

Tony's Story

When a stranger accosted Tony Gemignani in front of his own restaurant in San Francisco's North Beach, a historic Italian American neighborhood, Tony told him to move along. But then the stranger began calling him names.

"You're an f-ing dago," he said. "You're all f-ing dagos. I'm going to kick your wop ass around this building."

Tony, who owns several Italian restaurants and a bakery, shakes his head. "There was some deep, deep hatred there. You could see it in his eyes. Pointing at my chest, wanting to beat me. I thought, this guy hates me because I'm successful and I'm Italian."

And then he thought of his grandfather. "We lived on an orchard with my grandpa when I was growing up," he says. "We had about 30 acres in Fremont. He was a farmer and he was the hardest-working man I knew. My work ethic came from my grandpa. So when I pictured this guy pointing at me and calling me this slur, it felt like someone was beating up my grandpa in a way. I was pissed. I was mad. I was frustrated.

"Trust me," Tony says, "twenty years ago, I would have punched the guy's lights out. Now, I'm older, I'm a businessman who's been around for 30 years. It hasn't been easy, but I always find a way to go forward."

He filed a police report in case the man went further. He called his lawyer and told him what had happened. He went back into the kitchen and thought about it.

"I was trying to figure out a way to get back at him in a positive way," Tony says. "At the same time, I was thinking about what to call my new bagel bakery. And then, you know, it was funny, I just said, 'We'll call it Dago Bagel. Screw this guy. I'm claiming the word back.'"

The bakery sold out in record time when it opened and Tony increased production by 100 percent a few days later. There was a need for quality bagels in the area, he says, but some of the customers came in because the story had hit the newspapers.

"I've had more conversations in the two days since we opened, with old school Italians coming in and saying, 'I'm glad you used that word. I'm glad you're showing that guy. I was called that when I was a kid. Sometimes they would call my dad that, or my grandpa.' It's something people should know," Tony says.

"I knew it would create controversy," he says. "Controversy creates awareness. The younger generation doesn't know what those words even mean."

Inside the bakery, there's a poster telling the story of the confrontation along with a caricature of Tony smiling and flexing his muscles. "There's a little bit of humor in there with the caricature of me," he says. "Laughing at the insults shifts the power away from the person saying them and changes the words from insults to just words."

The episode was the first time Tony had experienced hate speech. When he was in school, kids would deliberately mispronounce his last name or call him "Tony Baloney" or "Spaghetti Boy," but it was just in fun, he says.

"That's just growing up. Even now, you and I could be Italian and joking around and I say, "You dago." That's okay. But when somebody wants to beat you down for who you are, that's different. It can be very, very hurtful and painful."

One of the best defenses against hate speech is pride, Tony says. He donates money from every bagel his bakery sells to the Italian American Athletic Club, which sponsors community events that strengthen the Italian culture of North Beach.

"I think it's very important to be proud of where you come from," he says. "I visited the village where my great-grandparents came from and met my family there. It's this little village on a hill. I have so much respect for them to make it all the way to Fremont, California and settle and become farmers because I don't think I would have the guts to do that."

The bakery has created a lot of awareness, Tony says. "I think it will always tell the story as long as I'm open. Every time you buy a bagel and you see that story, it may just resurrect what happened that day."

He tells about a customer who came in with his little daughter and gave her a sticker with "Dago Bagel" and the caricature of Tony on it. The customer said, "I love what you're doing and I'll tell her what it means one day."

Tony smiles. "That's what it's about."