

Outstanding Italian Women in the US: Ilaria Capua

Maria Teresa Cometto (February 16, 2018)



You can be innovative and start a “revolution” even in a small town in Italy: that’s the story told by world known scientist Ilaria Capua last night at the Italian Cultural Institute in New York. It was the kick-off of a new series of conversations called “Outstanding Italian Women in the US”. “We’ll have also women in art, music, food and finance,” said the director of the Institute Giorgio van Straten, introducing the event.

From [Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale delle Venezie](#) [2], near Padua, Ilaria was able to convince European authorities to adopt vaccination to prevent [avian flu](#) [3] killing thousands of chickens - a practice considered “crazy” in 2000, but now a common practice -, and she launched the open-source science in 2006, a big deal then, now a standard among researchers.

All you need is to be good at your job, stubborn and not afraid to pursue your vision, as Ilaria is. She



is also a survivor of a kafkian trial, where she was accused of “trafficking in viruses” (see her bestseller “[Io Trafficante di Virus](#) [4]”, 2017). She was totally cleared in July 2016 (because the crimes didn’t exist!), but in the meantime she had decided to accept a prestigious position at the [University of Florida](#) [5] - which has one of the most powerful super computers in the US - as the Director of the One Health Center of Excellence for Research and Training.

“Here there is no fear of making mistakes. If you have an idea, they say ‘go for it’. Instead in Italy, they say ‘wait a moment...’.” That is what she appreciates the most in her new environment. Besides, one big difference between research in Europe and in the US, she says, is that in the US there is much more diversity, researchers coming from all over the world, and that’s a plus, compared to Europe where institutions tend to have mostly European teams.

“Yes, sexual harassment happens in research labs too”, says Ilaria and she told a story that she wrote on her previous book, published in 2012. During a meeting with (old) male professors, one of them looked at her and said: “I had never noticed you have beautiful tits!”. She snapped back saying she would not hit him only because she was well mannered. It’s interesting that at that time, only five years ago, nobody found that an outrageous act of sexual harassment.

But the [#MeToo](#) [6] movement must move on, added Ilaria: “We have to put merit and talent back into the careers of women” and focus on getting the same treatment and pay of males with same skills. Ilaria is also dedicated on promoting female leadership in sciences: she organizes monthly meeting with women colleagues at the University of Florida, “[Ladies for Ladies](#)” [7]. “We don’t talk about careers, but about practical problems that only we women have - she stresses - because it’s important to share our experiences and not feeling alone on facing problems we have as daughters, wives, mothers...”.

From 2013 to 2016, Ilaria was also a member of the Italian House of Representatives with [Mario Monti](#) [8]’s Scelta Civica party. She felt she could make a difference, bringing her scientific knowledge into the Parliament. But she said she would not try and go back to politics, and if asked to become the secretary of Health in a future Italian cabinet, she wouldn’t accept. “I’ve realized I simply don’t have the skills to be a politician”, she said.

In the end, no matter what happened to her, the Kafkian trial and everything else, Ilaria is of course always proud to be Italian and to show her Italian pride where she lives and works now, in [Gainesville](#) [9], Florida. She loves cooking and hosts Italian dinners at her home, inviting fellow Italian researchers with their spouses who typically are from all over the world.

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[4] <https://www.amazon.com/lo-trafficante-virus-scienza-giustizia-ebook/dp/B06XFRCXQ6>

[5] <http://universityofflorida.edu>



- [6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Me_Too_movement
- [7] <http://epi.ufl.edu/onehealth/>
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