

A Starlit Journey

Marina Melchionda (March 14, 2010)



Federico left Italy after years of success as the official hair dresser of well-known singers, actors, and VIPs. He arrived here in New York with courage and fantasy, but soon his passion led him to a path filled with stars, as he became the official artistic director of Hollywood productions and of several editions of the N.Y. Fashion Week

The day before I was leaving for the US, I went to the bank to get money, but I found out that my account was closed by my father... When I asked him to give me my savings back, he answered that I was going to have all I needed before I took the plane...All I got, instead, was 500 \$! I couldn't survive in New York just with that! Worried, I asked my mother why he was doing that to me... She looked at me and said: 'You know how much we suffer from the idea of you moving to the other side of the world. But it's your decision, and we can't do anything about it. Now go, and show yourself and

us how much you are worth, show that you can make it on your own'. What my mother said not only gave me courage, but challenged me and my pride.

With these words Federico starts telling us his story. Going back to those moments visibly moves him. It is his attachment to his origins that brought us to share with you his personal walk through life. His story is of a particular kind, very different from the ones we've told you before. Yes, because his path is paved with gold, he's friend with some of the most renowned Hollywood and Italian stars, he is part of an environment that many of us only have heard about. But still he remains a normal man who puts his family and his roots in first place in his life.

He talks about them with a genuineness, a simplicity, that leaves us no doubt about the authentic attachment to these truly Italian values.

Federico is an enjoyable person to talk to who makes you feel at ease and laugh. He is open to whatever question or curiosity to which you would like to find an answer. No wonder we ended up talking to him for more than 2 hours, and found out things about his life that we could never imagine...

It was June 13 1983 and he was 21 when he took that plane for New York with one of his best pals to follow his "American dream". It was a need so strongly felt that he couldn't put it aside anymore. He was leaving behind a successful life, his school sweetheart, his huge family with six brothers and sisters, and an already long career as a hair designer. But it was still not enough for him. He had to start all over again, leave Milan, and become a renowned hair stylist in New York. And he made it.

We meet Federico in a restaurant in Midtown Manhattan, with the windows overlooking his huge salon. He stares at it every once in a while, his eyes filled with pride. "I've been working in this field since the age of 13. My brother Rolando is a name in Italy, and has been participating in all the editions of the [Sanremo Festival](#) [2] for more than 20 years as the official hair dresser of the event. I used to go with him and had the occasion to work with several Italian show and music stars, as we were also called for music videos, fashion shows, and movies. When I myself became recognized in the field for my talent and capacities, I understood that in Italy there was room for only one of us. That's when I decided to move to New York, and start all over again. But I still went back to Italy for Sanremo every year to help my brother. This is the first edition that I did not attend and that is only because I was called as the official hair dresser of the [New York Fashion Week](#) [3] that took place at the same time."

Federico's first steps in New York were very similar to thousands of people his age. He didn't speak the language ("When we took the cab outside of the airport, we couldn't explain to the driver that we wanted to reach Manhattan. We described it as the place with tall buildings, as we didn't know the word skyscrapers. He must have thought that we were nuts but fortunately an Italian-American walking by helped us out!"); he didn't have a place to live ("We stayed in a pension between Lexington and 45th Street for a couple of days. It was not great at all, but that was all I could afford"); and, of course, he didn't have a job. With the small amount of money his father gave him, he couldn't survive that long so he started looking for something to do on the very first day he arrived in New York.

A hair dresser on 55th Street immediately recognized his capacities, and hired him in the blink of an eye. As he knew some Italian-Americans in the Bronx, he moved to Little Italy on Arthur Avenue and gave "official start" to his life in New York.

That was, however only the first step of his social and professional climb. His career had a decisive turning point when he met actress Isabella Rossellini's grandmother. "She introduced me to the city's fashion world, starting with the [Gucci](#) [4] people, and to Sergio Valente, who worked at [Berdof Goodman](#) [5], and who hired me right away. I became artistic director, and started working in many fashion shows, among which those organized by [Oscar de LaRenta](#) [6] and the [Fendi](#) [7] sisters. It was after 4-5 years of experience there that I decided to finally open my own business".

As Federico's deep and strong voice recounted his first years in the city, he never forgot to mention how deep his bonds with Italy



remained. He went back there every year, in the summer he stayed in Positano, the famous sea town on the bay of Naples where his parents come from. After having earned enough money, he proposed to his sweetheart, married her, and brought her here to America.

Federico opened his first Salon at 10 west 55th Street and ran it for 12 years. It was in that period that his career got a definite boost, when he became artistic director of several popular comedies and movies, and started traveling between New York and Hollywood. Among the productions he's proud to have participated in, there are Batman, and one of the best comedies of all times, When Harry Met Sally. "In Batman, I was asked to work on [Michelle Pfeiffer](#) [8]'s hair. There was a scene with penguins, who have to be kept in a temperature close to zero, otherwise, as you know, they die. Michelle happens to have curly hair, but not enough to remain perfect in that kind of cold. Did you know that it was from this circumstance that the first "spray mousse" was invented? It was called "Hollywood Backstage" and was created at first just for us, because we needed something that could maintain hairdos in extreme temperatures".

Federico talks about his "adventures" in the Hollywood world with pleasure, his stories confirm to us that everything can really happen there. Down in California he became stylist of choice for celebrities such as [Nicole Kidman](#) [9], [Sigourney Weaver](#) [10], [Alec Baldwin](#) [11] and Mel Gibson, while as celebrity stylist at New York's Fashion Week shows, he has worked on many stars including [Eva Longoria](#) [12], [Nicole Richie](#) [13], [Jessie Metcalfe](#) [14], [Catherine Zeta-Jones](#) [15], Michael Douglas, [Rosario Dawson](#) [16], [Sarah Ferguson](#) [17], Katie Couric, [Betsey Johnson](#) [18], and [Rachel Hunter](#) [19].

His brilliant US career, however, didn't make him forget his years in Italy. "I met [Renato Zero](#) [20], [Iva Zanicchi](#) [21], Ricchi e Poveri, [Matia Bazar](#) [22] and many others when I worked at the Sanremo Festival. They are still great friends of mine". With the Matia Bazar, in particular, he shares an important moment of his career: "I had to work on the hairdo of their first voice, [Antonella Ruggiero](#) [23]. We wanted to do a ponytail with a wet effect. Today we would use gel to have it, but at that time, in the early '80s, you couldn't find a product of that kind in Italy. So we decided to make one on our own, mixing water with a lot of sugar. The result was just what we were looking for, as we invented the first gel in Italy, which was baptized 'gommina'".

One thing that strikes you about Federico, is his innate simplicity, his easiness. In spite of a long career of successes, of his famous friends, and his beautiful life, he enjoys spending his time in his beauty salon on 57th street with his "normal" clients. Mostly American and Jewish, they are "usual clients" that go to visit him sometimes every day, sometimes once a week, but never less than once a month.

The reason must be the joyful atmosphere they can find everyday within the sparkling white walls of the beauty salon, the exquisite espresso they can have while enjoying the very few relaxing moments the crazy New York life style concedes to them, the warm welcoming smile he and his assistant, hair designer Massimo, give you the moment you step in the door.

"From the general experience I have as a hairdresser in the US, I did notice differences from Italy. First of all, Italian women trust their hairdresser, and put their look in his hands. Here the women are more extravagant, they come here with a page from a magazine and want you to reproduce it exactly. The 'show biz dream' kind of enchants some of them, who want to become just like Hollywood stars. Also, a good percentage of the people here go to the hairdresser less frequently than in Italy, but that's because of the different lifestyle they carry on. Young New Yorkers go to the gym, sweat, and wash their hair everyday. So they ask for a haircut that they can take care of alone and come less often. However, that's not my case. I never lose track of my clients for more than a very few days!"

As our lunch comes to an end, Federico's risotto is getting cold. He is so involved telling us about his life, his business, and his passions, that he almost forgot to eat. Food, as he stated, is one of the strongest bonds he maintains with Italy. "I eat out very rarely, and at home we only cook Italian. My wife Patrizia and my children love sitting at the table and enjoy the recipes our parents and grandparents passed down to us. I raised my two daughters and son as Italian children, and the daughter in particular could cook when she was only 13. She just loves baking", he says with pride.



"Family" is the Italian value Federico believes in the most and he didn't forget to teach it to his own children.

Although two of them go to college far away from home, they always come back for the holidays and would never even think about having the "big Sunday lunch" somewhere else. "My children call me 'Fede', they look at me as a friend, but they never forget where they belong. They come on vacation with me, and dump their friends, because Patrizia and I are 'crazier' and are more fun to be with!".

We leave the restaurant at 2:30, after talking for more than an hour. Federico has a full afternoon of appointments ahead, we walk towards the office ready to write about another successful story in New York. The story of a man who fulfilled his American Dream and embellished hundreds of people with a delicate, sapient Italian touch.

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- [2] <http://www.sanremo.rai.it>
- [3] <http://www.olympusfashionweek.com>
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