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Jazmine Pignatello, '17

As the great-grandchild of Italian immigrants I have always taken pride in studying the language and culture of my ancestors. My experience with Italian language started when I was 12 years old in signora Vecchio's 7th-grade class. Then, in high school I participated in a cultural exchange program in Latina, Italy, where I had the chance to live with an Italian student and her family for two weeks. The challenges and excitement I found in trying to communicate and express myself in a new language inspired me to continue my Italian studies at Muhlenberg College with Professor Leisawitz, culminating in an independent study of Dante's *Divina Commedia* and a semester abroad in Siena, Italy.

My passion for Italian Studies has since expanded far beyond the boot-shaped Italian peninsula. With each new travel experience, I feel more and more inspired to see new places and experience new cultures around the world. From traveling I have begun to realize two things. First, the closest you can get to understanding another person is to see and experience the culture and place they come from. Second, I have learned that people with different points of view around the world are actually not as different as politics and media would have us believe. I have grown to realize that becoming a conscious citizen of the world is intrinsically intertwined with seeking to understand those people whom we may consider other from ourselves, and that language study and travel provide an auspicious path toward genuine understanding.

I would like to thank the Italian Studies faculty of Muhlenberg and also the anonymous donor of this incredible award for supporting me and all future prize recipients on our journey of growth and understanding of the world around us.