

Voices from the earthquake

By Monica Soladay

When an earthquake struck the town of L'Aquila in Abruzzo, Italy, on April 6, residents of both the United States and Italy scrambled to find loved ones. Ambassador shares two of their stories.



Courtesy of Joe DiMario

The town of L'Aquila, prior to the earthquake.

"I SAW MY ROOM SHAKING"

University student Sebastiano Savini, 23, was asleep in a rental house in the historic center of L'Aquila when the earthquake struck at about 3:30 a.m. on April 6. A language major, he lived in the house with two fellow students and walked to the nearby university.

"I heard the tremors from my bed," Savini said. "My bed was moving back and forth, back and forth. Then suddenly I woke up, I opened my eyes, and the room was going down. The room was shaking and broke everywhere and the walls were going down."

It was at that moment that instinct took over. On impulse, Savini crouched at the head of his bed under an overhanging bookshelf. The decision may have saved his life. The walls in his bedroom cracked and bricks began to rain down on the bed where he had lain just moments before.

"I saw my room still shaking," said Savini, of his view from under the shelf. "I saw my pictures on the

walls falling down, all my memories, just spreading down, everything in the room was just going down. I closed my eyes and I waited until it ended.

"Experts say it lasted 30 seconds," he reflected. "To me it



Student Sebastiano Savini survived the L'Aquila earthquake.

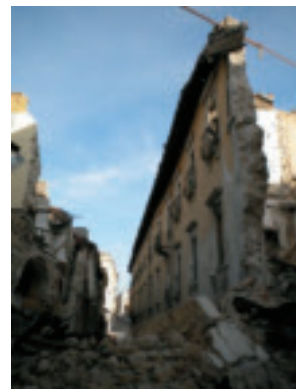
seemed...well, it seemed very, very long to me."

In the quiet that followed, Savini thought of the other roommate who was at home that weekend, Umberto DiVincenzo, 20. Surrounded by rubble, Savini began to scream for his friend. "I stayed on the bed, just screaming his name. I knew he had no shelf in his room [to hide under], so I wasn't sure if he was alive."

To his relief, DiVincenzo

responded within seconds. Rubble trapped Savini in his bedroom, so DiVincenzo kicked down his door and urged him to immediately evacuate the building. "I didn't realize it but the walls were really, really damaged," Savini said. "They were going to collapse. [DiVincenzo] realized more than me that the house was barely standing."

But when the two reached their front door, they found themselves trapped. Rubble blocked their way, preventing them from escaping the collapsing building. They called, "Help us! Please, help us open the door!" as neighbors rushed past on



the street, screaming. Tremors continued after the quake.

“It was not a good moment,” Savini said. “You could imagine we were completely blacked out, no light. There was water in the house because the pipes were gone. The inside of the house, the interior walls, collapsed first. We could smell gas.”

Finally, two neighbors heard their cries and helped them escape the building. Frightened for their lives, Savini and DiVincenzo joined the crowds fleeing to the nearest piazza.

Meanwhile, more than 150 kilometers away in the town of Pescara on Abruzzo’s coast, Savini’s mother was also awakened by the earthquake. Concerned about her son, she called his cell phone. The call went through just as Savini was escaping his home.

“I said to my mother, ‘This is a disaster, my house is collapsing,’” Savini recalled. “I said, ‘Mom, I’m scared. The earthquake was here and we are running. We are fine but I’m scared.’ Then the line collapsed because there were so many calls. She knew I was safe from the big earthquake because I was running away, but it was not a good moment.”

Dressed in sleepwear, the roommates joined fellow L’Aquila residents in a nearby piazza and waited

for help in the cold common to early April in Abruzzo. Humanitarian relief arrived at 7 a.m., providing hot drinks, sheets for warmth, telephones and a hospital tent. Uninjured, they arranged for DiVincenzo’s parents to pick them up



and take them to his family’s home in nearby Teramo. Savini’s family traveled there later in the day and brought him home to Pescara.

On the day after the quake, Savini returned to L’Aquila and with the help of local firemen retrieved his wallet and computer from his home. “The firemen said to me, ‘You are very lucky — it seems like inside the house a bomb exploded.’ All the inside walls had fallen down and the outside walls were still standing but really damaged.”

At his parents’ house, removed from his life in L’Aquila, Savini spent days in a state of shock. “I was just lying in my bed; I didn’t want to move. I stuck to the television, my phone and the Internet for news of

people I knew and the university.”

Today, Savini has “decided to come back to life.” He plans to return to L’Aquila and continue his studies, even if that means joining the town residents still living in tents. He plans to complete his studies and rejoin his friends; fortunately, none of his loved ones perished in the disaster.

Savini notes that he is looking forward to rebuilding his life, just as he is looking forward to watching L’Aquila rebuild. “I’m living the experience here and I know that people in L’Aquila are suffering. For now everything is okay but...now is a time to start reconstruction.”



“WE DIDN’T KNOW IF THEY WERE ALIVE”

At home in Long Beach, California, on April 5, Joe DiMario turned on the evening news and saw with horror that an earthquake had struck L’Aquila, the historic Abruzzo town where 18 of his cousins still lived.

The next morning at six a.m., DiMario and his sister began calling relatives in Italy. But with phone lines down and cell phone networks overloaded, they had no luck. Monday and Tuesday passed without contact. “At that point we really didn’t know if they were alive,” DiMario said. “There were so many of them living locally, all within a couple a couple of miles from each other. It was kind of scary and kind of frightening.”

In the meanwhile, DiMario kept close watch of the news on his local NBC station, KNBC in Los Angeles. The station showed footage of NBC’s Martin Fletcher live in L’Aquila’s city center.

“There was a pizzeria that we ➤

California resident Joe DiMario visits with family in L’Aquila prior to the quake.





DiMario stands outside a family member's house in L'Aquila's historic quarter prior to the quake.

used to go to all the time on the left hand side of the street. They showed that pizzeria and the buildings were demolished — they were just rubble,” DiMario said. “My cousins only lived 300 or 400 yards away. I’m thinking ‘This is not good. This is kind of scary.’ And the fact that we couldn’t contact anyone was just crazy.”



Desperate for answers, DiMario did the one thing of which he could think: He called KNBC, explained his situation, and asked, “I’m trying desperately to find if they are okay. Is it possible that someone could just walk by their house?”

DiMario found himself transferred to the KNBC West Coast Bureau Chief, who in turn spoke with NBC’s bureau chief in New York. “Within in 15 minutes, she called me back, having been instructed by her boss to ‘Get back

on the phone with him and tell him we’re going to find his family.”

That night just before the 11 p.m. broadcast, DiMario was connected via satellite phone with NBC’s Martin Fletcher, who was live on the ground in L’Aquila. “He said, ‘I can’t guarantee anything but I’m going to do my darndest to find your family for you.’”

DiMario e-mailed all of his family’s addresses, names and contact information to Fletcher, who told him he’d call back as soon as he knew anything. Faced with nothing left to do, he went to bed, finally falling asleep at 1:30 a.m.

At four a.m., the phone rang. It was Fletcher; he had found Bici Santilli, wife of DiMario’s cousin Vespesiamo. “That relief was just amazing,” he said.

While speaking with Bici, DiMario was able to get cell phone numbers for all of his relatives and confirm that his whole family survived the quake unharmed — all as cameras rolled. Later that night, NBC’s Nightly News aired footage of their reunion, with cameras showing both DiMario and Santilli speaking on the phone. “After two days of just banging our heads against a wall, I was just so happy,” he said.

Scenes from L’Aquila

Weeks after the earthquake, NIAF President Joseph V. Del Raso, Esq. and Foundation Board Secretary John F. Calvelli visited L’Aquila.

“The first impression was it was a modern-day ghost town,” Del Raso said of the city. “It’s like the city stopped in time.” Laundry still hung from the windows of crumbling apartment buildings, rubble filled the streets, and residents had been removed to nearby towns for safety, he noted, adding, “The rebuilding effort is going to be colossal.”

During their trip, Del Raso and Calvelli met with officials from the Italian government and U.S. Embassy to discuss allocation of funds collected for Abruzzo relief efforts. The two also met with first responders in L’Aquila who were involved in rescue efforts and presented a check for \$400,000 to the Italian government, symbolizing the funds that NIAF has raised to date. The Foundation’s fund-raising efforts are ongoing.

To learn more about how you can contribute to the NIAF/Abruzzo Relief Fund or NIAF’s Adopt-a-Student Campaign, which is helping displaced students from the University of L’Aquila find room and board for attendance at American universities, visit www.niaf.org or call 202-387-0600.

Although three cousins living in the city center have been relocated, the majority of DiMario’s family in Abruzzo is fine and did not need any assistance.

The next morning his phone began to ring — NBC viewers from across the country had tracked DiMario down to ask for his help finding their families in Abruzzo. He began to connect with these cultural cousins as well. “We had calls from Pittsburgh and Connecticut and New York,” he said. “And then I had one lady call from Long Beach, it turned out that she lived about three blocks away from me.” ▲