

Nonna's Story

My name is Magdalena but all my family call me Nonna, I have four children and fifteen grandchildren. I came to Australia from Sicily when I was fifteen and met my future husband on the boat. Our families and others, decided to emigrate as Australia was the place of opportunity for us and for future generations. We came in the first migration; back then they wanted people to come over – now they don't. Yes, so I grew up here, I didn't have much schooling in Italy, back then they didn't force you to go to school. I think it was only Year 2 and once I came here, I married and had a family.

I am 67 now and life did not always work out how we expected but one thing we are very proud about is our grandson Paulo who has just started university. He is the first of all the children and the grandchildren to come to university and we are very, very proud of him.

Well, we were hoping that he would choose a local university instead of going up and down to the city and I'm glad he did. I used to deliver flowers here so I knew what it was like. I was just working a part-time job with a florist and I used to deliver here all the time and my brother works as maintenance man here too so I used to come a couple of times a week just to deliver flowers so I knew how busy it was. It's like a little city like I said. Yes, so many faces and all nationalities. It's unbelievable how many people come to uni, how many international students.

So this is wonderful news for us because he's the first in our family to go to university and I've always said, you know, education's the key to everything. So he listened and he's done well. We always drummed it into all the kids and, you know, wanting them to do better than what we did. That's the maternal instinct and then he started living with me and I drummed it into him. He's been living with me since he was four years old. He's like my son, my last son. There are so many more choices for young people. Yes, so it's the way to go. You don't want to do what we did. We just have to work all our lives, hard and so university is a better place to be.

How I help...

Well I didn't know what uni was like because I've never been here or known anybody that was going here except for my friends' nephews but they all enjoyed it and then they ended up getting good jobs and that's what I wanted for Paulo, to have a better life. That's all there is to it now isn't it? You want them to experience life better than what we did. The way I help is I ask questions and listen to him. He will talk to me but I don't really understand what he's trying to do so I just listen.



So I sit there and listen to him, what he has to tell me: "Oh Nonna I had to study this today" and he asks me, you know, some advice about some subject or something like that that. Maybe I might know something about it you know, so I says "Oh well, I really..." I'll tell him I don't know about it but also tell him what I've experienced on that subject in my life or whatever. So yes, this seems to help and sometimes after listening to him for an hour about things that I know nothing about, he seems happier and says "Thank you Nonna" – for what I don't know!

So far...

The extended family are all pleased that he is undertaking these studies however they do not understand the course he is studying and find it difficult to discuss his studies with him. Paulo's whole outlook on life has changed also. He was always a sociable person but now his passion for everything he does has changed the way he interacts with people. He is obviously more content in himself as he walks a bit taller and smiles and laughs often. He has also made some changes in his behaviour that I think have made him a more patient and tolerant person.

Aside from listening to him talk about his studies and answer questions when I can, my husband and I also make sure that we support him in whatever way we can. I cook good food for him and we know that university is different to school, he needs to work after his classes and so, we know that he needs to spend a lot of time in his room reading and doing studies. My husband sometimes grumbles that Paulo does a lot of sitting around but I have explained that he is not just sitting; he is working, reading about his subjects and writing his reports. This is also difficult work! Ahhh education can be hard but also education is power. That's what I always say.

I often ask him what he is doing at uni, and I have asked him about what his assignments are about and what the teacher is talking about on the computer. Sometimes, I think about how much I would have liked going to university and learning about new ideas and research. Paulo told me that it is never too late and I am not too old. He tells me lots of older people study at university and that someone finished university who was in her eighties! Well, I'm 67 now and a grandmother but I often think about learning something new so perhaps, one day ...