

Next Month:
Why Work Here?

Healthcare Marketer's

Exchange

"Where Healthcare Marketers Connect"

VOL. 35, No. 8
SEPTEMBER 2026

Kids AND Family

Family meals.
Passed down.
Loved always.



Adventures together.
Memories forever.



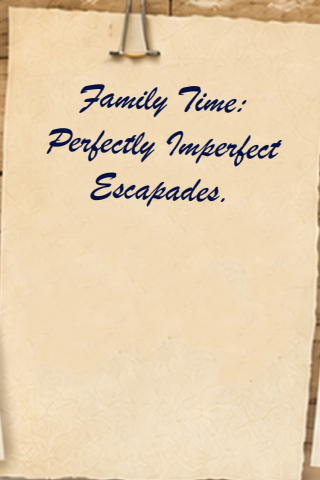
Our roots.
Our story.



A love of the game.
A lifetime of lessons.



Family Time:
Perfectly Imperfect
Escapades.



Work hard.
Make time for
what matters.



Matt Dechen
Healio Strategic Solutions

Mandy Graziani
SSCG Media Group
An Omnicom Media Company

Elizabeth Milic
Real Chemistry

Kim Nachbaur
PeerDirect

Natalie Natoli
Vumedi

Emily S. Poe
Real Chemistry

Juliana Strickland
Bryn Mawr
Communications

Marco Zuccarello
MDCalc

In memory of Mom.
Her strength.
Our inspiration.
Our why.



It's love
that holds
us together.



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To learn how you can take advantage of these opportunities,
contact Kevin Bolum at kbolum@acponline.org or 215-251-2440.



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Dear Friends, Readers, Contributors, and Advertisers,



As I look ahead to the next chapter of my life and begin planning for retirement, I have been thinking a great deal about the future of *Healthcare Marketer's Exchange*.

For 35 years, *The Exchange* has been more than a publication – it has truly been like my first child. It has been a labor of love that connected thousands of healthcare marketers, brought countless stories to life, celebrated our industry's achievements, and fostered lasting friendships and professional relationships.

I am deeply grateful to all of you who have made this journey so meaningful – our loyal readers, dedicated contributors, supportive advertisers, and committed staff. Your trust, participation, and partnership have been the foundation of our success. Together, we have built something very special.

Healthcare Marketer's Exchange has given me a wonderful life, both personally and professionally, and for that I will always be thankful. While I am not quite ready to say goodbye, I know it is time to begin thinking about an exit plan that will allow this publication to continue to thrive long into the future.

As I look ahead, my hope is to find the right individual, company, or organization that shares the same passion and mission to connect and support the healthcare marketing community and would be interested in taking over this incredible platform and carrying its mission forward.

If you, or someone you know, might be interested in discussing this opportunity, I would welcome a confidential conversation.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for your support, friendship, and belief in *Healthcare Marketer's Exchange* over these past 35 years. It has been one of the greatest privileges of my life to serve this community.

With sincere gratitude,

Nancy Leonard
Publisher

Healthcare Marketers Exchange

SEPTEMBER 2026 EDITORIAL LINEUP

This month, we're celebrating Family...

- What happens when vacation becomes a family tradition? Find out in **Matt Dechen's** (Healio Strategic Solutions) story of discovering Charleston, South Carolina.
- **Mandy Graziani** (SSCG Media Group, an Omnicom Media Company) tells about the decision to move near her in-laws, despite many warnings, and the gifts that resulted.
- **Elizabeth Milic** (Real Chemistry) reflects on the perfectly imperfect family excursion in NYC that included walking across the Brooklyn Bridge.
- As she launches grown children, **Kim Nachbaur** (PeerDirect) reflects on the passage of time and what she would tell her younger self.
- **Natalie Natoli** (Vumedi) sets off on an adventure to Costa Rica with her young family and discovers the joys of presence.
- **Emily S. Poe** (Real Chemistry) shares how her professional purpose became personal with her mother's cancer diagnosis.
- **Juliana Strickland** (Bryn Mawr Communications) tells of the treasured inheritance and enduring family bond of the love of baseball.
- You'll definitely want to visit Sicily, as **Marco Zuccarello** (MDCalc) takes us on a tour of the things he loves in the region his father came from.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

ONWARD&UPWARD

promotions • additions

9LABS has announced the appointment of **Fred Short** (fred@nine-labs.com) as Head of Growth.

21GRAMS has announced the appointment of **Heather Honan** as Senior Vice President, Group Director, Project Management.

Astellas Pharma has announced the appointment of **Sean Antoniewicz** as Senior Director, Lead, Brand Strategy and Market Development.

Bayer has announced the appointment of **Samantha Meyers** (samantha.meyers@bayer.com) as Senior Director, Digital Strategy and Activation.

Biogen has announced the appointment of **Stephan Krucker** (stephan.krucker@biogen.com) as Senior Director, Marketing – General Nephrology.

BridgeBio has announced the appointment of **Joe Romano II** as Neuromuscular Account Manager.

Bristol Myers Squibb has announced the appointment of **Chloe Thomas** as Associate Director, Accounts and Customer Engagement – Cardiovascular.

Butler/Till has announced the appointment of **Erik Svendsen** (esvendsen@butlertill.com) as Business Development Specialist.

Calcium+Company has announced the promotion of **Nina Narciso** to Senior Account Executive.

CMI Media Group has announced the promotions of **Jolene Brandimarte**, Supervisor of Engagement Planning; **Rebecca Greenberg** (rgreenberg1216@gmail.com) to Associate Director, Business Insights; **Marissa Hampp** to Associate Director, Engagement Strategy; and **Gia Latella** to Senior Engagement Planner. Joining the company were **Deanna Degliomini** (ddegliomini@cmimediagroup.com) and **Adrianna Yates** as Associate Directors of Engagement Strategy.

Compas has announced the promotion of **Jaclyn Luciany**, MOL (jluciany@compas-inc.com), to Client Services Account Leader.

Deerfield Group has announced the promotion of **Victoria Glammer** to Vice President, Media.

DGA Group has announced the promotion of **Cameron Hayes** to Associate Director, Strategic Communications.

Doximity has announced the appointment of **Italia Mombello** as Regional Vice President.

Eli Lilly has announced the appointment of **Valerie Cole** (valerie.cole@network.lilly.com) as Associate Director – Medical Affairs Nonpersonal Media, **Kendall Blincoe** as Specialty Territory Manager in Dermatology, and the promotion of **Samantha Theisen** to Associate Director, Breast Cancer Consumer Marketing.

EVERSANA INTOUCH has announced the appointments of **Gurleen Pal** as Senior Vice President, Strategic Planning; **Michael Le Brocq** (mlebrocq@eversana.com) as Head of Global Strategy; **Cassandra Trotta** as Senior Social Media Analyst; and **Ross Quinn** as Executive Vice President, Platform Integration and Enablement.

Evolvics, powered by Syneos Health, has announced the appointment of **Bruno Rios** (bruno.fale@gmail.com) as Director, Media Strategy.

Fifth Element has announced the appointment of **Jack O'Shaughnessy** (jack.oshaughnessy@fifthelement.nyc) as Senior Vice President, Group Account Director.

Formedics has announced the appointment of **Justin Budish** as Senior Director, Social Media Strategy.

Gilead Sciences has announced the promotion of **Rachel Rogers**, PharmD, to Senior Director.

GSK has announced the appointment of **Matthieu Edelman** as Vice President, Head of Marketing, U.S. Adult Vaccines Portfolio.

Havas Edge has announced the promotion of **Emily Masi** to Digital Media Supervisor, Health Media.

Havas Lynx has announced the appointment of **Harry Hooper** as Senior Paid Media Manager.

Haymarket Media has announced the promotion of **John Cutrone** (john.cutrone@haymarketmedia.com) to Sales Planner.

Health Monitor Network has announced the appointment of **Alejandro Alvarez** (alejandroa@healthmonitor.com) as Senior Director of Pharma Sales.

Heartbeat has announced the appointment of **Stacey Vail** as Managing Director.

Impiricus has announced the appointment of **Jerry Luciano** (jerry.luciano@impiricus.com) as Senior Vice President, Enterprise Strategy, and the promotion of **Jenna Getz** to Client Services Manager.

Initiative has announced the promotion of **Chiarina Garavuso** to Director, Communications Design.

Inizio Evoke has announced the appointment of **Helen Lee** as Director, Brand Strategy.

IQVIA has announced the appointment of **Morgan Wudke** as Account Manager on the Small Pharma Team.

Johnson & Johnson has announced the appointment of **Sarah Freeman** as Vice President, Global Oncology Communications and Public Affairs, and the promotion of **Bridget Finley** to Associate Director, Media Strategy.

Klick has announced the promotion of **Vivian Lam** to Senior Engagement Director and the appointment of **Gianna Oriente** as Director, Media Strategy and Planning.

M3 MI has announced the promotion of **Jennifer Valentino** (jvalentino@m3-mi.com) to Account Manager.

Map Change has announced the appointment of **Wynn Hansen** (wynn@mapchangenow.com) as Managing Director, Commercial Strategy.

MDCalc has announced the appointment of **Jayme (Lynde) Cohen** (jayme.cohen@mdcalc.com) as Executive Director, Business Development.

Merck has announced the appointment of **Brendan O'Neil** as Associate Director, US HCP Marketing – Ophthalmology, and **Bonnie Ben-Shmuel** as Director, Strategic Partnerships HIV PrEP.

Novo Nordisk has announced the promotion of **Rebecca Cha** to Senior Manager, Promotional Materials Management.

Omnicom Media has announced the promotions of **Claudia Giustino** to Associate Director, Paid Social Activation; **Pragati Khatri** (pragati.khatri@omc.com) to Associate Director, Communications Design; and **Emily Henderson** to Associate Director, Client Operations.

Orphic Health has announced the appointment of **Scott DeNicola** (scott@orphichealth.ai) as Vice President of Sales.

Phreesia Network Solutions has announced the promotion of **Nicholas Kreifels** to Senior Director of Market Development and the appointment of **Michael DiLanno** as Client Experience Associate.

Publicis Health Media has announced the appointment of **Olivia Clark** as Paid Search Associate supporting the Novartis account and **Sierra Zaccagnino** as a Planner, Strategy role with Zenith.

Razorfish Health has announced the promotion of **Brian Robertson** to Senior Vice President, Brand Strategy.

ReachMD has announced the appointment of **David Horowitz** (dhorowitz@reachmd.com) as Vice President, National Sales Manager.

Real Chemistry has announced the appointment of **Brian Petty** as Head of Growth Operations and **Donica Waldeck** (dwaldeck@realchemistry.com) as Director of Client Experience.

SOLVE(D) has announced the promotion of **Celeste Aparicio** to Senior Analyst, Data and Analytics.

Stream Companies has announced the appointment of **Noah Wolfe** (noahwolfe5@gmail.com) as Digital Media Strategist.

Swoop has announced the appointment of **Nina Kreutzberg** as Senior Vice President, SMB Sales.

Syneos Health Communications has announced the promotion of **Daphne Dsouza** to Vice President, Media.

VML Health has announced the promotions of **Derek Pearson** to Associate Account Director; **Nicole Whittaker** to Managing Director of Delivery; **Okna Freeman** and **Kieara Mejia (Hughes)** to Senior Media Managers; and **Emma Clarke** to Media Supervisor.

Zura Bio has announced the appointment of **Cathy Andorfer, Ph.D.**, as Executive Director, Medical Affairs.

NEW&NOTEWORTHY

awards • mergers • approvals

Otsuka Pharmaceutical has received U.S. FDA approval for SIMTRIYO (centanafadine), the first and only norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin reuptake inhibitor (NDSRI) for ADHD.

Sanofi has received U.S. FDA approval for subcutaneous Sarclisa Escena, the first cancer treatment delivered via an on-body injector (OBI).



MEMBERS ONLY

EDUCATIONAL FORUM

Ready, Set, Launch!

The Modern Pharma Playbook

DATE

Thursday, September 17, 2026

12:00 PM – 2:00 PM

In person only

LOCATION

CMI Media Group

7th Floor Conference Center

2000 Market St, Philadelphia, PA 19103

REGISTRATION REQUIRED

All attendees must be pre-registered.
Registration closes **September 15, 2026**



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<https://www.ammonline.org/2026-september-educational-forum>



Good Enough Work-Life Balance

BY KIM NACHBAUR

I started at PeerDirect in July 2007 when my twin daughters were just three months old. At the time, I was adjusting to becoming a new mom while also navigating a new job. There were so many unknowns back then. Would I be able to work full time and take care of my growing family? Would the girls miss me during the day? Or even worse, would I miss one of those milestones everyone tells you you'll never get back?

TIME PASSES

Looking back now, it's hard to believe how quickly it all happened. Those "babies" are now heading into their sophomore year of college, while my son, born two years later, is getting ready to start his senior year of high school. To think that PeerDirect is the only place I've ever worked that my three kids have known is surreal.

Whoever said "the days are long but the years are short" wasn't kidding. Through the years, there were plenty of early mornings, late nights, business trips for both my husband and me, basketball games, cross-country meets, school events, and everything in-between. While most of my travel involved day trips and were easier to manage, preparing for our annual Sales Leadership Meeting always felt daunting when my kids were young.



Thanksgiving 2007.

I vividly remember leaving for that trip in the early years. I would spend days preparing the family for my departure. I left pages of notes at home, printed photos for the kids to look at when they missed me, and told them

I was "going on a mission" just like the characters on *Little Einsteins*. Back then, being away for a few days felt like a major event. Today, there are probably more takeout meals than home-cooked meals when I'm on the road, but otherwise, everyone manages just fine.

PERFECTION DOESN'T EXIST – AND THAT'S OKAY

One thing I've learned over the years is that there is no such thing as a perfect balance. For a long time, I felt like



Nachbaur Family June 2025.

I was constantly being pulled in different directions. If things were busy at work, I worried I wasn't giving enough at home. If I was focused on my family, I worried about what I was missing at work. As a mom, I spent plenty of time second-guessing decisions and wondering if I was getting it right. Looking back, I realize that's probably just part of being a parent. You do the best you can, show up when it matters most, and hope your kids remember that more than the times you got it wrong.

SUPPORT AT WORK

What I'm most thankful for is having spent the last 19 years with a company that trusted me through every stage of life. Many of the people I work with today were there with me on Day 1 in our first office across from Bryant Park. They remember when our twins were babies, when Jimmy was born, and have heard more stories about my kids than they probably ever wanted to. In many ways, they've watched them grow up right alongside me.

WORRY LESS

If I could go back and talk to the version of myself who started at PeerDirect with three-month-old twins at home, I'd tell her not to stress so much. The meetings, RFPs, and business trips all have a way of working themselves out. Worry a little less, cheer a little louder, take more pictures, and trust that your kids will find their way. The years go by much faster than you realize.



Thanksgiving 2011.



Kim Nachbaur is President, Enterprise Partnerships, PeerDirect. She can be reached at 973-766-3612 (c) or Kim.Nachbaur@PeerDirect.com.



Chicken Cutlets and Family

BY MANDY GRAZIANI

Twenty years ago, my husband and I made what many people considered a very questionable life decision. We moved one block away from my in-laws.

The reactions were immediate. Friends and family members raised their eyebrows and joked that our lives were about to become an episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. At the time, I laughed it off, but as the years went by, I realized they weren't entirely wrong.

EVERYBODY LOVES...MY IN-LAWS

In some ways, my in-laws could have fit right into the show. They remind me most of Robert's in-laws, the MacDougalls. They are deeply religious, passionate about their traditions, and never shy about sharing their opinions.

My mother-in-law, in particular, has a voice that can travel farther than a block and a talent for letting everyone know exactly what she thinks. If she disapproves of something, you don't need to wonder. You know.

Living so close meant there were plenty of opportunities for unsolicited advice, surprise visits, and every weekend family gatherings that occasionally tested my patience. There were moments when I questioned whether moving a block away had been the wisest choice.

But over time, I came to see something much more important.

BEING THERE EVERY DAY

When we moved near them, my own family wasn't close by. Some had moved to Florida, while others remained in New York. I often felt the absence of having family nearby for everyday moments, especially as we began raising our children. What my in-laws provided filled a need I didn't even realize I had.

THEY SHOWED UP

They helped with childcare while I worked. They attended school events, birthdays, holidays, and countless ordinary days in-between. Whenever we needed help, they were there. They are the kind of people who would truly give you the shirt off their backs if you needed it. Their generosity wasn't reserved for special occasions. It was woven into their everyday lives.

FAMILY CULTURE AND COOKING

They also taught me a great deal about family. Family dinners weren't just meals; they were traditions. Holidays

weren't just dates on a calendar; they were celebrations that brought everyone together. Through them, I learned the value of staying connected, showing up for one another, and creating memories around a crowded table.



The "Crew."

And speaking of tables, they also taught me how to cook.

My mother-in-law passed down recipes, techniques, and the belief that food is one of the greatest ways to show love. To this day, I maintain that nobody makes a better chicken cutlet than she does. Although, if you ask my children, they'll tell you their father has now claimed that title. I'll admit he's become serious competition.

GREAT BLESSINGS WELL WORTH IT

Looking back, I realize that living a block away from my in-laws wasn't always easy, but it was one of the greatest blessings our family could have received. The years brought laughter, occasional frustrations, and more than a few stories that still get retold at family gatherings. More importantly, they brought and continue to bring relationships that enriched our lives in ways I never expected. I am also fortunate to have a wonderful extended family, including two sisters-in-law and several new nieces and nephews.

The jokes about *Everybody Loves Raymond* may have been accurate in some respects, but our story has a different ending. What started as a funny family situation became something far more meaningful. My in-laws didn't just become relatives who lived nearby. They became a source of support, wisdom, tradition, and love.

Twenty years later, I'm grateful that we took the chance. Sometimes the people who drive you a little crazy are also the people who help hold your family together. And, if you're lucky, they'll teach you how to make a pretty good chicken cutlet along the way.



Mandy Graziani is SVP, Director, Media, SSCG Media Group, an Omnicom Media Company. She can be reached at mgraziani@omc.com.



PINSTRIPES AND FAMILY TIME

BY JULIANA STRICKLAND

Some families pass down heirlooms; mine passes down baseball. That may seem random, but it's true. Woven into the fabric of my family are countless memories of backyard wiffle ball tournaments and trips to Major League ballparks.

YANKEES LOVE

Growing up in Upstate New York, being a Yankees fan was simply part of who I was. I loved watching players like Derek Jeter (who my cousin is named after), Andy Pettitte, Jorge Posada, and Mariano Rivera dominate baseball. My dad, Mario Nacinovich, who many of you know, used to say, "We bleed pinstripes." I'm still not entirely sure what that means, but it perfectly captures the level of love and loyalty our family has for the Yankees.

MANY FOND MEMORIES

I remember one spring day as a kid, heading to Yankee Stadium in the Bronx with my dad, my Nonno, and my sister. It was my first trip to the new stadium that had opened in 2009. We took a picture in front of the stadium that hung in my childhood bedroom for years. The game was rained out, but we made the most of the day by visiting the Yankee Museum above the main concourse before grabbing slices at Full Moon Pizza and finishing with cannolis from DeLillo Pastry Shop on Arthur Avenue – the best.



My dad and I together at Yankees Stadium.

Another picture that hung on my bedroom wall came from Sunday, July 18, 2010, a wild afternoon at Yankee Stadium. In the first inning, Andy Pettitte left the game with an injury. I remember the stadium suddenly felt quiet as everyone wondered who would pitch the rest of the game. Then, in the bottom of the seventh, Alex Rodriguez punctuated the game with a towering 440-foot solo home run. Then Joba Chamberlain came in for the ninth and shut the door on a 9-5 victory over the Tampa Bay Rays.

But my favorite memory from that day happened before the game even started. After getting our obligatory cheesesteak and garlic fries, we looked up at the jumbotron and saw an intern throwing a painfully slow pitch. The announcer explained that any girl who could throw faster

than her would win a free T-shirt. Instantly, my dad looked at eight-year-old me and said, "You can throw faster than that." So we headed over to the speed-pitch attraction on the Main Level concourse. This was before the permanent playground area upstairs had been built. I threw the baseball as hard as I could...and I won the shirt!

It read, "On the Road to 28," with both the Yankees and Phillies logos, a nod to the Yankees' 2009 World Series victory over the Philadelphia Phillies. It was a great day at the ballpark and an even better day with my dad.

Sixteen years later, that picture no longer hangs on my wall, and I don't wear that shirt religiously anymore. Both are tucked away in the back of my closet, brought out

every so often to remember. They are memories I'll never forget and keepsakes I'll never part with.

YANKEES AND PHILLIES UNITE

Ironically, despite being a die-hard Yankees fan, I married a Phillies fan. It's a joke that has followed us from our wedding day and beyond. As I said in my vows, "I promise to cheer for the Phillies (and any Philly team) as long as they're not playing the Yankees."

To me, baseball is the epitome of summer, it's America's pastime. I love the history and traditions that surround the sport, especially those within the Yankees organization – from the grounds crew performing the YMCA, to the section of the Yankee Museum dedicated to Thurman Munson, to Bernie Williams playing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" on acoustic guitar.

FAMILIES WIN THE GAME

My favorite traditions, though, are the new ones my husband and I have created with both of our families together. Each year, we travel to sunny Sarasota for spring training. What started as a one-time quick trip has become an annual vacation built around early-morning practices, autographs, new stadiums, and cheering on the next generation of our favorite players.

In my family, we inherit a love for a game, and a team that spans generations. Some families pass down jewelry, others art or recipes – we pass down baseball, and I wouldn't have it any other way.



Our new family tradition: Spring Training 2026 at BayCare Ballpark.



Juliana Strickland is Associate Sales Operations Manager, Bryn Mawr Communications. She can be reached at jstrickland@bmctoday.com.



Our Work Is Personal

BY EMILY S. POE

On my way to Chicago this year, I realized ASCO26 (American Society of Clinical Oncology) marks the 25th anniversary of my first time attending the meeting, back before it was even in Chicago.

For many of us who work in healthcare and here at Real Chemistry, we talk a lot about “purpose.” For me, though, this path wasn’t planned. I studied biology. I never took a communications class. And yet, looking back, I realize I had been preparing for this work my entire life.

A DIAGNOSIS

In the spring of 2013, during a routine mammogram, doctors found a tiny mass in my mom’s left breast. “It’s not even a centimeter,” they said. “We’ll biopsy it, but it’s likely stage 0.”

I wasn’t overly concerned. That year, like most, I traveled to Chicago for ASCO. I focused on work and the U.S. launch of a program in prostate cancer. I got the call while I was



Emily Poe with her mother, Barbara, whose experience with breast cancer made this work deeply personal.

there. The tumor was small, but cancer had spread to 23 of 27 lymph nodes. What we thought might be early-stage disease was actually stage 3C breast cancer.

Cancer had always been part of my story and an important part of my career, but in that moment, it became something else entirely. It became personal in a way that changes you.

My mother lived with significant hearing and speech challenges after a measles infection when she was little, and then severe mental and other health issues. From a young age as her only child, I often helped her navigate doctor visits, translating, asking questions, making sense of what could sometimes be overwhelming.

LIFELONG PURPOSE

Without realizing it, I had spent my life learning how to help someone understand and navigate healthcare.

But when it came to my mother’s breast cancer diagnosis, everything became more complicated. What I understood professionally about treatment options and outcomes, wasn’t what she wanted for herself. Her own life experiences shaped her perspective. She had watched her own mother die young of multiple myeloma and her sister endure difficult and experimental cancer treatments as a young woman diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. My mother made a clear, deeply personal decision and would not pursue the typical standard of care for someone with her diagnosis.

As her daughter, and as her advocate, I had to set aside what I knew academically was the “right” decision, backed by clinical data and real-world outcomes, and support her choice and reasons for it.

She passed away less than three years later. But she was at peace with her decision and the quality of life she had in that time.

HUMAN CARE

Every year now at ASCO, I’m reminded of stories like hers.

I think about the extraordinary progress being made – the data, the innovation, the breakthroughs. But I also think about the people behind those numbers. The families. The moments of decision. The trade-offs that aren’t captured in a clinical endpoint. And how we help people understand that personal side of cancer care.

Because cancer care is never just clinical. It’s human. And every choice, every path, and every outcome is deeply, uniquely personal.



Emily S. Poe is Group President and Chief Strategy Officer, Integrated Communications, Real Chemistry. She can be reached at 415-744-4503 or epoe@RealChemistry.com.



Sicily Calling...Back to My Roots

BY MARCO ZUCCARELLO

For me, travel has always been as much about exploration as it has been a chance for personal reflection. It's where I physically and mentally distance myself from the routine to become immersed in the lives, habits, and places of wherever I am traveling. I have been fortunate enough to explore much of the world, across several continents and dozens of languages, but one place continues to pull me back: Sicily.

Now you might say, "Well, of course, Marco. Your father is from there and you have been going back to your house there since you were a baby." And you would be right. But it's so much more than that. Sicily is a multitude of microclimates, countless cultural influences, and natural and archaeological sites, all tied together by a distinct language recognized by UNESCO. It is spoken by nearly five million people yet remains largely undiscovered by American tourists.

Consider this my "Top 5" pitch for why you should fly south – over Tuscany, past Rome, skipping the congestion of Amalfi – and go to Sicily.

1) THE FOOD IS OBJECTIVELY THE BEST IN ITALY

You hear of the food in Italy being the best in the world. I, personally, can't argue with that, but I think there are wonderful cuisines from around the world – each ready for when you have that distinct craving. But the best food in Italy is in Sicily. The best pizza, the best seafood, the best pastries and desserts, and the best street food. With its cultural influences – from the Normans to North Africa to the Spanish – Sicilian food is incredibly diverse from region to region and uses ingredients and cooking styles you won't find off the island.

An absolute can't-miss is Granita. I can't express how much it is *not* like Italian ice, and, honestly, it's better than gelato. I know it sounds crazy, but it is. It is made of the best possible juices and concentrates, frozen and churned to create a dessert that Sicilians will have at every meal – literally. I especially like Almond Granita with a warm brioche and double espresso for breakfast. Plan your travels around Granita and be sure to make stops at Savia in Catania, Bam Bam Bar in Taormina (plan accordingly as



This is Almond Granita from Savia in Catania.

Sicily is still very agricultural, making ingredients like almonds, pistachios, citrus, and stone fruits plentiful. You are never more than 10-15 minutes from a farm, and there is always a Granita to match. Start with almond or pistachio, as they are the most traditional, and then branch out to chocolate, blackberry, or coffee.

it's very popular), and Caffè Sicilia in Noto (yes, the one featured on Netflix's *Chef's Table*).

2) SIGNIFICANT ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

Sicily is a living example of ancient life in the Mediterranean. In every city and town, you can't turn a corner without seeing ancient ruins, Roman or Greek monuments, or even archaeological dig sites literally under the plexiglass floors of restaurants or shops. They are everywhere. I have been told by friends in Sicily that some Greek historians prefer going to Sicily – Agrigento, specifically – over Greece because the sheer density and high level of preservation of the Valley of the Temples and surrounding ruins offer so much more to researchers.

One does not have to go to Southern Sicily to see antiquity, though it is extremely worth it. In Catania, Siracusa, and Taormina (I will get to that in a minute), you can find Roman and Greek amphitheaters and remains tucked between apartment buildings or dug out between central boulevards in plain sight. Take the Anfiteatro Romano di Catania, a second century structure, for example. Mostly underground, part of this is uncovered right in the middle of busy Piazza Stesicoro, with cars and passersby minding their business as if it were the most normal thing in the world. Also in Catania are the Terme Achilliane – ancient Roman baths found next to one of the largest streets in the city and beneath the Cathedral of Saint Agatha, the patron saint of Catania whose name is everywhere and on everything, even the soccer team's mascot.



This is a photo of the Anfiteatro Romano di Catania. Every time I come back to Catania, I am always amazed at how normalized it is for Catanese to live between the modern and the ancient.

I get that sightseeing can be boring but take the day and visit one or many of these amazing places that have helped shape human history.

3) TAORMINA – THAT SHOULD BE ENOUGH

The second season of *The White Lotus* brought this sophisticated, cliffside beach town to prominence in the U.S., but the reality is that Taormina has always been a jewel. Besides being my favorite destination on Earth, Taormina is objectively one of the most attractive places to visit. Situated on the northeast coastline of Sicily, the town offers eastern views of the Mediterranean Sea and breath-

(Continued on page 11)



Sicily Calling *(Continued from page 10)*



Taormina's vistas are breathtaking. From nearly any angle, you can see clearly down the coast past Catania, Ragusa, and, on a clear day, all the way to Siracusa. Beach after beach lined with palm trees hug the shore. It's incredible.

In Taormina, you see it all: the mega-yacht elites, artisan sculptors, poets, and painters, renowned chefs, world diplomats, and carefree beach lovers. It is a place that makes you question why you don't just cancel your return trip and live there forever...Then you see the *nth* busload of tourists following yet another tour guide flag descending upon a tchotchke shop. It is a sad reality, but something to think about if you choose to visit in high season.

4) ETNA HAS YOU FEELING LIKE YOU'RE WALKING ON THE MOON

How often can you hike on a live volcano? Well, you can on Mount Etna. As the tallest active volcano in Europe and the highest peak in Italy south of the Alps, Mount Etna earns every bit of its recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. With multiple active craters, Etna is alive. It is not uncommon to look out your window at night and see the neon-red glow of lava actively lighting up the mountain-side. This activity means the mountain is constantly reshaping, erupting, and sculpting its own slopes – even slowly shifting towns as they are destroyed and then rebuilt after the latest severe eruption. In fact, people from Catania speak of Etna like a member of their community, looming over their city when



Etna is a fixture of the scenery in Eastern Sicily with its constant smoke plumes and periodic ash falls. I remember mornings at our home in Catania having to sweep an inch or more of ash from our balcony and driveway.

taking views of Mount Etna to the west.

When in Taormina, please just take it s-l-o-w. Enjoy it. Visit, eat, drink, relax. Visit one of the many galleries on Via Umberto. Have a drink in the main square. Let yourself splurge at one of the hotels. And try to walk up Vicolo Stretto (one of the narrowest streets in Europe at less than 20 inches wide!). Finally, enjoy dinner at one of the incredible restaurants like Al Saraceno or Osteria Rosso Divino.

it's spewing ash. Think of it a bit like Mount Doom and Minas Tirith for all the *Lord of the Rings* fans out there.

However, for the outdoor lover, it is paradise. There are endless hiking trails, wonderful wineries (like Patria, Benanti, or Tenuta delle Terre Nere), and scattered *Rifugi* – small inns where you can rent a room for the night and enjoy typical Etna cuisine of porcini, pasta, and horse...Yes, Sicilians really do eat horse, and it's actually pretty good. Etna is a singular place and a 100% “must-go” when you visit Sicily.

5) BETTER BEACHES THAN THE CARIBBEAN...AND I DON'T THINK IT'S CLOSE

I could say “Aeolian Islands” and pretty much call it a day on this section. But if you've made it this far, I may as well give you a little more to think about as you open a second screen and search “Best time to visit Sicily.” The beaches in Sicily are incredible and incredibly diverse – from pristine white to jet-black sands, to those molded from volcanic rock. The coastline in Sicily is spotted with “solariums,” or sunbathing platforms, which offer food, lounge chairs, and beach access during the day before transforming into one of Sicily's renowned beachfront nightclubs after sunset.

The Aeolian Islands, however, are the “top-top.” This volcanic archipelago, accessible by hydrofoil from Messina or Palermo, has all the Mediterranean monochromatic personality of much more well-known Greek destinations, but with a quiet, lost-to-the-world feeling of a true destination. And the beaches are the highlight. Mini, secluded bays cut into the dormant volcanic islands, touching clear light-green water, will have you feeling like you are in either a simulation or the pages of your parents' *National Geographic* magazines – featuring yet another place you thought you would literally never be able to visit. Match this feeling with a glass of local crisp, dry Malvasia wine and the freshest seafood available, and you will be emailing me a thank you when you get back.

If you have been considering a trip to Italy – let alone Sicily – I hope this completely unabashedly unbiased article has pushed you over the edge to put in your PTO request and book your trip to the island. Sicily is anything you want it to be, and so much more than I was able to capture in my top five reasons. If you do end up going, and my words had anything to do with it, I hope you have the most amazing visit, and I would be excited to hear about your trip!

Grazie a tutti!



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What Costa Rica Taught Me About Being Present

BY NATALIE NATOLI

Earlier this spring, my husband and I packed up our three children – ages three, five, and seven – and headed to Costa Rica for what we hoped would be a memorable family vacation. Like many parents, I approached the trip with equal parts excitement and anxiety. Would the kids handle the travel? Would everyone get along? Would it feel like an actual vacation, or would it simply be parenting in a different location?

As it turns out, Costa Rica gave us much more than a week away from our daily routines. It offered a powerful reminder of the value of presence, perspective, and adaptability.

Our adventure began with a lesson in trust – and a healthy dose of courage.

THE TREK TO HOME BASE

After a full day of travel, we climbed into our rental vehicle and began the final leg of our journey to an Airbnb outside La Fortuna. What we didn't fully appreciate when we booked it was that reaching the property required a four-wheel-drive trek up a steep, unpaved mountain road. The drive was narrow, winding, and intimidating enough in daylight. We quickly learned that every afternoon came with a deadline: Make it back before sunset. Once darkness fell, those roads became a challenge even for experienced drivers, let alone a family visiting from New Jersey.



Dinner in La Fortuna.

Yet when we finally reached the top, any hesitation immediately disappeared. Perched high above the rainforest with sweeping views of Arenal Volcano, our secluded home felt like something out of a movie. As we stepped

out of the car after a long day of travel, my seven-year-old took one look around and declared, "This is epic!" He was absolutely right. That moment set the tone for the rest of our trip. Costa Rica has a way of rewarding those willing to venture outside their comfort zone. The journey may not always be easy, but the destination is often worth it.

RIVER ADVENTURE

Our days in La Fortuna were filled with adventure. Surrounded by lush rainforest, waterfalls, and wildlife, it felt as though we had stepped into another world. One of the highlights was a river safari along the Peñas Blancas River. The current was strong enough to provide a bit of an adrenaline rush, but thankfully much tamer than the last time I experienced Costa Rican rivers – when I white-water rafted down the Pacuare River's Class IV rapids during my pre-kids, adventure-seeking days. These days, with three children in tow, my definition of excitement has changed considerably.

As we floated downstream, the kids were captivated by the wildlife around every bend – monkeys swinging through the trees, colorful tropical birds overhead, and crocodiles basking along the riverbank. Watching them experience such curiosity and wonder was one of the most rewarding parts of the trip. They weren't looking at screens or worrying about what came next. They were simply present, asking questions, learning about the animals around them, and taking it all in.

Watching them reminded me how often adults allow ourselves to become distracted by what has already happened or what still needs to be done.

THE RIGHT FIT

From La Fortuna, we headed to the Pacific Coast. Like many family vacations, however, things didn't go exactly according to plan. After arriving at our original hotel, we quickly realized it wasn't the right fit for our family. Rather than spending the week trying to make the best of a situation that wasn't working, we made the decision to change hotels.

At the time, it felt stressful. Moving hotels with three young children wasn't exactly how we envisioned spending part of our vacation. Yet looking back, it became one of the most valuable lessons from the trip. So often – whether in our personal lives or our professional lives – we stick with a plan simply because it's the plan. We convince ourselves that changing course means failure. In reality, adaptability is often the smarter choice.

Once we settled into our new hotel, everyone relaxed. The pace slowed. The kids spent hours swimming, exploring the beach, collecting shells, and chasing waves. The trip became what we had hoped it would be from the start:

(Continued on page 13)



The Reality of Magic

BY ELIZABETH MILIC

One of the gifts of living so close to New York City is getting to be a tourist in your own backyard. Somehow, after all these years, this was my first time walking



across the Brooklyn Bridge. And on a gorgeous summer night, it felt pretty magical.

I wish I could say it was a perfect night. It wasn't. But it was beautiful.

As with most family adventures with teenagers, there were eye rolls, complaints, and some very strong opinions about the amount of walking involved. A good reminder that family memories rarely look quite as



perfect in real life as they do on Instagram.

But then there were the other moments. The skyline glowing. Finding a fun spot for dinner. Watching the city light up across the water. And looking around and realizing how lucky we are to have all of this practically in our backyard.

It's been a busy summer, and there was something special about having a night to simply wander, explore, and be together, even if everyone wasn't delighted about it every single minute.

So magical in so many ways. So real in others.



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Costa Rica *(Continued from page 12)*

an opportunity to reconnect as a family and enjoy time together without the constant distractions of everyday life.

In a world where productivity is often celebrated above all else, there was something refreshing about slowing down. No packed agenda. No constant notifications. No endless meetings. Just time together.

MAKING SPACE

In this fast-paced industry, I often think about the importance of innovation, efficiency, and growth. Costa Rica reminded me that progress isn't always about moving faster. Sometimes it's about creating space to pause, observe, and reconnect. Sometimes it's about recognizing when something isn't working and having the confidence to make a change.

The country's philosophy of "Pura Vida" is difficult to translate directly, but it roughly means "pure life." More than a phrase, it represents a mindset – one that values gratitude, simplicity, and appreciation for the present moment. Throughout our trip, we heard locals use it constantly. By the end of the week, I began to understand why.

Pura Vida isn't about ignoring challenges or pretending life is perfect. It's about recognizing the good that exists alongside them. It's choosing optimism. It's finding joy



Rafting down the Peñas Blancas River.

in small moments. And perhaps most importantly, it's remembering that success isn't measured solely by accomplishments, but also by the quality of our relationships and experiences.

SLOWER GOING

When we returned home, our suitcases were filled with sandy clothes and souvenirs, but we brought back something far more valuable. We returned with memories of adventure, countless family laughs, and a renewed appreciation for being present.

Costa Rica reminded me that some of life's most meaningful moments happen when we step away from our routines and give ourselves permission to slow down. In a culture that often encourages us to do more, achieve more, and move faster, that lesson may be the greatest gift of all.

And for that, I am grateful.



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CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

A Family Tradition Worth Starting

BY MATT DECHEN

Every family has that one place they return to year after year – the destination that somehow never gets old.

For my family, that's Charleston, South Carolina. Every Easter, we head south and spend a week recharging along the South Carolina coast. While Charleston is the destination most people know, we've found our perfect home base just outside the city on the Isle of Palms.

What started as a vacation has become a tradition. It's something our family looks forward to all year. The combination of beautiful beaches, historic charm, incredible restaurants, and endless activities makes it one of the few places that truly offers something for everyone.

Whether you're planning a long weekend, an extended family vacation, or even a conference trip with a few extra days added on, Charleston and the surrounding islands deserve a spot at the top of your travel list.

WHY WE STAY ON THE ISLE OF PALMS

Charleston has no shortage of outstanding hotels and places to stay downtown, but for our family, the Isle of Palms checks every box.

Located about 30 minutes from historic downtown Charleston, the Isle of Palms offers a completely different pace. Instead of crowded streets and busy tourist attractions, you're greeted by wide beaches, quiet neighborhoods, bike paths, and a relaxed coastal atmosphere.

For families, it's hard to beat.

The beach is clean, spacious, and welcoming. Parents can actually relax while kids spend hours building sandcastles, hunting for shells, or playing in the surf. Morning walks along

the shoreline have become one of our favorite traditions, and evenings watching the sunset never get old.

Unlike some beach destinations that revolve around nightlife, the Isle of Palms feels designed for families. You'll see people riding bikes, walking their dogs, enjoying ice cream after dinner, and simply slowing down.

After busy work schedules throughout the year, that's exactly what we're looking for.



My family – wife Kim, myself, Collin, and Grant standing at the iconic Pineapple Fountain, a centerpiece of Joe Riley Waterfront Park in historic downtown Charleston, South Carolina.

CHARLESTON: HISTORY AROUND EVERY CORNER

One of the biggest advantages of staying on the Isle of Palms is that Charleston is only a short drive away. Every visit includes several trips into the city because there's simply too much to experience in one day.

Walking through downtown Charleston feels like stepping back in time. The historic architecture is beautifully preserved, with colorful homes, centuries-old churches, cobblestone streets, and hidden gardens around nearly every corner. The Battery remains one of our favorite places to stroll. Looking out over Charleston Harbor while admiring the historic homes reminds you why Charleston consistently ranks among America's favorite cities.

The Charleston City Market is another must-visit. Local artisans showcase handmade crafts, art-work, and the famous sweetgrass baskets that have become synonymous with the Lowcountry. It's an easy place to spend an afternoon browsing while supporting local businesses.

King Street offers a completely different experience, combining shopping, restaurants, and entertainment into one walkable district. Whether you're looking for boutique clothing stores, national retailers, coffee shops, or rooftop dining, King Street has something for every visitor.

One thing that stands out about Charleston is how approachable it feels. Despite its popularity, the city has maintained its Southern hospitality. Visitors aren't rushed from one attraction to another. Instead, you're encouraged to slow down, explore, and appreciate the details that make Charleston unique.

DON'T MISS SULLIVAN'S ISLAND

Just a few minutes from the Isle of Palms sits another destination that deserves a spot on every itinerary: Sullivan's Island. Smaller and quieter than many coastal towns,



Son Collin (15) and our last catch of the day - another Redfish/Red Drum.



My son Grant (10) and first catch of the day – a Redfish/Red Drum.

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Charleston *(Continued from page 14)*

Sullivan's Island has developed its own personality. It feels less commercial and more like a neighborhood where locals happen to welcome visitors. It's the perfect place to spend an afternoon.

The beaches are beautiful, the pace is relaxed, and the restaurant scene is exceptional for such a small island. If you're looking to escape the crowds while still enjoying everything the South Carolina coast has to offer, Sullivan's Island delivers exactly that.

TWO RESTAURANTS THAT KEEP US COMING BACK

Every family vacation includes those restaurants that become traditions of their own. For us, two places have become mandatory stops every Easter.

The Obstinate Daughter

Located on Sullivan's Island, The Obstinate Daughter has become one of our absolute favorites. The menu blends Southern influences with fresh coastal ingredients and Italian inspiration, creating dishes that are both creative and approachable.

Everything feels fresh, locally sourced, and thoughtfully prepared. Whether you're enjoying handmade pasta, fresh seafood, or one of their seasonal specialties, it's easy to understand why reservations are often difficult to secure. The atmosphere is equally memorable. Casual enough for vacation but refined enough to feel like a special evening, it's the kind of restaurant where conversations last long after dinner is finished. If you can only choose one dinner during your stay, this would be my recommendation.

Islander 71 Fish House and Raw Bar

Back on the Isle of Palms, Islander 71 has quickly become another family favorite. Located on the Intracoastal Waterway, the views alone make the visit worthwhile. Boats come and go throughout the day while guests enjoy fresh seafood, oysters, cocktails, and live music in an atmosphere that perfectly captures coastal South Carolina. It's relaxed without sacrificing quality.

Whether you're stopping in after a day at the beach or meeting friends for dinner, Islander 71 embodies everything people hope to find during a coastal vacation. There's something special about enjoying fresh seafood while watching the sun set over the water that simply can't be replicated anywhere else.

A PLACE THAT BALANCES ENERGY AND RELAXATION

One of the reasons we continue returning every Easter is the balance Charleston provides.

Some days are packed with activity – walking downtown, shopping, exploring historic sites, and enjoying exceptional meals. Other days involve nothing more than a beach chair, a good book, and watching the waves. That flexibility makes it ideal for families where everyone enjoys something different.

Parents can unwind.

Kids can stay active.

Grandparents can enjoy the scenery.

Everyone finds their own version of vacation.

WHY IT KEEPS CALLING US BACK

There are countless beautiful destinations across the country, but few create lasting traditions.

Charleston has done exactly that for our family. It's become more than a vacation spot. It's where we reconnect after busy seasons of work and school. It's where our kids create memories they'll hopefully pass on to their own families someday.

Every year, we discover something new – a restaurant we hadn't tried, a beach walk at sunrise, a hidden shop downtown, or simply another reason to appreciate the slower pace of coastal South Carolina. The familiarity is comforting, but the experience never feels repetitive. That's a rare combination.

FINAL THOUGHTS

If you've never visited Charleston, consider making it your next getaway. Better yet, spend your nights on the Isle of Palms and use it as your home base for exploring everything the area has to offer. Take a day to wander through historic Charleston. Spend an afternoon discovering Sullivan's Island. Enjoy dinner at The Obstinate Daughter. Watch the boats from Islander 71, and don't forget to carve out plenty of time to simply enjoy the beach.

For our family, what began as a vacation has become an annual tradition that we wouldn't trade for anything. Sometimes the best destinations aren't the ones where you try to do everything. They're the places that remind you to slow down, spend time with the people who matter most, and appreciate the moments in between.

That's exactly what Charleston and the Isle of Palms have become for us, and I have a feeling they might do the same for you.



Son Collin, nephew Noah (7), me, and son Grant.



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