

INTERVIEW with a MULTILINGUAL

By Elizabeth Schond



ALFONSO ESPOSITO

Alfonso Esposito - Background

Alfonso is 62 years old. He has lived in the United States for 35 years in Syracuse, New York. He was born in Cervinara, Italy, a small town in the Naples region.

Alfonso moved to the United States at age 27 with his wife, who was also from Cervinara. They have lived here since then and raised their three children here. In 2002, Alfonso married an American woman from upstate New York.

Alfonso has had little education and has had many jobs throughout his life. He currently works as a tradesman who replaces and installs tile in homes. When he first arrived in the USA, he worked in a tailor shop, a pizza shop, and a few other places where he could work with other Italians.

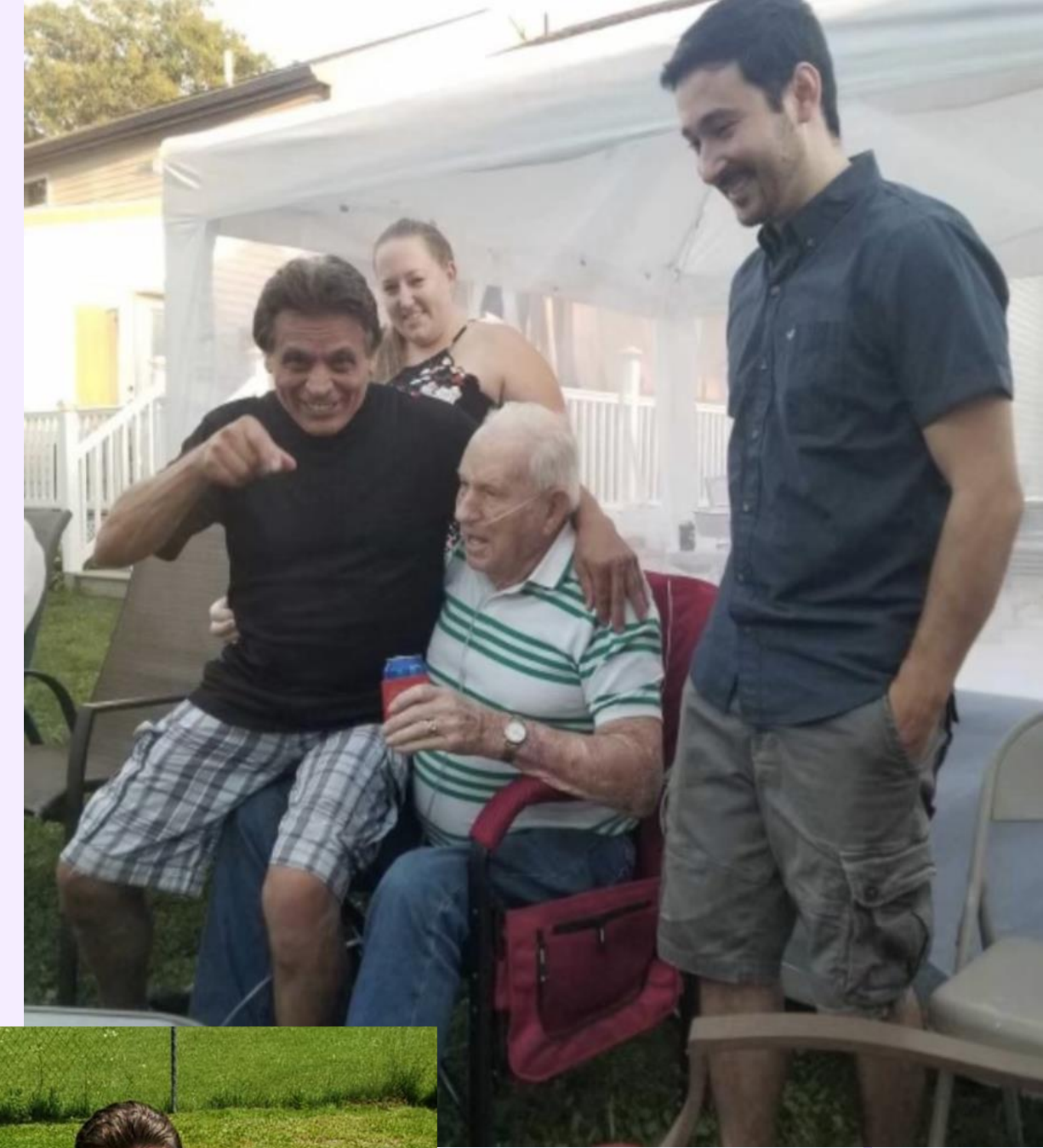


Personality & Identity

Alfonso is a very outgoing, loud, and funny person. He is very sarcastic and loves to joke around. I find it interesting that he is able to maintain his humor and fun personality in all of his languages.

Alfonso loves talking to people and always makes friends everywhere he goes. He is not afraid to use any of his languages and will make connections with anyone, no matter what languages they speak.

Alfonso loves his family and feels his languages are an important connection with his family members. His opportunities in his daily life that allow him to continue using his first two languages help connect him to his home and center his identity.



Family

Alfonso has three children from his first marriage: Brilliantina (Tina), Pasquale (Gianni), and Alexia (Lexi)

He has one granddaughter: Emilia

He has two stepchildren from his second marriage: James and Eric

He has two siblings, who still live in Cervinara, Italy: Gina and Pasquale (Gianni)



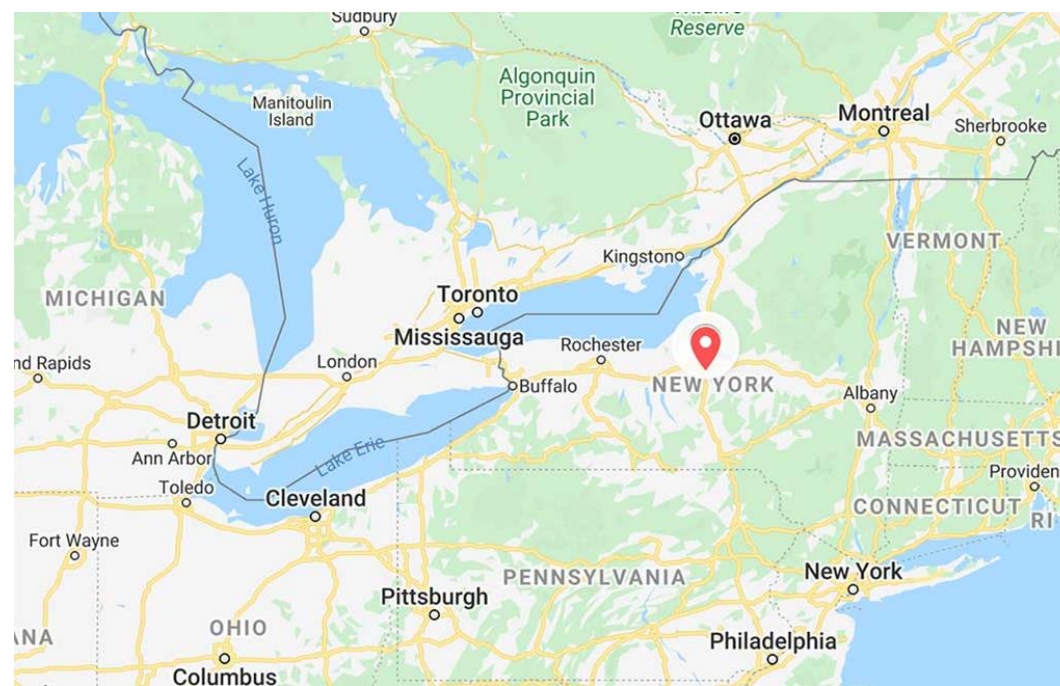


Cervinara, Italy

Born in 1960

He grew up speaking Neapolitan at home and learned Standard Italian in school until he dropped out at age 14.

He also studied French as a foreign language in school but has never used it regularly or remember any of it.



Syracuse, New York, USA

Moved here in 1987 [age 27]

He did not speak any English when he moved to the United States. He attended an English language class and spoke some English with his wife.



Cervinara/Syracuse

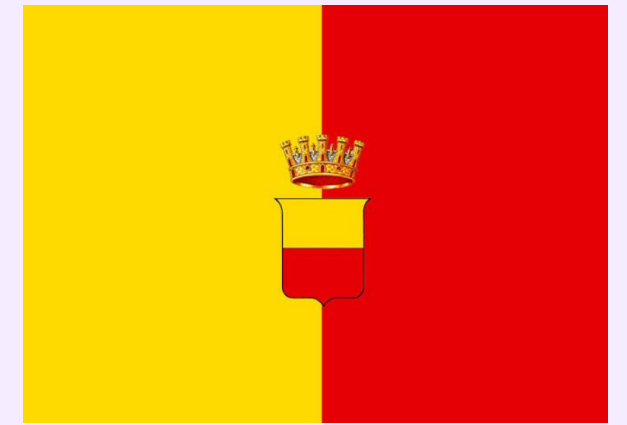
Today, he still owns a home in both places. He lives in Syracuse full time but visits his home in Italy every other summer.

He regularly uses English, Italian, and Neapolitan in his everyday life.



History with languages

- ❖ Alfonso grew up speaking Neapolitan with his family at home.
- ❖ Alfonso learned Italian when he went to school in Italy. At school, he spoke Italian, read in Italian, and wrote in Italian. He quit school at age 14, but he still uses his Italian to this day.
- ❖ When Alfonso moved to the United States, he did not speak any English. He lived with his wife and only spoke Neapolitan at home with her. He worked with other people from Italy and only spoke Italian at work. He had to take English classes to learn English and he watched English television to practice. His English improved when his children learned English at school and started speaking it at home. His English improved even more when he married Kelly, who has only spoken English her entire life.



Language Abilities

Neapolitan:

This was his first language and the language he is most comfortable speaking. He describes his ability to converse in this language (speaking and listening) as 100%. He is unsure in his reading and writing skills in this language as he does not have much experience with those skills in Neapolitan.

Italian:

Standard Italian is the second language he acquired by attending school until he was 14 years old. He began to read, write, listen, and speak in this language in school and quickly mastered his abilities. He would describe his abilities in this language as 100% in all areas.

English:

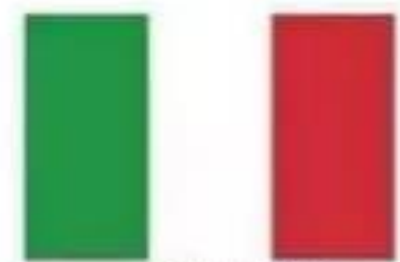
English is the third language Alfonso acquired by moving to the United States. Being fully immersed in the language was a bit difficult at first due to his living and working situations. However, he learned enough to manage his daily life. When he married Kelly, his second wife, his English improved dramatically. Although, he still does not consider his English to be very good, he estimates his ability to speak and listen around 75%. His reading and writing skills are much lower than that.

He is NOT a balanced multilingual

What is the Neapolitan Language?

According to Alfonso, it is a dialect of Italian spoken in the Naples region of Italy.

According to my research, it is a romance language spoken by over seven million people in southern Italy. It is not a dialect of Standard Italian because it developed independently and is considered to be descended from Latin. However, it is said that Standard Italian has influenced all aspects of Neapolitan.



ITALIANO

ACCORGERSI
FAZZOLETTO
SBAGLIARE

IERI
CUCCHIAIO
CINGHIA
ALZARE
FUCILE
COLOMBA
PENTOLA
SETTIMANA
FARSI MALE
AVERE
BOLLIRE IL RAGÙ
CUCIRE
CONTRARRE
FARE CONFUSIONE
ALTERARSI



NAPOLETANO

ADDONARSI
MUCCATURE
SGARRARE

AJER'
CUCCHIARA
CURREA
AIZARE
SCUPPETTA
PALOMMA
PIGNATA
SEMMANA
STRUPPIARSI
TENERE
PIPPIARE
COSERE
ARRUGNARE
AMMUINA'
'NGRIFARSE



Role of Bilingualism

1. Alfonso uses all three of his languages in his everyday life. He speaks English at home with his wife and out in public (restaurants, stores, etc.). He speaks Neapolitan with his family, including his children and siblings, with whom he speaks on the phone every day. He speaks Italian with his friends when visits a local Italian coffee shop. Some of his friends speak other dialects of Italian (i.e. Sicilian) so he speaks Standard Italian with them.

2. There are many people in his life with whom he is able to code-switch or code-mix. For example, Alfonso's children all have a basic understanding of all three of his languages so he is able to use whichever language he chooses when speaking to them. His children grew up only speaking/hearing Neapolitan until they went to school, where they quickly learned English. Now, all the children are most comfortable using English. Alfonso is also teaching his one-year-old granddaughter how to speak and read Italian and how to speak Neapolitan. Alfonso says that he is most able to code-switch or mix his languages with his siblings and children. He also says that he usually only uses the wrong language by accident, otherwise he feels confident that he usually chooses the correct language based on who is talking to.

Role of Bilingualism (continued)

3. In his daily life, Alfonso does not do much reading, but he does enjoy watching movies, tv shows, and especially sports. He consumes these in many languages, but most often he chooses Italian channels or movies. He says he would be more interested in reading if it were possible to find reading materials in his first language, Neapolitan.

4. Language Expression:

- Alfonso says that he thinks in Italian/Neapolitan most of the time. The only time he thinks in English is if he is in a situation where English is being spoken.
- He says he does not remember most of his dreams, but if he does they are in Italian/Neapolitan.
- When expressing emotion, he typically reverts to his first language (Neapolitan) and he also usually swears in this language. However, he did note that he enjoys swearing in all languages.

Multilingualism Advantages

1. “everything” - At first, after I explained the word “advantages,” he said “everything” and discussed that he found everything relating to his multilingualism to be an advantage.
2. Alfonso says it makes travelling easier as most of the time he is able to find someone who understands one of his languages almost anywhere he goes. He and his wife especially like to travel around Italy when they visit during the summers.
3. He helps his wife learn Italian and Neapolitan, which in turn also helps improve his English.
4. He believes his multilingualism has taught him empathy for others. He understands from his own experience struggling with English how others can feel in similar situations. He has also had many opportunities to meet many different kinds of people throughout his life.

Multilingualism Disadvantages

1. Struggles with his third language, English. The sentiment I felt from this portion of the conversation was that he felt his life would have been easier if he had never moved to an English-speaking country and had to learn English.
2. Alfonso was not successful in school so it was difficult for him to learn English as an adult in his English classes.
3. He dislikes the expectations to translate. He likes to do everything quickly and always moves at a fast pace, so he does not like having to stop a conversation to translate for others. At times, he is the only person in the conversation that speaks all 3 of his languages, so he is the one who is expected to translate.

Current Struggles with English [L3]

- Certain topics/situations are uncomfortable for speaking English
- Relies on his wife, Kelly, to help with legal documents, doctor appointments, and other situations
- Uses Italian grammar structures in English (dropping ends of English words)
- Circumlocution - Kelly and Alfonso have to reword or rephrase things to help with understanding
- Kelly noted that he uses “filler” words in Italian/Neapolitan when speaking English (for example, “but” or “however”)
- Spelling is the most difficult part for him, which affects his work. Technology (smart phones) has improved this for him
- When his kids were younger, they would call him and say “Papa pick us up” which he copied and tried to use to say he was picking them up and he would say “I pick us up the kids”
- He sometimes uses avoidance or changes the subject if he feels embarrassed or does not know what to say

Culture Shock

- ❑ Alfonso did not know the term in English.
- ❑ He has a phrase he uses frequently: “Only in America” to describe typical American things
- ❑ He does not remember much from when he first moved to the United States, but one thing that stood out to him at the time was how different the houses looked, especially the roofs.
- ❑ One thing he likes better about the United States is the driving. He says it is much easier to drive because all the cars are automatic (not manual) and the streets and highways are bigger and more accessible.



Thank you!

Questions?
