children but of course we didn't give in to this. She was strong until the very end – gave straight forward directions on how she wanted to be taken care of and how her home was to be sold before she passed away – always to be as little as an inconvenience to her children. She was a selfless until the end. One moment that will forever be engraved in my brain and heart is when we were wedding dress shopping and she would work every Saturday morning therefore the appointments had to be in the afternoon and she knew I was anxious to get the task completed and wanted to go earlier than later but she would say " if I work on Saturday I can make a little more money to put towards the dress and the wedding" Again a selfless mother!

As recounted by **Josie Porto** – daughter

For Luisa family was first for her so she would push herself beyond exhaustion to make sure everything was done for her husband and family. She rarely said no to helping others, often at the expense of her own health and time.

She carried on traditions in the new world when many moved passed them to assimilate into the new culture. Examples include daughters wedding dowries, homemade meals from scratch, annual sauce, wine, and salami making, these traditions have been carried forward somewhat with her children still.

Her pride and joy were also her home-the grass was pristine and the snow was removed right away. The inside was always clean and updated.

With grandchildren though, she did her best to assimilate and would take them to McDonalds, and adapt holidays, something she never did for her own children.

She was very strong and independent and not being able to drive was probably something she regretted as she needed to depend on others to get out and about. Often, to not impose on others, she would 'walk' extra miles to get what she needed done.

As recounted by **Anna Maria Monti**- daughter

Being the oldest of 4 children I was able to see and remember my mother's pregnancy with her youngest child. I remember her big belly and the fear in her face when she went into labor at home. I can still see the sweat on her face as her labor started and I eventually realized the fear was not related to the labor itself but of leaving 3 children at home with the neighbour, getting into a taxi because her husband was at work with the only family vehicle and there was no way to contact him as he was on a job site (cell phones did not exist) and eventually being in the hospital where she could not express in words what she felt or needed as she did not speak English.

I imagine how difficult and scary it was being alone, being unable to communicate and knowing the pain that was to come. Yet through all this she didn't complain, nor did she ask for help. This is only one of many examples of the strength of Luisa. From immigrating to Canada without any money or speaking the language to raising her 4 children in a society so different from her up brining. The strength it took her not to give up and return to Italy was immense. The ability to forge on despite all the difficulties is to be admired. In her last year of life, she suffered greatly being paralyzed and in pain, yet all she worried about was being a burden to her children. Luisa was more than just a strong woman she was an example to live by and we hope we do her proud following in her footsteps.

As recounted from **Domenico**- son

There are so many memories I have of my mother, and yet, when I have to write down just a few, I'm at a loss. Its impossible to sum up everything she taught me, because it ranges from practical things like writing my name, to tying my shoes, to mowing the lawn.

Our memories, especially our trips to Italy, will always stay with me. These are all things I'm grateful for, of course, and I find myself teaching my boys the same way she taught me.

Then there are the big things she taught me the importance of hard work, saving money, and family. Every life lesson has made me who I am today. And even though my family might make fun of me for how I turned out, I like to think that the important values that my mom instilled in me make me the man I am today. I always wanted to make her proud of me, make her happy. I hope I did. I hope I still do. I'm so proud to hear the wonderful stories about her that I hear when I meet people who knew her.

She was a remarkable woman, and there's nothing I love more than realizing not only how wonderful she was to me, but how much of an impact she had on everyone she met.

As recounted by **Anthony Marsili**- grandson

I discovered how tough and brave my nonna Luisa was one night when my sister and I were sleeping at her house. She had just tucked us into bed when we suddenly saw a spider crawling down from the ceiling. My sister and I both screamed and my nonna came into the room, grabbed her slipper, and swatted the spider without any hesitation. I know it may seem like a small act now, but at the time I was so amazed and impressed at her

calmness and bravery. This idea of my nonna being strong and brave was only reinforced as I grew up and witnessed her on a day to day basis - shovelling the heavy snow during crazy Canadian snowstorms, raising a family of 4 kids (and continuing to help raise her grandkids even as she got older), living alone in a house after my nonno passed, cooking multi-course meals that somehow managed to satisfy everyone at the table, moving to a foreign country with a foreign language...the list goes on and on. When I think of my nonna Luisa, I think of strength - a quality that she has most definitely passed down to her children, and that I hope gets passed down to me as well.

As recounted by **Lia Longo**- granddaughter

Luisa Cannito, a brave, selfless wife and mother of 4, who was the foundation of our beautiful growing family, built on love, trust, and respect. To know Nonna Luisa was to love her. She was a small, reserved, humble woman, but had such a big presence. She was hardworking, warm, nurturing, compassionate and generous. As one of her 9 grandchildren, I can confidently say that you didn't just know you were loved by her, you felt it. She was always giving, always doing- and in everything she did, she instilled pieces of her Italian culture, that she took great pride in. She didn't just simply cook for us; she would teach us how. She did more than just sew our things, she would have us sit side by side, showing us each stitch. When we needed to be bathed, it wasn't a quick in and out. She would take out her blue bucket, sit us atop of the washing machine, soak our little feet in the tub, and tell us stories that made us laugh, instilled wisdom and made all our time together, quality.

Nonna Luisa was very special to me. We took walks together, shopped together, baked together, and she always found the time at the end of a long day to sit and chat over a warm cup of "latte chocolat". I admired her greatly for all her wisdom, her values, her strength, and her innate goodness. She taught me many lessons over the years, and had a big role in shaping who I am. It was the little, everyday things she did, that made the biggest impact. She led by example. She taught me the value of work, not through her words, but through her actions, from watching the early morning drop offs and end of day pick ups. As a woman in her time, of her culture, working a 9-5 job was not the norm. She taught me the importance of kindness, in offering her colleagues rides home, in sharing home cooked meals with neighbours, and in seeing the good in everybody she met. Nonna Luisa showed me the value of keeping family traditions, celebrating together, and surrounding each other with love and support.

Having very little to start, she built an honest, pure, wholesome life for herself, and made sure we all knew the importance of living our lives the same. Nonna Luisa left a lasting impression on all of our hearts, and though she is deeply missed, her legacy lives on through her children and grandchildren.

## What Luisa would say if she were here

### Coming to Canada:

In 1958 while Raffaele was in Toronto with his sister and her family (he had arrived the year prior from Italy he wrote to Luisa's father Nicola and asked for her hand in marriage. The letter still exists. In October 1960 he returned to Italy, married Luisa and a few days later boarded a ship for Canada.

Luisa struggled with coming to Canada as she left behind her parents and siblings and did not know when she would see them next. She was not happy to leave at such a young age and imagined failing in Canada as she had never been out of her small town of Biccari in Foggia.

She kept telling herself that the benefit to leaving her small town and coming to a new country was for the opportunities of the children that were to come. This did happen as her 4 children were raised speaking

another language, had a good education and good work opportunities. Luisa did see the “fruits of her labor” as they were all healthy and successful before she passed on.

### **Life in Canada:**

Once she had settled, Luisa thought and hoped that more of her immediate family would join her in Canada. Aside from 1 brother, some cousins and paesani the rest stayed in Italy. This was hard for Luisa as she raised her children. Missing family broke her heart.

Luisa was a very hard worker, but because she didn't speak English, she found it difficult to communicate, and felt her opportunities were limited. The cold weather was difficult to adapt to. The distance between family members was also a challenge, as Mississauga and Oakville were far, and travelling to visit wasn't as easy as it was in her small town of Italy. Raising children was also difficult in this new place, as her traditional values were very different and stricter than the ones in this new country. She wanted to raise her children in the same manner that she was, with similar values, and had to deal with the challenges of a more permissive society. Money was tight, and her husband Raffaele - a bricklayer – worked a seasonal job that was not as steady as they would have liked.

The one thing that surprised Luisa in her new experience in this foreign place was the number of different nationalities that were represented in her community. She often told her children about the different people she'd meet; where they were from, and their very different traditions. Luisa didn't feel so alone anymore, learning about these other people just like her, new to this country as well. She often told us we “were all the same”. A nice reminder that is something that still rings true today.

### **Role Models & Friends:**

Luisa had many role models, but we believe she most admired and looked to her brother Donato and her mother Giuseppina. Mom had many friends both from work and the neighborhood but was always reserved in her relationships. Many, if not all, friends spoke Italian making it easy for her to relate.

Since family was one of the most important things for Luisa, the relationship with her brother Donato grew stronger once he moved to Canada and lived with her and her husband. Once Danny married Gemma, the relationship grew stronger and closer, and they became not only family but friends.

Luisa & Raffaele grew very close to the family that helped them immigrate to Canada. Antonio Gianfrancesco was a barber who had immigrated several years prior and helped others do the same. His wife and daughters became close friends with Luisa and helped her navigate the Canadian way of life. Eventually they raised their collective 7 children in a close relationship to the point that the elders were referred to as Zia & Zio.

### **Hardships Faced:**

Missing family was probably the hardest thing to overcome for Luisa because the times between letters, calls and visits were long. The language barrier was a daily challenge. The fact was that where she worked, shopped for groceries and spent time with family, her ability to always speak in Italian resulted in not learning English fluently. After 50 years of living in Toronto Luisa had not mastered the English language because of this. Although she sent her children to English speaking schools, she couldn't help them with schoolwork or give advice on assignments.

Never really feeling truly Canadian and now, not fully Italian, was always something that weighed on her mind. Her heart was always in Italy, but her head was in Canada where she worked to build a good life for her children

despite the financial difficulties. Many immigrants like her faced many challenges like racist remarks and missed work opportunities because of the language barrier.

When Luisa was 45, she was diagnosed with Thyroid cancer, and this probably became the biggest hardship she would face. Fighting cancer for over 30 years was most difficult not because of what she physically suffered but what she knew it would mean to put a burden on her family, her children. Mom was a fighter, but she was also most humble and selfless; she always thought of others first. Imagining that she would become dependent on her children during her fight is probably what she suffered from the most.

#### **What was Important to Luisa:**

Luisa often spoke of family first, her family, both in Italy and in Toronto. She believed raising her kids to have more opportunities, working hard, saving money to pay off the home we owned, and having a good reputation for her family were fundamental. Luisa's spiritual beliefs were also very important to her. While she could not go to church regularly, she prayed daily and thanked God for her family.

#### **Were you happy that you came to Canada?**

Luisa would probably say that she was both happy and sad about coming to Canada. The opportunity to live in Canada was important for her children, and the main reason she endured the hardships. However, missing her own family in Italy, and struggling with little money in a new land was difficult. Leaving Italy with very little life experiences was overwhelming and came with the fear of failure.

#### **What advise did you give your children and grandchildren?**

Our mother often reminded us of a basic rule that she was raised by and lived by – honesty. Telling lies was not acceptable in our family. Being honest meant showing respect for others and being humble. This was important in both work and family life. She did her best to instill in us and in her grandchildren that an honest life, a good work ethic, and the ability to be humble were important qualities to aspire to.

#### **Did things turn out the way you thought they would:**

As our mother reached her retirement age – a time when she should have been able to relax and worry less – she became ill and suffered paralysis from the cancer she was fighting. She had a lot of time to reflect on her life, and came to realize that things turned out the way they were destined to. She imagined a better life than hers for her children, and ultimately hoped that they would be healthy and happy. Her hopes for them included good education, successful jobs, health, and eventually happiness as they raised their own families. We know she was very happy that things did turn out the way she had hoped they would.

*If you're lucky, your parents will have taught you how to  
be a principled person by example.*

*We, her children are lucky!*