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UP CLOSE & PERSONAL

An interview with Caterina Bellandi

BY ALEXANDRA LAWRENCE (ISSUE NO. 91/2008 / NOVEMBER 27, 2008)
TAXI MILANO25

Pronto, Alexandra? Sono Milano25. I'm on my way to your office, why don't you come down and we'll do the interview in my cab?

Most people living in Florence are familiar with the white PT Cruiser decorated with flowers, driven by a woman sporting a huge hat and cape—a mix between Mary Poppins and the Wizard of Oz. I spotted the taxi coming around the corner and smiled as a blaring tune issued forth from her horn.

'Hop in the back,' Caterina, aka Milano25, said, 'Today you're a passenger, a special passenger.' Once inside the magical taxi, I took a moment to have a look around. Television screens were playing *Cinderella*; stuffed animals, flowers, balloons, musical instruments and lollipops covered the seat. It is a child's dream car. As Caterina turned to shake my hand, I got my first up-

close look at the eccentric driver I had seen in traffic so many times. She is lovely. She flashed an enormous smile, blue eyes twinkling under her huge hat and adjusted a few blond strands escaping from her extravagant hairdo. We were off.

However, we didn't get far before being stopped by a friend eager to share something with Caterina. I would soon learn that Caterina talks to everyone—greeting them all with an enthusiastic smile and a hearty 'Ciao amore!'. And she listens—really listens—to the answer to the first question she always asks: 'How are you?'

'It's the first thing I say whenever anyone gets in my taxi. I don't ask where they are going, I ask how they are doing. You wouldn't believe how surprised people are!' But Caterina likes to surprise, so she insists on getting an answer even when people are reticent, 'People need to feel important, like someone really cares how they are doing, and if they are feeling bad or sad, they can say it. They need to say it.'

She would know. Given the utter happiness she exudes and the joy that colors her every word, you would never expect to hear that hers is a story of pain and suffering. We drove up to Piazzale Michelangelo, parked on a side street, and with the Duomo and all of Florence spread before us, Caterina told me her story.

A few short years ago, Caterina was just a regular office worker in Prato, in love with a man named Stefano, who drove a taxi in Florence. When Stefano was diagnosed with lung cancer and died at just 39, Caterina's entire life changed. Before he passed away, Stefano told Caterina in no uncertain terms that she would become Milano25. She agreed.

'Sometimes people will get into my taxi and give me their home address and it will be somewhere I'm not familiar with. I'll have to look up how to get there and sometimes they get angry. They tell me it's my job to know! But then I tell them this is my job because the love of my life died and gave me his taxi. They immediately change their attitude; they soften, they forgive me for not knowing off the top of my head. "We'll get there", I always say, even though it might be a way totally route different from the one you know.'

It is her candor in talking about pain that makes the greatest impression. Among the flowers and the balloons and the sound of Cinderella's mice singing, she explains how pain has brought her joy. 'When Stefano was sick, a lot of our friends just disappeared. They couldn't deal with it. He was too young; they didn't know what to say so they didn't say anything. They didn't understand that you don't have to say anything, you just have to be there.'

So she took over the taxi and began to talk about her hurt with whoever would listen. The more she told her story, the more she shared, the more her pain transformed into joy. But the real turning point came the day Costanza hopped in the back seat of her cab. The three-year-old told her taxi driver about her little brother who had gone up heaven because of a brain tumor, and Caterina learned about the family's dedication to a charitable foundation for the cure and study of paediatric tumors.

Profoundly touched by the story and the family's experience, Caterina began doing her part to ease other children's suffering by offering free rides to and from Meyer Children's Hospital in Florence. What started out as a simple service became such an important part of her life and work that Caterina decided to create a nonprofit association in order to better serve 'her kids'. Kids battling cancer and other life-threatening illnesses have a friend, a mother, a favorite aunt, a babysitter and a fairy godmother in Milano25.

She is their champion and their hope. 'These kids deserve a great life, no matter how long or how short it may be.' She listens, she hugs, she blows bubbles, she blows up balloons, and she tells them if they choose to become doctors one day so they can help other kids, she'll pay for medical school in America.

But her nonprofit is not just about raising money and providing economic support. 'People are always generously offering to help but say they don't know how; they don't have a lot of money. I say, "Listen, it doesn't take anything at all to volunteer or to give of yourself." Do you cook for a living? Then you can offer a lunch to some of my kids; that's your contribution, and it's huge. Are you taking your kids to the movies to see the latest Disney film? Why not take one of my kids along with you? It costs you 7 euro, think about it: they are on top of the world and at the same time you've taught your children about compassion. You've taken pain and turned it into joy.'

For Caterina, it's all about solidarity: being an active participant in your life by connecting with those around you; understanding that life is filled with hurt, but, instead of letting it control you, doing what she did—let yourself be transformed by it, for the better.

'I wouldn't change my life for anything in the world. I am who I am because I chose to share my pain.' However, she recognizes there is no roadmap for grieving. When her father passed away a few years ago she thought she would know how to deal with the loss, but she found herself unable to understand how to keep going when she missed him so terribly. So instead of retreating within herself, she went outward and began asking people in her cab if they had lost a parent and, if so, how they kept going without them. One day a friend



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replied, 'But Caterina, don't you realize that you *are* your father?' It was then that she began to recognize all of the characteristics she inherited from him and took comfort in what her father had given her.

Her mission, her taxi, is not just an idea or a way to raise money for those in pain. It is, like life, a constant evolution. As our interview came to an end, we made our way through the streets of the center of Florence, Caterina slowing every time she saw a child to honk and wave. She said, 'The thing I most want people to know about me is that I want to be hope for these kids. Nothing more, nothing less: just hope.'

The particulars

Milano25 is a 'regular' taxi, in accordance with the rules and regulations of the city of Florence. In addition to offering free rides to and from Meyer for children and their families, Caterina is available for weddings and other special events.

On November 15, 2008, Caterina was awarded Florence's prestigious Scudi di Benemerenzia in recognition of her work with and for sick children. Caterina recently met Patch Adams, the doctor-d clown made famous in a film by Robin Williams.

Dr. Adams invited Caterina to Russia, where he has been involved in charity work in hospitals, orphanages and nursery schools for the last 20 years. Details from the trip and more information on Milano25 can be found on www.milano25.com

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