

# One Man's Story

Born In America, Highly Considered in Altamura

*Pat has a son with Thalassemia, a disease that is little known in Pat's home Chicago written by Onofrio Pepe*

*This story starts out with two stolen tires and a tire jack suspended in the air and how a cold night on Chicago's South side changed the life of Pat Girondi.*

*"If I'd have hit the guy in the head with the tire iron my life would have turned out differently. Instead I put it down and my brother Jeff and I put the tires back on the car of the man who unintentionally helped to change my life."*

*It's probable that the fight against Thalassemia, a terrible genetic blood disorder, would not be at the threshold of being cured. Believe it or not, the story's true.*

*The life of Patrick Girondi, known in Italy as the 'Americano' is divided between Chicago and Altamura, Italy where he has three sons: Rocco, Francesco and Giancarlo. Pat's life is encompassed in the hope of his son's life turning into a normal life.*

*Rocco has been living on blood transfusions since he was 3 years old. He's now 16 and attends chef school. His life is interrupted by trips to the hospital for blood transfusions and treatment every 20 days. The transfusions bring much needed oxygen to Rocco's body. The battle for Rocco is a step away from being won and it may very well change the life of a million Thalassemic patients in the world.*

*Pat was born in Chicago. His mother's family was from the Italian town of Modugno in the province of Bari in the Puglia province. Pat's father abandoned the family when Pat was about 5 years old and his life along with that of his brothers and sisters was a life of being bounced back*

*and forth from residence to residence as his mother worked two and three jobs to keep food on the table. Pat ended up in Bridgeport, a blue collar ethnic community on the south side of Chicago with a high population of southern Italian immigrants. At 8 years-old he shined shoes.*

*Pat grew up on the streets of Bridgeport between petty larceny and big aggravation that he brought to the local police. In the middle of his sophomore year he was sent away to school. He ended up with the Christian Brothers at De La Salle.*

*One arrest, then another and Pat didn't finish high school. He was given the choice of joining the military or the state juvenile penitentiary. He chose the first.*

*At 19, he was back out on the streets. He took a job at Great Lake Supply working on the dock and driving a truck to the steel mills of Chicago's far south side. A little score here, a little score there and life was livable... then was the night he looked into the abyss. In that moment he remembered his two years in the military, years that saw him struggling and a professional fight in Idaho. A strange one, who was arrested once for assaulting a bus driver who wouldn't open the doors to let an old woman sit inside to protect her from the rain.*

*And then there was Joe Gornick, his Croatian boss at Great Lakes who convinced him with threats of physical assault to take a job offered to him from his friend Bobby Houlian running orders out on the Chicago Board Option Exchange. Pat's decision was helped by the sudden death of a friend who worked with Pat on the docks. Johnny Griffith, Pat's co-worker and friend, was found behind a Cicero tavern with an ax sticking out of his head. It could be that Pat was not far behind Johnny.*

*Pat put on the jacket of a runner and went to work for Larry Hanson at the Chicago Board Options Exchange. Pat learned quickly. He was ambitious and shrewd. He was a 'runner', and he literally ran the orders out to the brokers. He gained a reputation for his speed and courage.*

*One day one of his bosses doubted Pat's integrity and Pat punched him in the face. There was talk about Pat being expelled from the exchange. But in the end it was ruled that Pat was provoked and he responded in his own way.*

*Pat was thinking about returning to the docks when he was hired by a trader from Singapore. He added to his knowledge about the floor and trading and it was his first chance to become a trader. In time, after another altercation, Pat left the trader from Singapore and began to trade for himself. He hired men that he grew up with and bought a Rolls Royce, which he never drove. Instead, friends used it for weddings and baptisms.*

*Pat learned quickly and it wasn't long before he was asked to be on 'Oprah Winfrey's Show' as a rags to riches story. Articles were written about him all over the US. He was in Playgirl Magazine as one of America's most eligible bachelors.*

*He met his wife, Otensia Caputo, daughter of an Italian American factory worker. The Caputo family is from Altamura, 25 miles Modugno, from where Pat's grandparents came from.*

*Business went well. The local press talked about Pat as the rags to riches story who won't leave his roots behind. Most rags to riches stories find themselves on the 'Gold Coast' or the 'Magnificent Mile'. Not Pat, Bridgeport was his choice. He refuses to forget where he came from and helps plenty of others who were from there as well.*

*His life changed when his son, bearing his maternal grandfather's name, Rocco, was born in '90', Francesco was born in '91'. Life was good.*

*The fairy tale story ended abruptly in October of '92'. At 2 and a half years of age Rocco is diagnosed with Thalassemia. He couldn't produce hemoglobin, the oxygen carrier of the blood. The consequence of the disease is death to the liver, the heart and the kidneys. The average life expectancy is 27 and there is no cure other than a Bone Marrow*

*Transplant. There are no compatible donors for Rocco.*

*It is an 'Orphan's Disease'. (An Orphan Disease is a disease with less than 200,000 in the US). There's a limited amount of research in the disease since there are a small number of patients. Research is not practical for the drug companies.*

*After months of being hospitalized using experimental medicine in the US, the family decided to move to Altamura where Rocco can do his experimental treatment from home. Tough days for the Girondi's.*

*Pat followed his work from Italy, often flying back and forth. He opened a company in Switzerland with a banking license, which was eventually closed 14 years later. Pat's new career became to cure Rocco. The first doctor who saw Rocco said that he would not see the age of ten .*

*Pat began to sponsor research and a researcher named Susan Perrine. Pat opened up a laboratory when the University of Bari refused to allow Perrine to work in their laboratories.*

*Then Pat teamed up with Walter Hayhurst, Norb Wiech and John Walton, and they decided to take on the 'Orphans'. To date, Pat has been directly or indirectly responsible for 32 million dollars in research.*

*Next, Pat met Michel Sadelain. With the help of Franco Locatelli, Allan Cohen, Aurelio Maggio, they formed a squad to combat Thalassemia.*

*The research is hopeful. Pat and Doctor Norb Wiech became friends, and Norb's unique expertise pushed the project ahead. Official communications were made between the Italian government and this squad assembled by Pat Girondi, the kid from the streets of Chicago.*

*Recently the Sun Times of Chicago wrote an article about Pat. The life of Pat is more and more wrapped up in this mission, as he calls it.*

*Whoever meets Pat for the first time can mistake him for a strange type*

walking around in Bermuda shorts, loud colored tee-shirts and beach thongs. He has an office in a 700 year old building in the center of Altamura.

On the other end of the piazza is 'Toto Club' where Pat plays cards with his friends all of whom are carpenters and brick layers, truck drives, garbage men and mechanics. They play Italian card games and the famous 'passatella' a game that is played using glasses of beer as the winnings. The club rings all day and night with swearing and dialect and of course Pat's own combination of Italian, American (Bridgeport), and the dialect of Altamura.

Pat enjoys yelling out into the piazza in his special way watching the passer bys' looking on in astonishment at the American. Who is he? What does he do? He's certainly a strange fellow, this American.

He seems almost eccentric, but always ready to offer a coffee an ice cream, or a panzerotto.

When there is someone looking for a hand out in the piazza Pat goes and brings them to the bar Striccoli and offers them breakfast or whatever else they want. He's seen often having breakfast with an old woman who he treats like a queen. He's a passionate man. And what passion. He composes and performs songs.

His first CD 'Orphan's Soul' was released in '04'. His next album 'Orphan's Journey' will be released by summer of '07'.

What is his favorite song? He responds, 'Quattro Ore in Paradiso' (Four Hours in Paradise). He mixes up songs of Sinatra, Police, Bee Gee's and Springsteen with his own original pieces in concerts he has performed in Italy.

He hates Mc Donald's and Coca-Cola. He's against all war. He is not complimentary of Bush's policy in the Middle East.

*He is proud to be an American but likes very much living in Italy. He says that Altamura reminds him of the neighborhood 'Bridgeport' where he grew up. Pat Arbor his friend, ex-chairman of the Chicago board of Trade and descendant of the town next to Altamura agrees with him.*

*Over the years, the two of them have become close friends of Renzo Arbore. Pat is organizing an event in Chicago where he'll perform with the Italian 'Dean Martin'. Arbore will be given an award by the Italian Chamber of Commerce.*

*When someone talks about all that Pat has done for 'Thalassemia' he begins to squirm. 'We're more than half way home', he says, 'and I am just a tiny piece of an enormous puzzle.' The story of a puzzle that I would certainly not be telling if that night in November Pat had not laid the jack down.*

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The Story of a Man is translated by Lara Musard.

The article was originally written by Onofrio Pepe in the 'Corriere della Sera' a national Italian paper.