

I. Am. The. Y.

Pasquale Presa

Connecting Generations through Mentorship: A business man shares his story with teens in the Y Mentors program

Pasquale Presa immigrated to the United States from Italy when he was six years old. His mother had a 2nd grade education, and his father barely attended 1st grade. They literally had nothing except a hopeful dream of a better life when they arrived in New York City.

Growing up in the Bronx and Rockland County just north of Yonkers, Pasquale had to take English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. "The experience was very positive for me because I met other children from around the world," Pasquale remembers, "In class we were all equal; we were all one." But childhood was far from easy. He had to move to new schools four times because of the availability of the ESL classes. Non-ESL kids in the schools would make fun of him and called him stupid. "It was hard, but I had a family who loved me."

As a young man, Pasquale found his love for food and made the decision to pursue a career in the culinary arts. He worked many odd jobs to pay his way through school at the Culinary Institute of America. At times, he would sleep in his car or crash on a friend's couch because he had no money for overnight accommodations. Thereafter, he worked as a young chef at many hotels, such as the Hyatt, Starwood Hotels, St. Regis, the Weston – to name a few.

His experience with the YMCA did not begin until he married his wife, Valerie. As newlyweds, they took out a family membership and began frequenting the Y. "My first impression of the Y was that I felt like I belonged, like I was accepted for who I am. It was that same sense of belonging I had from my days in the ESL classes," Pasquale smiles, "And I noticed instantly the Y's devotion to family and diversity, which touched my heart."

In 2010, Pasquale moved his wife and three children to Rochester. He went to work at the Kahler Grand Hotel as the Executive Chef. "I never lost sight of my dream to one day have my own restaurant and be in a position to give back to my community," Pasquale remarks. After much perseverance, he finally accomplished his dream in late 2016 with the opening of Pasquale's Neighborhood Pizzeria, just down the block from the Y on 1st Avenue. "I think it is destiny that I'm neighbors with the Y, which is why I decided to get involved and give back."

"What touches me the most about the YMCA is when we talk about the stories of the families in the Y community, I can personally relate to their struggles," Pasquale comments, "It's

important for these kids to have mentors who will help them form and strive toward their own American dreams."

As a business owner, Pasquale desires to share his story and inspire kids to succeed. So, he has committed to visiting the Y on a monthly basis to spend 'mini mentor moments' with teens. He brings complimentary pizzas. "It is important to trigger kids' happy thoughts," he remarks, "If I can do that through food, then it's a start. Food makes people comfortable and brings them together."

Pasquale has words of wisdom to instill in the teens – words that any of us can benefit from – "Never give up; always persevere; ask 'What can I do to be unique?'; look to others for guidance; find something you love and embrace it; make a difference and give back."

To him, it is simple. These kids need to know that they have opportunities, that each of them is someone of value. Pasquale sees his dedication to the Y as a way to truly make an impact in our community, and he wants to inspire other business leaders to join the Y community.

"We, in many different ways, can touch people's hearts. It's not just through a donation. It's about spending time with them because people need time; people need to feel they have a connection with you. So, the more we can spend a little bit of time where Y members feel they have a safe zone to meet someone, to them it is inspirational. It gives them a sense of belonging. It gives them positive energy. It gives them a sense of encouragement to accomplish their dreams."

