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Gigliola Staffilani and her parable to success

LAVINIA PISANI

Gigliola Staffilani is the only Italian woman teaching full time pure mathematics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Originally from Martinsicuro, a town in the Abruzzi region, her future was supposed to be as a hairstylist.

"I am glad that I could be a role model for many girls who may be interested in becoming a professional mathematician," she writes during our email interview.

In fact, her story proves that math is for women as well.

Both her parents were farmers and the first one in the family to go to college was her older brother. Staffilani was a hard working student but as stability vanished with the tragic loss of her dad, who passed away of colon cancer when she was 10, her priority became to financially help her mom.

Still, mathematics was her landmark.

"It was the part of the world where there is only one reality. Everything is logic, maybe difficult, but absolute," Staffilani said during a former interview with Riviera Oggi.

Thanks to outstanding performances in high school, Staffilani's mother conveyed a career, as a secondary school, or high school, math teacher was a good path for her daughter to pursue. So, she enrolled at the University of Bologna and graduated in math.



Gigliola Staffilani. Professor of Mathematics at the Department of Mathematics Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Staffilani's parable was meant to reach a higher point though. In fact, thanks to a scholarship, she left Italy right after college to keep on studying math at the University of Chicago.

She didn't speak the language, nor did she know someone in Chicago. Her future was uncertain, but all she wanted was to keep on researching solutions to complicated equations.

Despite of the many obstacles life introduced her to, Staffilani's tenacity, determination and commitment, pushed her to achieve the life she was meant to live.

How did you manage to follow your passion without being shaped by society?

I grew up in Italy where nobody even dreams about saying that girls are by nature more gifted in math and sciences. Quite the opposite, at school, teachers were always expecting that the top girls would do better than the top boys in math. On the other hand being smart was and still is not cool, both in the USA and Italy. I didn't care about that. I was never into girly things anyway. So, I just kept on doing what was making me happy: challenging myself with more and more difficult math problems!

What brought you to specialize in dispersive equations? Please explain what they are.

These are equations that are supposed to model certain waves in different physical phenomena. They are called dispersive since their wave solutions tend to die out after a certain amount of time, unless they hit an obstacle. These equations are not exactly solvable. Therefore, one needs to use

very sophisticated mathematical tools to learn about their properties and how they interact with each other in a very complicated way. I work with this kind of math because it is interesting to me and it is the one I like the most.

What is the percentage of women in mathematics working around you? And as part of the Association for Women in Mathematics (AWM), what do you think could be done to get more women involved in this field?

If we are looking at professors in our department women make up about 4-5%. Graduate students are better, about 20%. I think that nowadays if you are a woman and you like math, you have endless possibilities, in particular I see super smart young women going into finance where there is way more money to be made. I do not mind this at all. Why should be only men getting these very well paid and powerful jobs? In any case I think that the culture should change starting from elementary school. Math should be cool and if a girl is good at math, she should be as cool as somebody who is good at sports. Unfortunately, we aren't there yet!

When I read that your mom had for you in plan to become a hair-stylist, while your brother was studying to become a doctor, Elena Ferrante's book "My brilliant friend" came up to me. It feels like there was a similar mentality in terms of women ending their studies, at the end of secondary school, to start focusing on marrying some rich men. Who inspired, or allowed, you to keep on studying



Gigliola Staffilani. Professor of Mathematics at the Department of Mathematics Massachusetts Institute of Technology

through high school and university?

I love Elena Ferrante! I totally agree with you. While I was reading her books I felt like she was talking about many parts of my life when I was growing up. I had a lot of support from my brother and the teachers. Also our families really valued education, also for girls, but the family didn't have money, so "plan B" needed to be put in place.

At first, both Stanford and Princeton University offered you a position as Associate Professor. What brought you to choose MIT instead?

Princeton only offered me an Assistant Professorship, Stanford offered tenure. I picked MIT because it was the best place both

for me and my husband, who was already a full-time professor at MIT.

What growth have you had since you have started teaching at MIT in 2001?

In the last 14 years I had many opportunities to grow professionally, while living in a wonderful place like Cambridge with our kids. I was asked to serve in several committees for the governance at MIT, I have created classes, I have received grants and I have been able to hire post docs, whom I am working with.

What do you think about Italy's current situation? And what do you believe is needed in order to make a change?

I read Italian newspapers, but I have to admit I cannot really form

a complete idea of what is going on there. I think the main problem is the lack of funds and the mentality that supports: "you help me I help you," nepotism in a very general sense, instead of talent. This is something really difficult to eradicate since it is deep inside our culture.

What do you consider as your highest career achievement? And what would you like to achieve next?

Being at MIT and being elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences is more than I could ever expect. So, I don't really think about what I want to achieve next in my career. I only want to have time to do researches and teach to a whole bunch of young students!



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