Creativity and Connection within the Italian Landscape

Spotlight on the Associazione Italiana Rolfing®

By Lina Amy Hack, Certified Advanced Rolfer®, Marina Blandini, Certified Advanced Rolfer, Rolf Movement Practitioner, and Pierpaola Volpones, Basic and Advanced Rolfing® Instructor

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ABSTRACT *In this interview, Rolfer Lina Amy Hack talks with the Director of the Associazone Italiana Rolfing, Marina Blandini, and Italian Dr. Ida Rolf Institute® faculty member Pierpaola Volpones about Rolfing® Structural Integration in Italy, the challenges they have experienced during the pandemic, and the strategies that are helping them persevere.*

Editor's note: This conversation took place on March 21, 2022.

Lina Amy Hack: Hello from Canada, great to connect with you both. We are at a great distance from each other for this chat, where are each of you today?

Pierpaola Volpones: Hello, Lina. Nice to see you. I live in a tiny little village called Torriana, just outside the city of Rimini, Italy.

Marina Blandini: Yes, hello Lina and Pierpaola, and I'm in Sicily.

LAH: I'm so glad that Zoom connects us, thanks for making time to tell us about Rolfing Structural Integration (SI) in Italy.

MB: Yes, we have had great experiences with Zoom. The Associazione Italiana Rolfing (AIR) organized a series of encounters, once the first lockdown was finishing, to help our Rolfers figure out how it was going to be next. The title, I think was, "Into the New."

PV: You have it, the full title was "Into the New! Reaching Out – How Rolfing Makes Us Feel Stronger and Better." It was a series of eight webinars designed to help us during this transition time. It was produced by the European Rolfing® Association (ERA) in May 2020, each webinar was forty minutes of presentation and twenty minutes of questions and answers. We had Robert Schleip, PhD, Jonathan Martine, Juan David Velez, Pedro Prado, PhD, Kathrin Grobelnik, Peter Schwind, PhD, and myself, as well as a talk about the recent scientific findings on fascia and its relationship with martial arts.

MB: It was fantastic. We had hundreds of people join us from all over the world. We were all closed in our houses for months, and then all of a sudden, connection with colleagues. Yeah, it was fantastic.

LAH: How are Italian Rolfers doing with regard to COVID-19? Italy was an early spot for the pandemic, so your group of Rolfers was on the leading edge of having to deal with the pandemic, going through it before all of us knew what it was.

MB: Yes. In one of those Zoom meetings, I remember Pedro Prado using a sentence, that to me, kept me very alive, "We have to surf this wave." Either we surf it, or you're being crushed by it. So, I focused on trying not to disappear, not to be crushed. And to constantly be surfing the pressures we faced, even when the Rolfing studios were closed, even if we were not working, we could be keeping our work alive in the collective mind of the people. We could keep being there for our clients, so when our studios could open again, then we could act. This is what happened when I opened my Rolfing studio, my schedule filled up quite quickly. Afterward, we had to close again. It has been difficult.

For a while, our studios were quite empty. Somehow every time that we could open again, only some people came for sessions. Yet, what is happening at this moment, it's very strange. We have a fantastic webmaster, they tell us that people are visiting our website, website traffic is way up, yet the studios at this moment are not so full. My feeling is that the Rolfing SI name is out there enormously at this moment, much more than ever. I'd like to hear Paola answer your question because we might have different perceptions.

PV: Well, I can speak for myself. At the beginning of the pandemic, the first two months from March to May of 2020, after the first huge surprise of the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent shutdown, the experience was mixed with fears of the unknown. It was actually a fantastic moment for me, very creative. I was not in my regular work routine, I had a lot of space and time for myself and my family. I was thinking of my clients and looking for a way to keep in contact with them. And not disappear. I had the idea to create audio clips of embodiment explorations, sending them via WhatsApp. They loved it. I produced seven audio clips, sent one every week. There was no charge; it was my gift.

Then, reflecting on the content of the audio clips, I had the idea to explain what was behind the movement suggestions; I started to write, and it became an ebook about Rolfing SI. It's a kindle version, in Italian and in English [*Meet Rolfing, Meet Yourself* (2020); the above-mentioned webinars and link to purchase the book are available at https://rolfing.org/articles, they start at page 4]. So actually, for me, my time in lockdown was quite creative and helped me to find out what was really important to me, rethinking my values, in my private and professional life. Then, when we opened up again in May 2020, slowly the office was getting fuller again with bookings, but very slowly. People were afraid to return to in-person work. I had new people who came for sessions. A new kind of client. And then, I was never obliged to close my office again, even when we had the second wave. It took about seven to eight months for my regular clients to come back and I had this new group of people coming to see me.

Talking to some of my colleagues on a personal level, the experience of COVID-19 for them was a challenge. They started to ask themselves questions like: What kind of Rolfer am I? What kind of clients am I looking for? Some people decided to take other training, like Feldenkrais Method® for example, because it was possible to give online sessions. You can't do the manual aspect of Rolfing sessions online. Other people decided they wanted even more manual therapy training. For example, some decided to take the Advanced Training with me in 2021, and this allowed me to teach my solo class here in Italy. I think COVID-19 was a way to confront our true wishes and true desires, and needs. To ask ourselves, what do we need, exactly? And thinking about the community of Italian Rolfers, some of us got closer.

MB: Yes. Some of us got closer. Some crashed with the waves.

PV: Yes. Some disappeared, and some got closer. Again, facing the challenge, people made their decisions.

LAH: When did the Italian Rolfing Association first become organized? And what do you call your group?

PV: We say A-I-R, Associazione Italiana Rolfing. It was created in 1990. The person who started AIR was Deanna Molrini Lanfranco. She was living in Brazil and working as a Rolfer; she worked with Pedro Prado [one of the founding members of the Associação Brasileira de Rolfing (ABR)]. She got the spirit of how Brazilian Rolfers were working together. So, she came back to Italy and started our Rolfing association here. Sadly, she died quite young, but AIR stayed.

Pierpaola Volpones: At the beginning of the pandemic, the first two months from March to May of 2020, after the first huge surprise of the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent shutdown, the experience was mixed with fears of the unknown. It was actually a fantastic moment for me, very creative.

Marina Blandini: Every year around the week of Dr. Rolf's birthday, the 19th of May, we call it our Rolfing week and we open our studios to the public. Every Rolfer organizes it the way that they like, but we know that across Europe we are all doing this week together, in honor of Ida Rolf, PhD (1896-1979).

MB: And actually, correct me if I'm wrong, AIR was the first association in Europe, right Paola?

PV: Yes, we were.

MB: And after us, the ERA [formed in 1991; see the article with Executive Director of ERA, Sabine Kalmbach on page 18]. As we said, the Italian Association was born before ERA in 1990.

LAH: I didn't know that. In this issue of *Structure, Function, Integration*, we are offering our readers the story of Rolfers in Europe. Of course, I knew Italy has had a regional association for a long time; AIR is active with regular training and busy Italian faculty members.

PV: At the time, ERA became the umbrella organization, then they had to license the trademark in different countries individually.

LAH: Right, that makes sense.

PV: And remember, all the European countries at that time were still individuals then, it was not even the 'European Union' [geo-politically] at that time.

LAH: Of course, that's a good point.

PV: So, you do have to think about all the different countries in Europe. The Rolf Institute® [now known as the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute® (DIRI)] at the time was licensing Europe to hold the trademark of Rolfing SI.

MB: And to give classes, right?

PV: And to give classes, yes, because, before that time, when DIRI faculty came from the United States, there had to be a local organizer who was helping to set up the training. This is how I trained to become a Rolfer. An American woman living in Munich, Germany found the training room and facilities.

MB: These days, ERA has a lot going on. I was in an ERA meeting right before we connected, which is still going on. ERA plans regional association encounters every three months. There is a marketing group for all the countries that are connected with ERA, for all ten countries [Spain, Czechia (Czech Republic), France, Italy, Switzerland, Ireland, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Germany, and Austria]. This is quite interesting to be meeting so often. I have been a board member with AIR for nine years. For a long time, the ERA was meeting every two years with each country association. And just for a few hours, there would be a meeting with the regional association's contact person. This was not much time to accomplish our goals. Now, every three months, all the regions meet and focus on sharing, creating connections and networks. This is working quite well, I would say.

There are great ideas that go back and forth. In May, we always do a Rolfing week at the European level, and Lina, I am telling you this idea so you can do it too. Every year around the week of Dr. Rolf's birthday, the 19th of May, we call it our Rolfing week and we open our studios to the public. Every Rolfer organizes it the way that they like, but we know that across Europe we are all doing this week together, in honor of Ida Rolf, PhD (1896-1979).

LAH: That is inspiring to think about. I know some of our colleagues in the United States do this for the day, working with children as a celebration of Dr. Rolf, but I really like the idea of a whole week.

Before COVID-19, did AIR have face-to-face meetings? And now probably more Zoom meetings?

MB: Yes, we had face-to-face meetings before, and now it's Zoom. There are around seventy-five Rolfers in Italy. New graduating Rolfers are completing their training, so we will have more shortly.

LAH: What is the wider structural integration profession like in Italy?

MB: There are not that many SI practitioners from other schools here in Italy.

PV: I would say there is more of a feeling of competition.

MB: There is competition, but there's also friendship. We've invited teachers from the European Guild for Structural Integration to come to our meeting. They're doing their things. We're doing our things. And everybody is trying to get as many clients as possible.

LAH: Natural competition, it's healthy for everyone to try to be their best.

MB: Yes, it's a healthy competition.

LAH: What are Rolfing studios like in Italy? I have a romantic notion of Italy, I have not been there myself, so I must confess I think of beautiful historic buildings, vineyards, the ocean, and cobblestones with hundreds of years of humans walking overtop of them.

MB: There is a lot of difference within our community. That's what I like about our Rolfing community. When I have colleagues over to my studio, they say, "Oh, wow. This is so different than mine." Some Rolfers have offices that are more clinical, and some are more in the historical thing. Myself, I have one office in a building from the 16th century, and I have another one completely lost in nature.

PV: It is my dream to have a studio with just glass walls in front of the beach, and

to have a forest at the back. That would be my dream office. But, this is not what's happening. I am in a building of five floors, I'm on the ground floor, and it's in the suburb of the city, which is very good because people can easily come from the highway. It's outside the usual traffic.

LAH: When did AIR start offering classes?

PV: Between 2010 and 2014, if I'm not mistaken, we ran three rounds of Basic Training. But that is not all that has taken place. There was one class in 2008 in Rome that was organized by the ERA. That was my project, I had this plan to run a training in Italy, so I started to give these small little classes to train people, as preparation classes. The teachers and the administration were provided by ERA back then, and we provided the place and the models.

MB: And we offered pre-trainings in Italy starting in 1992, for thirteen years.

LAH: I see, now AIR is benefiting from this groundwork. Your association has grown in members and now has faculty members to continue that growth.

PV: Right. We doubled the number of Rolfers with the trainings we have run in Italy.

MB: Yes. We also had found a person who was very good at marketing. This was a good investment. We promoted the courses we offer to become a Rolfer. It's a circle that keeps nourishing itself – advertisements lead to more people coming to the studios because they want to go to the classes. It's good for everybody, for the individual Rolfer, for the class, for the association.

LAH: How do the 2022 and 2023 schedules look like for AIR?

MB: Let me first say, how this moment looks to me. I had the completely opposite experience to what Pierpaola just told you. After the COVID-19 shutdown, I only had my regular clients. No new ones. It took a long time to have new clients find me, and all of a sudden, many new ones. In Italy, we saw many different waves of infection, even this year, some things closed down again. So, it is difficult to say what will happen now and the year to come. It is difficult to imagine.

PV: It is difficult to make plans. This is the lesson we are learning, we have to be as resilient as possible. Now with the war in Ukraine, there is more uncertainty.

MB: This war is right next door to us.

PV: It's next door. We are all concerned about that.

MB: We all are. Let me tell you, at this moment, in Italy, in my opinion, the majority of people are depressed because we are so tired of the stress that COVID-19 has put us through, and now this war. People don't want to spend money when there is a war. So, the future is difficult to imagine.

LAH: I just want to pause and breathe with what you are saying. People are going through so much and have been through so much these last two years.

I feel so much gratitude to you both, for your leadership as Rolfers and for sharing with us what your work life is like in 2022. Is there anything else that you'd like our membership and readership to know about AIR or about Rolfing SI in Italy?

MB: I think the key word is creativity, both for Rolfing SI, and for the way we try to make AIR a presence in the world. Because this is how we connect professionally, and at this time, the key word is creativity.

PV: For me, the way I think about it, I like when a community is alive and vital. My focus is to make our Rolfing SI community in Europe alive and vital; then we are spreading out this vitality and aliveness. Full of life. It is important to establish relationships, and it's a very delicate task to have good relationships. It requires a lot of presence and mindfulness. It's not always easy, yet it is important.

MB: And a lot of elasticity.

PV: Yes. Build up our intentions, let them go, and listen. And at the same time, when all this is happening, when there are these moments of togetherness, they are great. They're really great.

MB: And you can see, it's true that Italians do move their hands a lot when they are talking. I can see mine and Pierpaola's hands saying as much as our words.

LAH: Yes, I'm enjoying taking in all these details of how you express yourselves. I really appreciate that you both took the time to speak with me and share your thoughts and feelings with us. I sure appreciate how we have the capacity to be more connected while the world is going through so much difficulty.

MB: It keeps us alive to stay connected. We do this because we like it. I'd like to say to our community around the world, do not wait for your Rolfing association to do things for you. If you want something professionally, you have to think about it, organize it, and put it out to your group. Then the association can hold you and support you, but each of us Rolfers is important and we each have to do our part.

PV: Yes, this is true. This is how we can have lightness together if we all share the work.

PV: My focus is to make our Rolfing SI community in Europe alive and vital; then we are spreading out this vitality and aliveness. Full of life. It is important to establish relationships, and it's a very delicate task to have good relationships. It requires a lot of presence and mindfulness. It's not always easy, yet it is important.

Screenshots of Marina Blandini (top) and Pierpaola Volpones (bottom).

MB: At our last AIR meeting, I thanked every single colleague that did something during the year for our association. And for our group of seventy-five people, there was a list of twenty-seven thank-yous, which I think is great. It's a good number, a good percentage.

LAH: That is a great message for us to end on – we are an international grassroots profession and everything we have has come from people before us who decided we needed it. We all have the opportunity to make our mark, our legacy contribution. I thank you Marina and I thank you Pierpaola for your presence and efforts, it's been a pleasure speaking with you.

PV: Thank you Lina, come and visit us in Italy.

MB: Ciao, Lina.

Marina Blandini is a Certified Advanced Rolfer, Rolf Movement practitioner, and a professor of contemporary dance. Blandini completed her Rolfing SI training in Germany in 2002 and is today a Rolfing mentor. She has studied with some of the pioneers of Rolfing SI, such as Ray McCall, Jan Sultan, Jim Asher, Hubert Godard, Pedro Prado, PhD, and Robert Schleip, PhD. She has been researching and practicing the 'art of movement' for the last forty years. After thirty years of international studies, research, and work (seven years in the United States, seven years in Brazil, and fifteen years in France), she returned to Sicily and created the Centro Studi L'Arte del Movimento.

Pierpaola Volpones discovered Rolfing SI through bodywork and her research into well-being and somatic expression. She studied in Munich, Germany with Stacey Mills and Michael Salveson in her Basic Training and with Michael Salveson and Jeffrey Maitland in her Advanced Training. Her Rolf Movement training took place in Italy with Janie French and Annie Duggan. She began her Rolfing SI and Rolf Movement teacher training almost twenty years ago, and she has been teaching since 2006. She runs a practice in Rimini, Italy, and teaches for the European Rolfing® Association e.V. Her website is www.volpones.it.

Lina Amy Hack, BS, BA, SEP, became a Rolfer® in 2004 and is now a Certified Advanced Rolfer (2016) practicing in Canada. She has an honors biochemistry degree from Simon Fraser University (2000) and a high-honors psychology degree from the University of Saskatchewan (2013), as well as a Somatic Experiencing® Practitioner (2015) certification. Hack is the Editor-in-Chief of Structure, Function, Integration.

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