

# NOT JUST A BRONX TALE

Frank J. Bia

I thank you all for coming out today. I know it's not the most pleasant day to be out, but we're here, it's cozy and it's nice. The story I'm going to tell you, if we call it my intellectual trajectory, has to do with the influences and confluences in my life that brought me here. I feel the part I'm most proud of occurred back in the 1980s, when I collaborated with Dr. Michele Barry, who's now out at Stanford University, and we began the International Health Program, which allowed residents from Yale, and now from all over the country, to go abroad and work there as part of their medical training. We started in Haiti and moved quickly into countries in Africa and South America and now are also very active in Uganda. That began around 1980 or so. For me this is the fruition of something that began when I was very young, and I'll try to explain that to you. This is also a bit of an ethnic story. I don't want to be offending anybody, but I do use accents, because that's what I grew up with, both myself and the people I was around. So let me just start out with this quote from Alfred North Whitehead: "No one who achieves success does so without the help of others. The wise and confident acknowledge this help with gratitude." And that's what this is. About six months ago I was asked to be part of an oral history project at Fordham University, from which I graduated in 1967. It's officially called the BIAHI, or the Bronx Italian American Historical Initiative, and it really got me thinking about the arc of my life and how I got to where I am. I had fun and it's now online as part of the testimony of about thirty or forty people.<sup>1</sup> But it gave me some perspective on what those influences were.

First let me take you back in history a bit because a lot of this has a lot to do with my grandparents. In around 1870 or so many of you are aware that the Italian State as we know it was formed from many different components including Sicily, which was somewhat of an outlier. There were thirty to forty separate and distinct dialects in Italy. Neither of my grandparents on my father's side could speak to their counterparts

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on my mother's side, since they spoke distinct Italian dialects; their only common language was English, such as it was. After the unification of Italy, which was fostered by Giuseppe Garibaldi and Camillo Benso di Cavour, with Cavour being the master of realpolitik, the south of Italy, known as the *Mezzogiorno*, became even poorer than it had been. The unification led to the further ascendancy of northern Italy, including the cities of Torino and Milano. Most of the Italian Americans you might meet today are the descendants of Italian immigrants who did *not* come from northern Italy. They had few reasons to leave. But then there are people from the south, the *Mezzogiorno*, and they led a massive exodus of four and a half to five million people from the Italian peninsula, and also from Sicily, which was very much depopulated between 1890 and 1924. Immigration restrictions, particularly for Southern and Eastern Europeans, translated notably as Italians, Greeks, and Russian Jews, was markedly diminished in 1924 by the Reed-Johnson Act. For Asians it was cut off completely.

By 1890 in New Orleans, there was an event that was very telling, and very much imprinted on the minds of Italians in America, but particularly Sicilians. The New Orleans police chief, David C. Hennessy, was shot on the steps of his brownstone in New Orleans. He lingered for a while, and what he said before he died was, "The dago did it." That led to massive arrests of hundreds of Italians, most of whom were Sicilians who worked the sugarcane fields along with African Americans who were supposedly "emancipated." Ultimately, more than a dozen Sicilians were tried and acquitted. That wasn't enough. A mob essentially stormed the jail, took out eleven of the nineteen men who were indicted, and lynched them in the streets. That is the largest mass lynching ever to have occurred in this country. I don't want to diminish, however, the fact that African Americans died by the thousands: four to five thousand documented lynchings and only the gods know how many others. This event was imprinted on the minds of the Italian people who were working here. Yet, the exodus from Sicily continued. When Giuseppe and Sara Ioppolo, my maternal grandparents, left Sicily for good, between 1909 and 1910, they were part of this massive exodus. They had both been born and raised on the northern coast of Sicily [Naso] and came here through Ellis Island, then lived in Port Jervis before coming to the Bronx in the 1930s. This is a Bronx tale, as you'll probably figure out soon enough. In May of 1913, Francesco Bia left from the Port of Naples, although he was actually from the east coast, a town called Modugno, near the port city of Bari. Ergo, he was Barese, and his dialect would not be understood by my grandparents from Sicily. He got passage because his father, who was supposed to travel as a so-called Bird of Passage, became ill. These were Italians traveling back and forth from Italy to make money, bring it back to family in Italy, and then return. He developed a dental infection, most likely what we call an anaerobic abscess of the jaw. So I'm here today talking to you because of an anaerobic abscess.

My grandfather Francesco Bia was sixteen – the ship’s manifest shows him turning seventeen on the ship, the *Principe di Piemonte* – and he was alone, neither polygamist nor anarchist. Following his arrival, the first language he had to contend with was Greek, because he was working in a Greek ice cream parlor. Quickly he understood what was going on around him and realized maybe English was a better choice at that point. I should tell you that I am an Italian citizen, as is my wife, Peggy Bia, M.D., and our two boys, Jesse and Josh. This is because of my grandfather. There’s a provision in the Italian laws [there’s always a loophole in being Italian]. My father was born before my grandfather was naturalized as an American citizen; therefore, he was also an Italian citizen without knowing it. I spent three years finding the necessary documentation, which was quite difficult, including ship’s manifests, arrival papers, naturalization records, and even late-nineteenth-century birth certificates from Italy. At the end of three years, at the Italian consulate, once I finally cleared up my marriage certificate, in which I’m named Francis instead of Frank, I received the letter indicating that Peggy and I, along with our two sons, were now Italian citizens. We also have passports which allow us to travel far easier throughout the EU countries, which is great.

By 1924 immigration was very much cut off by the Reed-Johnson Act. In 1940 that generation which is called “the first generation” had produced the second generation, which to a large extent felt they were getting assimilated. However, in 1940 over 650,000 Italians were labeled “Enemy Aliens.” So then, my grandmother Isabella Bia thought it might be a good idea to naturalize, which she finally did, having arrived in 1916. After World War II, when many Italian Americans and Japanese Americans had fought for the Allies, it seemed that the acceptance of each ethnic group had gone up considerably, and I think that was true. I showed up on December 21, 1945 – the oldest grandson of what was then called a “mixed marriage,” meaning that my father, a Barese, had married a Sicilian girl, and that was *not* what one usually did. I also had ten cousins and three brothers, so there were fourteen of us living in the Bronx moving along very different intellectual trajectories. When I was six years old my mother and I often went into the delicatessen across the street, and I noticed when the owner, Abe, passed the roast beef to my mother [usually the end cut, which she did not like], there were five numbers tattooed on his forearm. “Mom, what are those numbers on Abe’s arm?” She said he had been in prison. “In prison? What for? What did he do wrong?” She told me he didn’t do anything wrong. This was right after the Nuremberg trials. If he didn’t do anything wrong, what was he doing in prison? She said, “Look, when you get older, I’ll tell you the whole story.” They all knew it at this point, what had really happened in Europe, and she kept her word. A few years later we sat down and talked. She explained the numbers tattooed on his arm. I began to get an understanding, an initial sense that Italians weren’t the only people in this neighborhood, besides the Irish.

It became even clearer to me that we weren't the only ones, because I was in Catholic parochial school and I came up against some Irish-American prejudices. Now you have to understand that antipathy for Italians, but particularly for Sicilians, was very high among the Irish in New York. They preferred separate churches too. I'm going to read two items to you that have to do with those lynchings in New Orleans. Let me read from the *New York Times*; this is before Adolph Ochs and his family took over publishing. "These sneaking and cowardly Sicilians, the descendants of bandits and assassins, who have transported to this country the lawless passions, the cut-throat practices, and the oath-bound societies of their native country, are to us a pest without mitigations. Our own rattlesnakes are as good citizens as they.... Lynch law was the only course open to the people of New-Orleans." That was in the *New York Times*. I have one other quote; I don't think you'll place it, unless I tell you. "Monday we dined at the Camerons; various Dago diplomats were present, all much wrought up by the lynching of the Italians in New Orleans." [It was one week after the lynchings.] "Personally, I think it rather a good thing, and said so." That is Theodore Roosevelt writing to his sister Anna. So, that's some of the background, and Italians knew of this. In 1911, you may be aware that there was an industrial fire in Manhattan in the Asch building, which still stands. It is referred to as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, and 146 people died. One hundred and twenty-six were just girls and young women between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four; virtually all the names on that list represent Italian or Jewish girls, mostly probably representing Russian Jewry in New York at the time. The doors had been locked in that factory, because that was the practice, due to fears that the women would steal merchandise from the company. That was the garment district in 1911, and that's the way they ran it. Foment and protest led to the founding of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union largely because of that tragedy. So, this is the background and history, in order to understand some trajectories.

My mother was the first person in that pantheon of people who helped me along the way. She was one of seven, the youngest girl, among six girls and a boy. Oddly enough, my wife, Dr. Peggy Johnson Bia, comes from a family of six girls and a boy; and more oddly enough my other grandfather, Francesco Bia, comes from a family of six girls and a boy. How that could happen in three different family generations, I have no idea. But my mother was the only one who did not have a college education, i.e., at first. My grandfather from Sicily, Giuseppe Ioppolo, sent all of his children, women included, to college and some professional education, largely during the Depression. I really do not know how he did it. His only son, my uncle Cono, graduated from Fordham Law School in the 1930s. Mom eventually did go to college at the Lincoln Center campus of Fordham University, but she died quite young. It was her four sons who had been sending her to Fordham. When we were all young and sitting at the dinner table, we'd clear it off afterwards and draw maps of countries and continents at her command. We'd fill in the cities, then we'd color them, and under her supervision

we talked to each other about what was going on in those particular countries, what they were all about, and who lived there. My mother basically gave me a terminal case of *pruritus pedis*, that's the medical term for itchy feet. Because of those evenings around the kitchen table, I was drawn to experience the world and its people.

So, I attended the local Catholic parochial school, teeming with baby boomers, and I soon found that I had a facility for languages, which has really served me well in life. I learned of that because I became an altar boy and picked up on Latin very quickly. I actually had no idea what I was saying in Latin at first, but eventually I was able to translate. I often served Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral with the Cardinal, and while I was about to choose high school I thought, "I'm really interested, I might want to be a priest." I think now, looking back, that I was looking for acceptance and certainly not Irish Catholicism. The power structure right in front of me was the Irish Catholic Church. St. Patrick's Cathedral, I was reminded over and over again, was *their* edifice, especially noted by the Irish clergy in attendance there. One example occurred following a Mass, high Mass at St. Patrick's. One of the priests came over to my friend Danny and me. He said, "Look, look at the ceiling, boys. What do you see?" I said, "I just don't see anything, Father." "No, no," he said, "look harder." Danny was totally preoccupied, about to purloin a nice bottle of unconsecrated Pinot Grigio, white altar wine, then deftly hide it in his duffel bag, so we could drink it on the subway heading home to the Bronx. Pretty standard stuff for altar boys in those days. So Danny and I were just standing there, and *sotto voce* he says, "Let's get moving." "Wait a minute, Father, I am looking up at the ceiling. I see red hats hanging down from up there." He says, "That's right! And boys, can you tell me, whose hats are they?" I said, "I really don't know." "I'll tell you," he says. "Those are the hats of the Cardinals of the City of New York!" Danny is not impressed. I asked who they were. "Well there was Hayes, Farley, Corrigan, McCloskey, and Hughes." I get an elbow in the ribs from Danny. He says, "Do you sense a trend here?" We were both about fourteen at the time. Picking up on the ethnicity in the power structure, he tells me point blank, "You don't have a chance in this operation, you just don't have a chance here." We proceeded to shove the wine into the duffel bag when no one was looking, and we took it on the Lexington Avenue IRT subway, then we talked about it all the way home. So, I made a decision, but the decision was also dangerous one, and I'll explain why. When I expressed an interest in the priesthood, you could hear all other academic doors shutting. Number one, "You will *not* apply to the Bronx High School of Science, and that's for Jews anyway." Number two, no applying to Regis High School, the best Jesuit school in New York, and tuition-free. Very important, my father had gone bankrupt. You can't apply, because *you* have a vocation, and *you* are going to the minor seminary, which was on the west side of New York City, on West 86th Street. I was still somewhat interested. Then, something else came up: there was a scholarship exam for a private school run by the Salesian Fathers in New Rochelle. I took the exam, and I got the word that I won a scholarship. This was important in terms of family finances. My parents and I

visited but I soon found out that I didn't win a full scholarship, I had only won partial support. It was out of the question. We couldn't afford the tuition, and in addition, I would likely have had to stay in New Rochelle at a dormitory. Not good.

The Salesian Fathers were destined to reach the top of the list of child abusers. They are a worldwide Catholic Order, not very subject to the Pope, and with a central mission to educate young men. I had dodged a bullet, because had I gone up there and stayed in the dormitory, it would have been potentially quite dangerous. Instead, I entered Cathedral College, both a high school and the preparatory seminary for the archdiocese of New York. Met some wonderful people, but I turned out, unknowingly, to be a moving target for potential abuse. I knew none of this. I would attend early morning Mass in my parish and then head down to the west side of New York City, but I would be home in the Bronx by four in the afternoon. However, some of my friends who lived at the dormitory for students from upstate New York were abused. I didn't know that at the time. Forty years later my sons would ask me, "Dad, which one of your classmates is in the *New York Times* today?" because ultimately they also became the abusers. In fact, however, my experience with most of my teachers was quite good. But at the end of the third year I said, these people are not saying "celebrate," they're saying something else, "celibate"; and I said, "this is not going to be in my repertoire." I was very upset that I was not learning enough science. I had one course in science and that was biology, sort of pre-pre-DNA version, and it really was very rudimentary. I left after only three years, which was a rough thing to do – transfer in your senior year. I worked to make that transfer ... this is what I refer to as my *annus mirabilis*, my miraculous year, 1962 to '63. I jumped ship, but I needed more science to make the transfer, and I was working during the day at Woodlawn Cemetery as a gardener with my grandfather. So I went to night school in the Bronx, and I took physics. The teacher was Mr. Greenberg. He had sixty-three students, most of whom had failed physics during the year and had to take it over. I had never taken a Regents examination because you didn't take those while in the seminary. Many of these students had taken it and failed. I would show up at six each evening following work, attend classes and laboratory until nine, go home, do physics homework, and get up the next morning and go to work with my grandfather in the cemetery. At the end of the six weeks I borrowed a Barron's review book in physics from a friend of mine. It had all the old Regents exams. If you're from New York you know what I'm talking about; they were the great equalizers for New York State. So, I studied every Regents exam that I could get my hands on, all the way back to 1935. The night after I took the Regents, which was at the end of a hot August day, I was about to transfer, but I had to find out; did I pass this thing? I thought I did. I went back to Theodore Roosevelt High School – the doors were actually open at 7 p.m. in the Bronx, believe it or not. There was a light on, I went up, I opened the door, and I heard, "Get the hell out of here." What? They were marking Regents, and "You can't come in here; it's against the law." Uh-oh, I started to slowly shut the door and I hear, "Bia, is that you?" It was Mr. Greenberg. He



called out, “Hey, get in here and stand there; don’t touch a thing. Everybody, stop what you’re doing.” There were about twenty men in that room who were tired, hot, and still marking Regents examinations. Greenberg said to all who were now listening, “You see this kid? Do you see this kid? This kid saved my ass. Out of those sixty-three kids, I let thirteen of them take the Physics Regents; the rest took my exam. Of those thirteen, he’s the only one of those SOBs who passed! With you, kid, I have an 8 percent pass rate and it’s good enough.” Oh, I thought, this is really good news. Then he said, “Get out, you can’t stay here.” I turned around and I almost pleaded, “But I’m transferring high schools, Mr. Greenberg, what did I get?” He said, “I don’t know how the hell you did it, but you got a 94 percent.” I thanked him and started to leave. About when I reached the door I heard him, “Hey Bia. Listen kid, I don’t know what you’re doing, but good luck.” I never saw him again. At this point something very important came over me, that there were other more important forms of acceptance.

I had also been working as a milkman at night with my uncle along the Grand Concourse. When I switched high schools I started to take fairly intense German language classes. The German and Yiddish languages are very close to one another, so I had a pretty good sense of what people were talking about when I collected bills each morning, and I learned more vocabulary. But that was not uncommon in the Bronx. My grandfather from Italy used to call me a crazy thief in Yiddish. I asked where the hell he had learned that. He insisted that it was English because he learned it here in the United States. I taught him another lesson once. I had given him a Christmas present, but it was wrapped in Hanukkah paper. He says, “How comma’ you given me a Christmas present that she’s wrapped in Cha-nu-kah paper?” “It’s not Chanukah, Pop, it’s Hanukkah.” Okay, whatever. So I told him that I went to work at the post office for the holidays, and I made some good money. Hanukkah usually came way before Christmas and in the Bronx the Hanukkah paper went on sale for 50 percent off. He says, “You telling me you maka you money, you buy yourself a some Christmas presents for your family and then you taka *my* present and you wrap (his voice was rising) in a Hanukkah paper. And you giva to me, because you get it for 50 percent off?” I said, “Yeah, Pop, that’s about it.” He looked at me sternly and then said, “That’s my boy!” For Francesco Bia, frugality trumped religion and ethnicity.

So, I was growing up now in several different cultures. I graduated from Cardinal Hayes High School after one year, and during that year I took chemistry in addition to more advanced physics on Saturdays at Manhattan College. I bet my chemistry teacher that I could get a 100 percent on the Chemistry Regents, because I was getting really cocky, and he took the bet. We all graduated at St. Patrick’s Cathedral that night. Just before we graduated, I saw him in the hallway. I said, “So... ?” He gave me the thumbs down and told me I did not get 100, I just nailed a 96 percent. “That’s good enough,” he said. So, from Hayes I lived at home and attended Fordham with the Jesuits. I decided not to go premed because everybody in that group was sort of cookie-cutter, and they all looked alike academically. Remember, at a Jesuit university you

were essentially first required to minor in philosophy and theology, and then you would probably major in biology, and so every premed looked the same. They had all the premed courses, philosophy, theology, etc. I took chemistry as a major. Peggy was in the first graduating class of women at Fordham, just one year behind me; she did the same and majored in chemistry. She actually had a higher grade point average than me, but that's all I'm going to say about that. So we go through Fordham, I graduate following my acceptance to Cornell for medical school in New York City. Why there? Because Dr. Benjamin H. Kean, a leading tropical medicine specialist in New York, was there, and I was certainly channeling my mother by that time. I basically wanted to work anywhere in the world that would take me in. Another wonderful aspect of Cornell is they had scholarship money, and they offered me a partial scholarship. I said, "I can't afford to go here." They said it was alright; they would make it a full scholarship. What's the big deal? Tuition was not steep at \$1,800 a year in those days. So, I started out with those funds, some loans along the way, and a night/weekend job as a hematology technician at New York Hospital.

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In this new and rarified atmosphere I developed a lifelong friendship with a classmate, David Liebling from New Jersey; he was Jewish and hilarious most of the time. About two months into medical school I told David that I had to speak with him. He asked why. I said, "Because I want to know why I am being referred to here as the Italian Jew." He laughed so hard and said, "You picked up on that?" Of course, I picked up on that! He said, "I'll tell you there's three reasons. Number one, you speak more Yiddish than these guys from the suburbs. Number two, no offense but you're from the Bronx and these guys don't particularly feel that Italians from the Bronx study as much as Jews do there. So, if you're from the Bronx you must be Jewish because you study so hard." Fine, that's a nice compliment. And I asked what the third reason was. David told me the third reason. It was then October and I was still darkly tanned from the summer sun. He says, "You have very dark skin. Well, they assume you are Sephardic." "Oh, I'm a Sephardic Jew; is that right?" Correct. I said, "Is that a good thing? Is it a bad thing?" I did not yet understand the distinctions, and then David put his arm around my shoulder, "Look Frank. Let's just say for now that it's not Ashkenazi." Oh? So, I began to realize that I was not carrying one single culture but several others reflecting the people who had influenced me. If I go back a few years my mother, Anita, had said to me when I graduated from high school, "You know there's a new Jewish medical school a few blocks from here. What she was referring to was the Albert Einstein School of Medicine, Yeshiva University, which was established in the mid-1950s, and it was then 1963. She said, "I heard they are hiring high school graduates for the summer. If I were you, I would get my buns over there." That was to be understood as more than a suggestion. So I did, and I got the job working for Dr. Robert Katzman, who was, I believe, an early chair of neurology. Fast-forward four years and he was able to write a very supportive letter for my application to medical school. They had allowed me to work on weekends carrying out experiments, throughout college, because I was



also living at home. Again, the money was a major consideration. I had gotten a full scholarship, a Presidential scholarship, to Boston College, but I couldn't take it. I had three younger brothers. My father had still not gotten out of financial difficulties, and I became a commuter student as most of us were at Fordham. Eighty percent of us were commuters living at home.

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So, a couple of the other things that I wanted to bring out now were people who further influenced me, once I was moving into the field of medicine. Peggy and I were married, but we were again separated by one year at Cornell. If I took an additional year we could head off to internship and residency together. I took that extra year to get a master's in tropical public health at Harvard. First we went to South America. We had fellowships from Louisiana State University to work in Medellín, Colombia. We learned Spanish, and when we came back we were off to Boston. I attended the Harvard School of Public Health and Peggy did her fourth year in Boston. On arrival at our commune of graduate students in Cambridge, Peggy said to me, "How are you paying for this year?" I had absolutely no idea. "I think I will be going over to the Bursar's office now to see what the arrangements would be." When I showed up, they said, "Forget about it." It's a wonderful Bronx and Brooklyn word, but pronounced as "faggedaboutit" at home. They told me they had applied for funding from the United States Public Health Service on behalf of physicians, "So your tuition is paid and you'll get a check for \$550 every month." Yes! I went over to the Department of Tropical Public Health and the chairman, also my adviser, was Dr. Thomas Weller, who had won the Nobel Prize for the isolation of polio virus. Really, he was the most humble and encouraging mentor. I told him what I wanted to do – I was interested in tropical diseases and international health – and the advice he offered was very clear. He said, "Look, what you've got to do is to get yourself certified in what you love, which is apparently internal medicine. Then break off and figure out where it all applies."

After that year, Peggy and I headed off as internal medicine interns in Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania, and there we encountered other mentors, whom many of you know. Dr. Samuel O. Thier, who was the vice-chair under Dr. Arnold Relman, is originally from Brooklyn, and Peggy is also from Brooklyn. They spoke the same language and got along well. Many people were very much intimidated by him. Residents were known to have fainted on rounds. Peggy was the only woman in our internship group and was not shy about engaging Sam. She might say, "Dr. Thier, I don't think that's true," while on rounds together. He'd said, "What?" And then they would have a dialogue, and he loved it. He absolutely loved that from his residents. For me, he became the epitome of a respected physician and medical educator. As time went on, we decided we wanted to stay at Penn as fellows, she in nephrology and me in infectious diseases with Dr. Richard Root. At about that point Sam was appointed the chairman of medicine here at Yale in 1975. I went in to see him immediately. I said, "Sam, what's going on, you're going to Yale and we're planning to do our fellowships here in Philadelphia. I mean, what are we going to do? You're taking the very people

we want to work with.” He said, “Yes, you have a choice to make. You can either stay here or you can come with me up to New Haven.” I said, “But Sam, we didn’t apply for anything at Yale.” He looked at me and jokingly commented, “What are you, an idiot? I’m inviting you to come to Yale.” New twist. So in 1976 we both came here as fellows; and my infectious disease mentor, who came with Sam, was Dr. Richard Root, another incredible role model. Also, I worked here with Dr. Vincent Andriole. Vince was the acknowledged dean of infectious disease physicians in this part of the country. And to his fellows he was affectionately referred to as “the Godfather.” He was also an Italian American, originally from Scranton, Pennsylvania. He had attended Yale School of Medicine in the 1950s, and he acted like the proverbial Godfather, Don Vincenzo, in many ways, and he was extremely good to his fellows, always looking for ways to help them along their way. From Vince, I learned the true power of clinical medicine and infectious diseases when we were at the bedside, especially because he could relate to just about anyone. He was really quite good at it.

Other mentors. I was lost one day in the West Haven VA Hospital, since I was a new fellow. In my wandering through the VA I met Dr. Edith Hsiung, whom many of you may have known. Edith stopped me and asked if I were lost. “I’m looking for the virology lab.” “That’s me!” she exclaimed. I explained what I wanted to do with a complicated diagnostic issue in virology and within about an hour she just said, “Why don’t you come and work over here for a couple of years. I have money for this. I like to mix Ph.D.s and M.D.s in my laboratory and, you know, it works out very well.” So I did join her for the next ten years, and Edith was the person who helped me get my research going, particularly because I hadn’t come to Yale with *any* research background. That also allowed me to work within two departments when I became an assistant professor, the Department of Laboratory Medicine under the chair, Dr. Peter Jatlow, and the Department of Internal Medicine. Peter was clearly the person who really gave me a home base at which to stay at Yale, although I was primarily in Internal Medicine and Infectious Diseases. For eighteen years I had a section chief in ID who did not think much of what I was doing in international health. He was a lab rat, and I was *persona non grata*. I stayed, he left. But eventually, I decided that after working nearly three decades with my closest colleague, Dr. Michele Barry, that it was time for me to try something else for a few years. We had built an international health program within the Department of Internal Medicine focused on getting residents-in-training experience in the developing world. So, I left at that point. Michele Barry, many of you may know, and many people said that they could not work with her. “How do you do it, Frank?” Mutual respect was our answer. I said that I’m not so easy to work with either. Michele and I, without knowing it, devised something that twenty to thirty years later we looked back on and said, “Do you know what that was? That was the ‘academic buddy system.’” She wasn’t the director; I wasn’t the director; we were co-directors. If she pulled in a grant, or I had one, we worked on it together. We must have thirty publications in which we were both authors, and we both benefited considerably. But

the time came when I had so many jobs in Medical Education, Internal Medicine, and Lab Medicine, I said to myself, “I just can’t do this anymore.”

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So in 2008 I left Yale as an emeritus professor, and I commuted down to AmeriCares in Stamford, Connecticut, as its medical director for six years. AmeriCares is a disaster relief organization, and I had a chance to work in several countries, including Armenia, Honduras, Cambodia, Malawi, and Tanzania; and after six years of that I thought it was all good, but I missed clinical medicine. Yes, I had enjoyed working part-time at a free clinic in Bridgeport, the Weisman Clinic, that’s run by AmeriCares, but it just wasn’t enough. So I returned to Yale as an emeritus professor in 2014, meaning no salary, no office, but you can basically do anything the hell you want in terms of contributing to the efforts of the medical school. I’ve been an emeritus for well over ten years, but for the past five or six years I’ve been attending in Medicine, working at the Fair Haven Community Health Center, a federally qualified health center where most of the patients speak Spanish. I volunteered for all the endeavors I like, without having to worry about where the salary was coming from. Some have a salary line and some do not. I am not on food stamps. That was the onus that was placed—is always placed—on faculty in the medical school. Where’s your salary coming from? And I had to juggle just too many sources, so that’s why I left. Anyway, that’s where I am, and if you would permit me one minute I want to say a word about Peggy Bia.

Some of you may not know Peggy. She is only the second woman to become a full professor of internal medicine at Yale. She did this in the field of nephrology and renal transplantation. We met when we were sixteen years old, 1962–63, my *annus mirabilis*. During that wonderful year when I left the seminary and started to live a more normal life, we started to date. She was from Brooklyn; I was from the Bronx. We met in Manhattan at some high school society bringing students together from all over the city. I said to my friend Danny, “Say, who are these people in the back of the room?” About nine young women in Catholic high school uniforms but looking somewhat tough. He said, in the universal Bronx answer again, “Faggedaboutit, they’re all girls from Brooklyn, and you’re from the Bronx. A very long train ride. There’s no way you’re going to get to Brooklyn from the Bronx.” I said, “Wait a minute, I want to meet that cute blond over there; I really want to meet that girl.” He finally gave in. So, I went over to her, meaning I walked up to Peggy and I was about to say something, and she looked up at me and said, “What do you want?” I said, “I just wanted to introduce myself.” And she said, “You just did.” Danny gave me the look, “For this, you wanna go to Brooklyn?” But for some reason I did, and we had our first dates riding the Brooklyn to Staten Island Ferry back and forth. It doesn’t exist now, because we have the Verrazano Bridge. On our first date I said, “This could get expensive. I mean going back and forth.” She said, “What are you, an idiot?” (Again, it came up.) “We just hide in the bathroom and we go back and forth.” Anyway ... so then we just teamed up and, as I said, she was in the first class of women to graduate from Fordham’s initial undergraduate college for women, called Thomas More College. And that was the

Jesuits really pushing the envelope with the Vatican, even before Yale College admitted women.

So, that's most of the story. I'd like to complete it with something I'm doing right now. I was just speaking about it to Dr. Art Rosenfeld. I looked back after all of this history when I was recently involved in an oral history endeavor, the Bronx Italian American History Initiative at Fordham, and I said, "Wait a minute, my grandfather from Sicily – he was not a typical Sicilian; he was educated. He worked as a scribe in Palermo. He was a musician; he played clarinet in an orchestra. He was an education nut. He had a party every year for all fourteen cousins who were his grandchildren. The admission ticket was your report card, and then what he did *not* do was the judgmental *shtick*. Instead, he gave out financial prizes, and then everybody's photograph was taken and published in *Il Progresso Italiano*, the major Italian American newspaper in New York. His wife's name was Rosaria. At least in Italy. Here in America, her name was Sara. I had begun to investigate the very strong possibility that we are descended from the Sephardic Jews of Sicily who were expelled from Spain and then Sicily in 1493, but did not all leave. Many of them did; some became *conversos*, but many just went underground for centuries. I don't think my grandparents had any inkling of this. If they did, then they were not talking. They had concepts, traditions, and ideas that make me believe that was the case. I am actively investigating this now. Two months ago, we were in Portugal at a wedding and my second cousin on my father's side came over from Bari, Italy. We have the same great-grandparents. I said, "Agnes, it's so good to see you. What are you up to, what's new?" She said, "Not much you know; I just did ancestry.com." What did she find out? "Well, you know something," she said. "We are a small percentage Ashkenazi Jews." What? Both sides of the family? So, maybe there really was something to my questioning David way back at Cornell Medical School. Why were they calling me the Italian Jew? The answer probably is that something is definitely there. But the point I'm trying to make is that my intellectual trajectory was heavily influenced and determined by the people I lived around early on in the Bronx, those people in the Jewish American community of New York. When I went to the interview at Fordham University with this Bronx Italian American Initiative, I laid much of this out over two hours of oral history. The chair of the department came over to speak with me. It was Dr. Jacqueline Reich, who is also Jewish, and she said to me, "You know, we're also producing the Bronx African American Initiative in addition to a Bronx *Jewish* American Initiative." She looked right at me and said, "Would you like to do it?" She was clearly joking with me, but she had gotten the point. In order to make any jump toward all these various and wonderful places where I worked and studied, there had to be an intellectual movement toward something other than the survival mentality that was prevalent among many first- and second-generation Italian Americans. The concept of becoming a physician was somewhat foreign and really thought to be beyond their reach in many instances. However, I did have one relative who was a physician, Dr. Joseph Giuffre, who practiced in the Bronx, but had

not gone to medical school in New York. He certainly wasn't going to come up here to Yale. You weren't going to get into Yale if you were a woman, Jewish, Italian American, or African American because you were openly excluded at Yale School of Medicine, and it was best left off your list. So, Dr. Giuffre and his best friend left the Bronx and went off to the University of Indiana School of Medicine. How they got in there, I don't know. He was to graduate in 1939, just before the Second World War. But within one month of their arrival they were called into the dean's office. He sat both of them down, looked at them, and said, "I hear you two boys are from New York. We don't want any trouble out of you two." Period. End of sentence. He had some very fixed notions about who was sitting in front of him. My uncle and his friend did not know what to say. But a lot changed after that. When I did get into Cornell in 1967, Dr. Giuffre just shook his head and said, "Yes, it's a little different now, Frank."

### Notes

- 1 See <https://digital.library.fordham.edu/digital/collection/bronxitalian/search>.