

The lady with the dirty feet

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts

photos by Master Sgt. Keith Reed

They were warned about “her.” Friends and colleagues described her as a beauty to behold, but cautioned George and Amy Lamont that if their eyes gazed downward they would discover her dirty feet. Some even refer to her as the armpit of Italy.

“We chose not to listen and to form our own opinion,” said Mrs. Lamont, who was introduced to Naples almost three years ago.

As they became acquainted, they indeed found elements of dirt, litter and crime that define the stereotypes Naples is known for. But everyone has faults, and like good friends, the Lamonts were willing to overlook these undesirable traits.

“I think it’s like any city. All have something that will drive you crazy,” said Mrs. Lamont, who worked at the Naval Support Activity Hospital until a recent move to Ramstein Air Base, Germany. Her husband, a lieutenant

colonel in the operations division for Headquarters, Allied Air Forces South, agreed that Naples is like a quirky, but loveable, friend.

“This is a place of uniqueness,” said Colonel Lamont. “The people are some of your biggest frustrations, but at the same time the source of your greatest memories,” he said while seated at a snack bar inside a dormant volcano where the military operates a recreation center that includes swimming, camping and golf. And stories.

During her sister’s visit, Mrs. Lamont tracked down their Italian relatives. A phone call to their stateside grandmother led them to a grocery store in a nearby village. Five minutes later Pasquale Napoletano emerged, embraced them with open arms and took them into his family’s life. He then whisked them off to dinner with his clan. Neither spoke the other’s language, but they found a common language in food.

Sunday lunches with the Neapolitano family became a tradition. They began about 1 p.m. and ended about four hours later. After a lengthy coffee pause, Colonel Lamont said, they had to be careful or someone would order a pizza, and the family food affair would begin anew.

“It’s all about sitting around the table enjoying the kids and conversation,” he said. One such visit ended with Mr. Neapolitano asking them to drop off a bag of potatoes at a nearby cousin’s house. He also put something special in another bag for the Lamonts. During the drive, Mrs. Lamont said she smelled something funny. Her husband reached back to grab the potatoes before putting them in the trunk. The bag moved; they jumped and screamed. A live chicken. They took it home, gave it a name and pondered what to do next. Henny the hen, as she was dubbed, was destined to become a special dinner guest.

The Lewis family will have kinder, gentler culinary memories of Naples. Ten years from now when Devonte Lewis is 17, he’ll look back on his early childhood in Naples and long for a taste of his fondest memory — mozzarella. That’s right, he’s 7 and shares the same love for cheese made from buffalo milk as his 11-year-old brother Derrick. Naples is reputed to have the best mozzarella in Italy.

Their mom, Tech. Sgt. Cheree Lewis, took an assignment in Naples to give her boys a taste of European culture. The sight of trash took a bit of getting used to, she said, but the local markets, brimming with fresh fruits, vegetables and seafood, the shopping, and the culture have exceeded her expectations of this southern seaport with Mount Vesuvius looming in the background.

Sergeant Lewis doesn’t buy into Naples’ negative stereotypes. Instead, the single mom likens the corner gro-

cery shops and big city life of Naples to Manhattan in her home state of New York. But it’s what she can’t find back home that makes Naples special. Across the street from the neighborhood ice cream store, she can enjoy world-class gelato [ice cream] beside ancient Roman ruins. Her boys’ textbooks come alive with visits to Paris, Rome, Venice and the ruins of Herculaneum left in stately preservation from the same volcanic eruption that put Pompeii tragically on the map.

Her kids play with Italian children and inadvertently learn the language. “You can’t buy that,” Sergeant Lewis

When not at work as the chief of supply and transportation at Allied Air Forces Southern Europe, Capt. Robert Degregorio and family liked to slip away to their favorite local Italian restaurant in Naples, Italy, where they exchanged hugs and kisses with the staff and owners upon arrival and departure. His wife, Tricia, looks on while other employees offer warm farewells to the Degregorio’s three daughters, Shayla, Alyssa and Gabriella. The family has since moved to Charleston Air Force Base, S.C.



For more info about Naples

For tips on navigating Naples from people who have been there, visit www.af.mil/news/airman/0404/af.shtml.

said. Listening to his mother's words, Derrick pointed out that many of his mates speak three or four languages. "That motivates me to learn," he said, much to his mom's approval.

Vicki Shepherd may be one of the rare few who showed up oblivious to Neapolitan stereotypes. She arrived five years ago with a few of her own preconceptions. Visions of modern Milan and Italian runway models ran through her mind. Those thoughts escaped her upon arrival.

"I set myself up," said Mrs. Shepherd, the sexual assault victim intervention coordinator who works at the new support site in Gricignano where the once scattered housing, base exchange, medical and other military amenities are being centrally located. "I stepped off the plane and thought, 'Where am I? What have I gotten myself into?'" she said as she gazed upon litter, unfinished buildings and interspersed vineyards. "When you think of culture shock, it was culture shock."

The shock and awe soon wore off. "I've been here five years and love it. I've been robbed, [and] my car's been broken into — but I love it," Mrs. Shepherd said. "I recommend Naples, but you have to have a thick skin and be extremely flexible." Contending with gas coupons, risky driving, scattered support facilities and limited activities for teens can be daunting, she said, but added that the Navy has achieved

much progress toward quality of life improvements for military families.

The drawbacks, she said, are more than compensated by an environment rich in natural beauty and architectural history, and the warm, embracing Neapolitans and their deep-rooted sense of family. Three of her children — Tamar, Sterling and Kay — immersed themselves into the culture. Kay is 5, "fluent and loving it," Mrs. Shepherd said. Kay has been "adopted" by her Italian babysitter's family, so she "has the best of both worlds," she added.

But it isn't for everyone. Her daughter Ashley didn't embrace the language and disliked the lack of freedom imposed by the need of a parent to provide transportation. Then came the crime. As they entered the front door of their off-base dwelling, a burglar scooted out the back. "Road blocks just went up," she said of the incident that tipped the scales in disfavor of Naples.

For the record, a study commissioned by a previous commander found that while Naples shares a high crime rate comparable to big cities in the United States, it has a lower rate for violent crimes, said Tech. Sgt. Eugene Miller, the noncommissioned officer in charge of the international police flight. Crime in Naples is more focused on car and home theft.

Keisha Yarbrough knows about crime. The technical sergeant is a single mom who lives off base with her



8-year-old son Andre and does so with no worries.

"I think it's a crime of opportunity like anywhere else," Sergeant Yarbrough said. Following basic crime prevention tips is the same in Naples as in any big city, she said, noting

that her house has remained crime-free thanks to attentive Italian neighbors. Instead, her focus has been on adding to the scrapbook of memories, literally and figuratively, that mother and son have accumulated through assignments

in England, Japan, Turkey and the Azores. Others agree.

"Naples has an unfair rap," said Capt. Robert Degregorio, who lived at the new support site with his wife, Tricia, and three precocious daughters — Shayla, 5, Alyssa, 2, and Gabriella, 11 months.

"There is no reason to be scared. You just have to pay attention — just like in D.C. It's common sense," said Captain Degregorio, who has since moved to Charleston Air Force Base, S.C. "It's like Guam and the brown tree snakes," Mrs. Degregorio said of the rep-

Maj. Patricia Burrows (second from left) enjoys dinner with an Italian family that adopted her soon after her arrival in Naples where she's the Air Force element commander for Detachment 2, Mission Support Squadron. When she learned of her assignment, her first response was, "We have Air Force people in Naples?" She soon discovered a "totally different approach to life and work," but quickly immersed herself and found that Naples is a great place to live and work.

tile known as an invasive nuisance, but in reality is a nocturnal creature rarely, if ever, seen during a short tour at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam [See "Keeping the Serpent at Bay," March 2004].

Otherwise, as Mrs. Lamont pointed out, Naples is the place to be. You can have your fresh seafood underneath almost nonstop sun while admiring fantastic historical and geographical locations.

"How can it be a bad assignment if you can spend your day driving along the Amalfi Coast?" she asked.

Sergeant Yarbrough agreed with that assessment, but she also suggested that while driving, "just don't look down." ☺

Naples at a Glance

Mission: About 120 airmen are assigned to Allied Air Forces Southern Europe, the air component of Allied Forces Southern Europe, and provide security and territorial integrity of NATO member states throughout southern Europe.

Location: Southern Italy on the Bay of Naples, about 120 miles south of Rome.

Getting around: Although narrow roads and congested traffic can make getting around in Naples a bit tricky, the city offers convenient travel escapes by highway, rail and sea.

Population: AFSOUTH includes more than 5,000 officer, enlisted and civilian representatives from 14 NATO countries. The total community population fluctuates around 10,000. The city of Naples has just over 1 million residents.

History: Naples can trace its origins to nearly 3,000 years ago when it was founded by Greek settlers approximately around the time of the founding of Rome. In 1951, Gen.

Dwight Eisenhower announced establishment of AFSOUTH as an allied integrated military command for the defense of NATO countries in Europe.

Climate: Mild, occasionally rainy winters and hot, humid summers. Temperatures range from 30 to 50 degrees in winter and 70 to 100 degrees in summer. Annual precipitation is 38 inches.

Known for: Excellent cuisine such as its world-renowned mozzarella di buffalo (mozzarella cheese made from buffalo milk) and pizza Margherita, named in honor of Queen Margherita and featuring fresh tomato sauce, mozzarella di buffalo and fresh basil.

Housing: Military members except for lieutenant colonels and above are assigned directly to government housing. Residents are permitted to relocate to the local economy after six months; however, relocation costs are paid by the service member. Apartment costs range from \$700 to \$1,000 monthly.

Cost of living: Other than housing costs, living in Naples will not take a huge bite out of your paycheck. Military members and Defense Department civilians can purchase coupons for car and

heating gas at the local Navy Exchange at a reduced rate. Food items are reasonably priced in local grocery stores and markets, and a family of four can easily enjoy a full meal at a nice restaurant for about \$50.

Education: Naples Elementary and Naples American High School are at the new support site in Gricignano di Aversa 15 miles north of Naples. Colleges include Central Texas College, Embry Riddle Aeronautical University, University of La Verne, University of Maryland University College and the University of Oklahoma/Cameron University.

Recreation: There are a wide variety of travel opportunities such as Rome, Venice, the Amalfi Coast, or the ruins of the ancient cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The military operates Carney Park located in an extinct volcano where golf, camping and swimming are available.

More info: www.militaryexits.com/military_bases/naples_italy_navy.shtml; www.nsa.naples.navy.mil; www.afcrossroads.com.