

My Story of the Journey  
... from Coloring My Roots  
... to Visiting My Roots  
by Frances Ginsberg

For years, every two and a half weeks or so I needed to color my roots . . . those pesky little grey hairs would make an appearance, peeking through my dark brown, long, curly, actually kinky thick hair. My obsession to have my hair smooth and shiny indeed made me a slave to my hair and made the roots more visible. This became a chore and a challenge of creativity in finding new ways to cover these roots and discover new hairstyles in doing so. The time spent on all of this "to do" was endless and easily could have been spent on learning a whole new opera role instead, memorizing the Italian.

About three weeks to the day after Valentine's Day, clumps of all that thick dense voluminously long hair started coming out. As I attempted to apply conditioner in order to de-tangle the curls; enough hair to cover three heads appeared in my brush. I felt a cold chill down my spine, in spite of the hot shower.

My nurse, Judy, had prepared me that this would happen and precisely when - but it still was a very vulnerable, frightening moment.

In December of 2007, I found myself sitting in the waiting room of an Italian gynecologist's office; in shock with the report. A cyst was found on my right ovary and it was advised that I needed to have it surgically removed. The big question was where and when? I had been living in Milano, Italy for almost 2 and 1/2 years, working and studying as an operatic soprano. As an American, I was not sure which way to turn medically. After finding the American Jewish doctor from Chicago in Milano, from the American consulate there; I felt much less lonely, even so, still confused.

It was narrowed down to two "best" gynecological/oncological surgeons in Milano. And being December in Italy, I was at the mercy of the season and was asked to wait until "Natale" (Christmas) was over before even considering the surgery.

I waited as I was told, singing "Ave Maria" and "O' Holy Night", in cathedrals in Milano, with a strange sensation in my lower abdomen the entire time. As I played the waiting game, the number 1 "best" surgeon unexpectedly passed away, as a young man. The shock was felt by all of my friends and relatives on both sides of the Atlantic. Then it was on to number 2 "best" surgeon and again I played the waiting game as my surgery date kept being postponed. I was being served the best "spaghetti pomodoro" with fresh tomatoes, daily, and made many new friends as the other beds in my hospital room kept revolving with various new faces. Each had their own families, all of whom heard me vocalize and saw me cry as I kept thinking of where I was and why I was there. My cast of characters in this

opera was a list of wonderful names; Italian and American, who helped keep me informed, supported and less alone. Friends and cousins from St. Louis, my home town, my brother's family in New Hampshire, my amazing friends and colleagues from Milano, who never failed to be at my hospital bedside with smiles and bureaucratic minds to help me fit into the system of healthcare there; even the in-laws of my maestro from La Scala - always with smiles of presence and presents of smiles. One special face was that of Elizabeth from St. Louis, a nurse of 40 years, who came to Milano to support me and give comfort during this ordeal out of loving friendship. In the meantime Janie, Pam and Melanie in St. Louis were all organizing who would be my doctor in St. Louis - if I needed to continue with treatment or as the Italian's say "La cura."

On January 23<sup>rd</sup> I finally had the needed surgery and it was diagnosed from a biopsy as an ovarian cancer. As I looked at that word I only saw "CAN-SIR!" I CAN SIR do whatever is needed to cure and heal. It was decided that I would need 6 cycles of the treatment and I saw instantly the power of the word . . . CHEMOTHERAPY . . . with the word MOTHER smack dab in the middle; nurturing, care giving, life breathing, protecting, and loving!

Little did I know that was exactly how it would be and more so!!! Elizabeth, wife of my life time long time friend, Timothy, had invited me to stay in her home in St. Louis for the duration of the "cura" and the ball started rolling . . . literally the "Cardinals baseball!" Doctor David Mutch (of BJC) had been contacted and he was waiting for me even before my arrival from Italy to St. Louis.

St. Louis?? Wow, the thought was surreal. My hometown, where I started singing in my living room in Olivette but had not lived there in over thirty years. The flights from Italy to St. Louis seemed an eternity; my breath was not "my breath" with endless long inhalations and exhalations for singing long romantic Italian phrases of passion and melancholy. I was not myself and I just did whatever Elizabeth told me to do. She, having been the "head nurse" or "Capo Sala" as the Italians say, was used to giving orders, and being obeyed. My Italian friends obeyed her too! And in spite of her toughness they all adored her dimpled smile and "grande cuore" (Big Heart) for making the trip to be-friend me and accompany me back to the "big America".

Upon arrival to St. Louis, Dr. David Mutch intercepted the ball and gave me instant care and attention while I was having warm blankets brought to me; it was discovered by Judy, his nurse, of my voice and career. Instantly I offered my voice for any fundraising or "raising of the roof" with some high notes. Never did I imagine what that would begin. I started a strict regime of conditioning and exercising, breathing, stretching, treadmill, bike and emotional hike toward getting my breath again to be "my breath."

It worked, and I never stopped singing from day one. Visits from friends from kindergarten, junior high, and high school literally made me "high" and the gift of love and

laughter poured forth overshadowing any fears. I began to rekindle a true love affair with my St. Louisians and my actual roots. One dinner grew into twenty then fifty and recited songs unaccompanied grew into many full recitals, church solos, rehearsals, contacts with Opera Theater St. Louis artistic administration and Cathedral organists.

Speaking Italian with a Sicilian born, now St. Louis-based-Italiano, drives through gorgeous green landscaping of all the suburbs and feeling 10-years old walking from animal to animal at the St. Louis zoo - superior to all zoos - cheering for the Red Birds in a sea of red humanity. Visits from my own East coast brother, and friend stage director, both brought that touch of New England sophistication to the mid-west endless parties for Easter, St. Patrick's Day, birthdays, Passover, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. Continual celebrations as the good news from Dr. Mutch grew into GREAT news as he called me immeasurable!!!!

Several trips to Steak'n Shake, reading the Post-Dispatch daily, KMOX Radio, impressed with classical radio delights, the oldies station happiness . . . all St. Louis musts!! Walking through Olivette, revisiting my grade school, my only house, braving to ring the bell, invited to dinner there, pinching myself to be sure it was not a dream. "Dreamsicles" at the summer pool, listening to English, amazed that I understood it so easily - all still part of this experience called "re-visiting my roots".

The longer I stayed the more that presented itself and I saw a life full with calendars and date books. Actually I was even fixed up on a real date! Not European enough for me - but part of the process. I never thought I would need a vacation from St. Louis but the joys of old friends, new friends, new places, old faces, calls and messages, limitless appointments, ointments to the soul - make a person whole, happy, and TIRED!! The slower paced Italy would be a needed rest from the journey of visiting my wonderful St. Louis ROOTS!!

Back to my hair roots. I have been given a gift of gorgeous wigs and one fits perfectly in my baseball cap. The biggest daily decision is which wig and false eye lashes or not . . . "I" lashes turned into flashes of cameras from my past, present, and future from this unforgettable trip to St. Louis.

You can sing "Meet me in St. Louie, Louie" anytime and I will be there. Continual thoughts of Louis and Evelyn, my parents, as drives through our hometown had been one surprise after another. Who ever thought that as I surrendered "coloring my grey roots" and "visiting my roots" would be so fantastic and healing!!! And colorful!! Thank you God.

Frances