

Life Lessons

Building on their commitment to education, two faculty members establish separate scholarships that honor loved ones while helping Southern students earn their degrees.

By Natalie Missakian

Thèrese “Terry” Petto wasn’t supposed to live past her first birthday. Born with a severe congenital heart defect, she found it difficult to climb a flight of stairs, walk outside in cold weather, or engage in mild physical activity.

But Petto grew up and defied all predictions, living a rich 35 years — the longest of any known patient with her diagnosis at the time — before succumbing to pneumonia in 1991.

Rita and Salvatore Misasi met as teenagers, coming of age in a small upstate New York town. Although neither went to college — an injury thwarted Salvatore’s chance to play baseball with the Brooklyn Dodgers — the couple worked tirelessly to make sure their three children pursued higher education.

The examples set by Petto and the Misasis are the inspiration behind two new scholarships at Southern, both established by loved ones who are members of the university faculty.



Professor of Exercise Science Sharon Misasi, ’83, established the Rita A. and Salvatore A. Misasi, Sr. Endowed Scholarship Fund to continue her parents’ tradition of promoting the pursuit of a college education.

The fund will benefit students enrolled in the School of Arts and Sciences or School of Education who have at least a 2.7 grade point average. Candidates must write an essay demonstrating why they deserve the scholarship, and first preference will go to liberal studies majors, followed by students majoring in exercise science.

“My parents always taught us to help whoever you can in whatever way you can,” Misasi recalls. “If you have the opportunity, you pay it forward, because you didn’t get to where you are on your own.” Misasi remembers how they were always quick to lend a helping hand when friends

or neighbors needed a favor.

The pair, descendants of Italian immigrants, met at school in Saugerties, N.Y., when they were 15 and have been married for 57 years. After Salvatore’s short-lived baseball career, they both took jobs at IBM until Sharon’s brother was born. Rita

quit her job to stay home and raise the children while Salvatore worked his way up to a managerial position. To raise

additional money for college, they had a turkey farm on the side.

“They really wanted us to have more opportunities than they did and saw college as a way for us to do that,” Misasi says.

She says her mother broke down in tears when she learned about the scholarship through a packet of paperwork Misasi sent home to surprise them. “It’s exciting for me to be able to do something in their honor that will live on beyond any of us.”



Professor of History Christine Petto has established the Thérèse C. Petto Endowment Fund, a scholarship to benefit students pursuing the study of world languages. The fund will benefit full- or part-time undergraduates with at least a 3.0 grade point average who demonstrate financial need.

“She was really the scholar of the family,”

Christine Petto, one of eight children, says of her older sister. “She loved to read, she loved English literature, and she loved foreign languages.”

Petto says her mother could never forget the day a doctor diagnosed her infant daughter with a severe heart malformation. “He handed her back to my mother and said, ‘Enjoy her because she won’t live to be a year old,’” Petto recalls.

But with sheer determination, a sense of adventure that couldn’t be harnessed, and the unshakable support of her parents, Terry didn’t just survive, says Petto. She thrived — even after a subsequent diagnosis of severe scoliosis that required multiple surgeries.

Terry graduated from Boston College’s Evening College (completing her studies in eight years), traveled, and spent time living in Europe. She also earned her master’s degree from Middlebury College’s School in France and had a successful career as a translator and college professor.

“Somehow she summoned the energy and perhaps all the spirit in the universe to be able to do these things, because it was tremendous [given her limitations],” says Petto. “I just think she was a lot braver than I — and a lot more adventurous.”

An Adventurous Life

Terry had just returned from a summer study program in Strasbourg, France, when she developed pneumonia, which led to her death. She had been preparing to go back to Europe later that year to take a new job in Paris.

Petto gives much of the credit for

her sister’s success to her parents, recalling the lengths to which they would go so that Terry could have a typical childhood.

“When she first had her back surgery [for scoliosis], she had to be in a body cast in a horizontal position. We would go

for walks with my sister, and they would wheel the stretcher all around town and think nothing of it,” she recalls.

They bought a station wagon to make it easier to travel with Terry on the stretcher, even to the drive-in movies.

“They instilled in her this sense of determination and told her to follow her dreams,” Petto says. “In a different family, I don’t think she would have survived.” ■



[LEFT] Professor of Exercise Science Sharon Misasi, '83, (center) established a scholarship in honor of her parents, Rita and Salvatore Misasi.

[RIGHT] Furthering her work in the classroom, Professor of History Christine Petto honored the memory of her sister by funding the Thérèse C. Petto Endowment Fund, which benefits students pursuing the study of world languages.