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Italy's inspiring growth mindset: how the Juvenile Detention Centre "Ferranti Aporti" teaches compassion and kindness

di Lorenn Walker

Mrs. Lorenn Walker, an Hawaiian educator, is visiting juvenile detention centres all round the world, from New Zealand and Indonesia to Europe, encouraging young offenders to work hard to change their life style and telling them her own experience: after being sentenced to prison when she was very young she managed to get back on track and even graduated as a lawyer. The following is the report of her visit at the Juvenile Detention Centre "Ferranti Aporti" in Turin where she offered advice and "recipes" from her own life.

"Bonjour, do you know where Via del Carmine, number one is?" I keep asking people this question on Turin's crowded streets late Sunday afternoon September 8, 2008. It is unusually hot and humid weather. I am pulling my wheeled maroon colored suitcase and wear a backpack that is getting heavier by the minute. I am exhausted and dressed in long jeans much too warm for the unexpected heat. I arrived two hours earlier, after a picturesque, but long train ride from Cinque Terre. Visiting the magical villages dug into the cliffs overlooking the strikingly beautiful Mediterranean was my fun after a week of work in Switzerland. I taught conflict management for women from all over the world who run their Olympic Committees in Lausanne. I have come to Italy to learn how it deals with social problems.

I am a public health educator who designs learning programs to bring more peace and happiness to people. I have worked with many disenfranchised groups such as foster and homeless youth, crime victims, and incarcerated people. Whenever I travel I try to learn about a country's approach to these problems to improve my own. I have visited prisons in many countries including England, Belgium, Sweden, Spain, New Zealand and Indonesia. This hot afternoon I have come to Turin in order to visit the Ferrante Aporti Penal Institute for Minors. Now if only I could locate the B&B I reserved months earlier.

I ask many people on the Turin streets, that I frustratingly keep circling, if they know where number one Via del Carmine is? Many know where the street is, but no one can help me find number one. I am lost, and it is beginning to get dark. Finally, a young blonde teenage girl with dark eyes is my salvation. When she sees I do not understand her directions, she walks with me to find the B&B. She even offers to pull my suitcase. Instantly, my exhaustion is replaced with gratitude by her kindness. It also reminds me of how often today youth are wrongly considered problematic. Far from having anything "wrong with them," my experience over the years, especially with youth in social service programs and correctional facilities, has taught me that they are full of strengths including compassion and friendliness. Again on the streets of Turin, this is confirmed.

The next day, September 9, 2008, after a night of disrupted sleep (my B&B is on the edge of a popular piazza), I wake early and take a taxicab to the Ferrante Aporti Penal Institute for Minors. The facility is named for the Italian Catholic priest Ferrante Aporti who was an educator that cared deeply for poor children. In 1827 he created one of the original pre-schools in Cremona, which led to the development of similar schools throughout Italy. Aporti and Maria Montessori, Italy's first woman medical doctor, famous for developing the *Montessori Method of Education*, are credited with helping make Italy a renowned pioneer in pre-school development. I feel a special connection here because I became a Montessori teacher when I was nineteen years old and it continues to influence my work today.

The compassionate visions of Aporti and Montessori to provide educationally enhancing environments for youth regardless of their backgrounds and status, continues to be embraced today at the Aporti youth facility.

Aporti is comprised of cream-colored buildings with some nice trees and lovely plants nearby. Inside the walls are painted in two tones and decorated with original paintings by residents. Aporti is a striking contrast to other correctional facilities, which are stark, drab and unappealing aesthetically. Noticeable too is the refreshing smell of Aporti compared to other facilities, which often smell from too many humans crowded into small areas and strong disinfecting detergents. The gracious Aporti environment shows the strong level of respect that is felt for its young residents.

The youth residing at Aporti are charged with a variety of offenses. Many are here for theft and most of them are foreigners whose families brought them to Italy looking for a better life. Theft is a common crime in Turin as it is in most tourist destinations all over the world. Stealing from tourists and travelers has been a regular occurrence since medieval times when "highway robbery" became a common crime.

Most of the incarcerated youth at Aporti are learning occupational skills. The youth show responsibility in learning pottery, art and other academic studies. They learn that their effort matters more than their inherent abilities, which is a vital lesson.

Sanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck, author of *Mindset The New Psychology of Success*, has done extensive research into how people learn best. She has found that believing in effort, and not genetics, is what matters the most.

A "growth mindset" is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts." *Fixed mindsets* on the other hand are based on the belief that the ability to learn is a pre-determined inherent quality.

Professor Dweck believes Italy projects a growth mindset. She says that, "in France, when they're nice to you, you feel like you passed a test. But in Italy, there is no test. Parents and teachers who send fixed-mindset messages are like France, and parents and teachers who send growth-mindset messages are like Italy."

Not only is Aporti's physical environment respectful, but the facility's staff also has a special respect and kindness for the youth in their care. Their positive attitudes generate positive emotions and behaviors for everyone.

An example of the staff's respect for its residents is administrative assistant Angelo Pandolfi who stops to greet youth by name as they pass him in the hallway. Giovanni Lapi, facility director, Rocco Tralli, security director, and Antonio Pappalardo Juvenile Justice Center director, who works close by, also demonstrate honorable demeanors with the youth and those working with them.

Before I leave preter Marina Sicilian

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Before I leave the facility I stop to speak with a group of young girls. My kind interpreter Marina Siciliano translates what I say into Italian:

"I was like you and in trouble too when I was young. My family had problems. I left home when I was 14 years old. I dropped out of school when I was 15. I was in jail when I was 16. And I had a baby girl when I was 18, but I found I could make a better life and eventually I went to college. It was hard work. I had a lot to make up, but I never quit trying and I became a lawyer. Later, I helped young people just like you who were in trouble and in prison. Today, I travel around the world helping people learn how to get along and be happy.

I want you to remember me. Remember to never give up trying to improve your lives, and never regret your past. Your life experiences have been hard, but they've made you strong, and someday they can make you great leaders. You each have something special to help make the world a better place. You can be anything. You can do anything. All it takes is hard work.

I want you to know too that my daughter now lives down the beach from me in Hawai'i, in a very nice home with a very nice family."

After Marina translates, the girls' smiles and Marina's teary eyes touch my heart.

My final stop before leaving the facility is the gift shop where I am stunned by the beauty of the objects on sale that the youth have made. There are beautiful plates, masks, paintings and belts. Selling their products is a wonderful way to teach the incarcerated youth that their efforts are what matters. They can take responsibility for their lives, and they can learn skills to improve themselves, which will improve the community.

The rest of the world should take a lesson from Italy's growth mindset. Environments that respect troubled youth, and learning opportunities that encourage effort, as the true means to a successful life, can transform lives. Not only young lives, but adults too who work with in these environments can be transformed. It is never too late to learn. A positive growth mindset environment influences everyone to think and behave more compassionately, and more kindly.

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