

The Gift of a Smile: Pizza Class at Mount Sinai Medical Center

Natasha Lardera (November 27, 2012)



Although known to be a hospital for rich people, Mount Sinai treats every day little patients whose family cannot even afford to give them a meal. Doctor Angela Cioffi and restaurateur Michele Luzzo organized a pizza class in the Oncology Department to teach them something new, make them eat a healthy Italian specialty and give them the chance to smile.

"Let me introduce myself: my name is Angela, I am an oncologist from Salerno. I have lived in Paris for 8 years where I worked in an important Oncology Center. I specialize in rare tumors (sarcomas) afflicting young adults. I moved to New York two years ago through an exchange program held at Memorial Sloan Kettering. Then I decided to stay, because the doctor I was working with, Dr. Robert G Maki, was offered a job as Chief of the Pediatric Hematology/Oncology at Mount Sinai Medical Center and he needed experts in rare tumors to coordinate research projects as he had to re-organize the entire pediatrics department and possibly open an Adult Sarcoma Unit.

Dr. Maki is one of those doctors that is human with his patients and who is greatly respected in the



scientific community because of his great knowledge and relationships with his colleagues. He is not competitive, he actually is open to international exchanges, indeed we are working on projects in collaboration with Istituto Tumori in Milan. He is a great teacher, always willing to share what he knows. He asked me to contribute with my expertise in the creation of his Sarcoma Unit and I could not say no.

At Mount Sinai what immediately struck me was that the situation was really peculiar: although it is known to be a hospital for rich people the little patients of the Oncology Department are about 80% from Harlem, the Bronx and Queens with no insurance, they only have Medicare. They come for a day long chemotherapy session yet they cannot even afford to eat a decent meal... often the social workers have to buy them food with their own money.

Food is one of my weaknesses, I particularly enjoy going out to the different restaurants and pizzerias in the city and through the years I got to know many cool and generous people. I wanted to put the two things, work and food, together, to make something special. Once I was talking to Michele (owner of Luzzo's, Ovest and Mikele) and he suggested we organized a pizza class for the kids. This way they could get a distraction during their day-long chemo session and, at the same time, enjoy a free meal that is also nutritious and tasty. Michele had already taken part in similar events for autistic kids and he knew how to organize things.

I had to pitch the idea to the department head, the manager and the social workers and together we decided to give it a try with about ten kids. The idea is to make it a weekly, or bi-weekly, appointment and to welcome all kids, not just oncology patients. Of course other Italian restaurants will participate some have already confirmed their participation. We are using the cooking class idea as a way to give these kids a free meal while they are in the hospital. Then later on, during the spring time, I will coordinate, it is a way to make an even more effective impact with my work, other events with the participation of artists and photographers and restaurants (Michele has already agreed to participate). This is not a way to promote Luzzo's or whoever... this is a way to stimulate the community so that these little treasures will continue to get the best possible care but in a serene and familiar environment even though they actually are in a hospital."

How can anybody not be familiar with the wonderful work of doctor Angela Cioffi, the Mount Sinai staff and Michele Luzzo? As the holidays approach, there is room for some serious thinking. In a moment of giving it is important to understand that giving is not simply buying a cashmere scarf or a mini i-Pad... giving is much more, it's bringing hope, it's partaking knowledge, it's waking up a smile.

This is what happened at the Pediatric Hematology/Oncology Unit at Mount Sinai Medical Center during a pizza class organized by Angela Cioffi and held by Michele Luzzo.

"I was so emotional the night before the class," Michele explained, "that I could not sleep. I was terrified I would say something wrong to the kids. Then my wonderful daughter and Angela were able to calm me down and I understood I simply had to be myself. I went to the hospital with the material, 15 individual doses of flour, yeast, salt, sugar, all other necessary ingredients and a smile!"

"Michele showed up with a smile able to melt everybody," Angela explained, "He is the typical Neapolitan father. He was talking to the kids with a simplicity that was just... disarming. Even the social workers were speechless."

Everybody, not just the social workers but also parents, family members, volunteers, staff and simple passers by were captivated by Michele's ability to speak to the kids, involve them in the pizza making process and, mostly, to get the attention (and cause laughter) of those who, because sad or shy, rarely speak.

"There was an Italian-American child, M. age 10," Michele says, "who was sitting beside me and he was looking intensely at me. I could almost read his thoughts... 'what does this man want from us?' he seemed to be asking... I reminded him of his Sicilian grandfather, he was emotional at seeing I was doing some things he used to do... He was asking lots of questions and even gave me advice on



how to make spaghetti ai frutti di mare. Two other kids were really melancholy and reticent. The social workers told me they never saw them laugh, BUT after a few jokes in my broken English, they could not resist... they burst out laughing as we were preparing the dough, mixing the ingredients and let the pizzas fly... it was general happiness. In the end, when I asked them to put the mozzarella on the pizza, J., a sweet 7 year old girl, drew the peace symbol. It was really emotional to see that such a young child could be so wise."

As they were checking everything was going according to hospital rules, volunteers, social workers and doctors alike wanted to join in and make their own pizza. They knew the class was for the kids but Michele was simply irresistible. "It was supposed to be a test," Angela explained, "we wanted to see the children's reaction and the feasibility of the event in the department but the outcome was so positive that Michele was immediately asked to do more. Maybe not just pizza but even pasta or other Italian specialties."

"Everything that can be done by the department for the kids is welcome," Angela continued, "especially if it is free and raises awareness on the needs of the patients. Pictures of the event will be posted on the hospital's site to raise awareness and motivate possible donors."

"I am so enthusiastic and proud," Michele concludes, "As a human being you strive to live a dignified life, you work hard yet this is what fulfills your spirit and makes you feel alive, you realize you are really worthwhile."

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