

Episode 4

Ken and Ann Marie Thigpen – Mud Angels

Hannah (H): Welcome to Noles Abroad, a podcast by Florida State University International Programs! I'm Hannah

Zoë (Z): And I'm Zoe! And we are your hosts. On this podcast we'll talk about study abroad from the perspective of the students, faculty, staff, and alumni who make it an experience worth sharing. We'll also bring you travel tips and fun facts from around the globe.

Z: Today is a special episode as we interview two "Mud Angels" who helped in the aftermath of the 1966 Flood of the Arno River in Florence, Italy. Ken and Ann Marie Thigpen met on the program and have been married for over 50 years. Today we talk to them about the story of how they met, how they helped with cleanup efforts after the flood, and how their class became known as the "Mud Angels." Let's go to their introductions now:

Hello, thank you for joining us today! Can you both introduce yourselves just telling us who you are, when and where you studied abroad, and what you're up to now?

Ken (K): My name is Ken Thigpen. I live in Long Island, Port Washington, Long Island. I'm retired I was in Florida State for two degrees, my bachelors and my masters. As part of my bachelor's degree I studied in Florence, Italy which happened to be the very first year that Florida State had a study abroad program in Italy. There were some other schools that had programs there before, they were small, the one that we had at Florida State was very large and that's where I met my wonderful wife, Ann Marie Chianci.

Ann Marie (AM): Chianci, in Italian. I'm Ann Marie Chianti Thigpen and I also studied in Florence at the study center from 1966 to 1967 and that's where I met my terrific husband Ken. And I work with nonprofits, I taught at Penn State University for many years but transitioned into working with nonprofit organizations and I'm retired now but I'm still doing consulting.

H: Wonderful. Today we want to go through your story of how you met and how you spent your time in Florence so to start off the story can you go through how you met?

AM: Sure!

K: Well, when I went to Florence I was a teenager, I was very young, and I really wanted to meet Italian girls. So we had been given a center in this hotel that was right near the Piazza San Marco and you know there are a lot of Italian men outside but I didn't see any Italian women and I was told that you will never meet Italian girl. But one day I saw, it was right after we got there, the first week I saw this beautiful Italian girl, speaking Italian and I was smitten immediately. And I thought "I'm gonna introduce myself 'cause I'll probably never meet another Italian girl." So I walked up and I started speaking my still fledgling Italian to her and she immediately switched into English for me and said, "Hi, are you from Florida State too?" and it was it was Ann Marie.

AM: That's right. And I was an Italian dissent, Italian girl but Floridian, so that's how we met. We met in the lobby of the hotel where we stayed, in late August early September of 1966. And we went out for a little bit, I went out with a lot of Italian guys because there were lots of those around and we went to

Oktoberfest for a weekend, a bunch of us students did and Ken and I went out there and then when we came back we started dating seriously, and that was the start of it in 1966 and we got married in 1967.

Z: Wow, that's so wonderful so you've talked a little bit about Oktoberfest which obviously was in October, but then in November of that year we want to talk a little bit about what happened then. So the Arno River flooded in Florence, so can you talk about the day that the river flooded and how it unfolded as you learned more information? So your initial reaction and then sort of how it all unfolded.

K: Well we knew something was going on because our teachers hadn't showed up for classes and we were kind of excited that probably classes would be canceled that day so we went out in the streets and we saw the water coming up, and it was still raining there and I think we had one little portable umbrella

AM: That we shared.

K: That we were sharing, and so we stood in the middle of the water, it was up to our ankles, on the Via Cavour, one of the main streets of Florence and we posed for a photo thinking, "oh this is just the streets flooding," and it was later on that we learned what a disaster it was.

AM: Yeah, we had no idea. Of course there was no internet then, we had no television so there was no real way that we could find out and tune in like you could today. But yeah we were just frolicking in the water, in the rain and it started coming, and then coming, and then coming, and pretty soon we realized it really was a real disaster and that's when we all had to stay inside the hotel, we couldn't go outside. We lost the power, we lost water, we lost everything and we had to brush our teeth with wine and it was it was a disaster. And it was kept hearing by word of mouth how tragic it was for many people who were trapped in their homes, who were ill, it was it was it just sort of ballooned into something really awful that we hadn't in anyway anticipated during our rainy walk on the Via Cavour.

K: Some of our professors lived down near the river and they saw the flood. I mean literally tearing through the Ponte Vecchio and down through the center of Florence and they didn't know how long it was going to last so they, I know Dr. Tanzy was wading out with his children, he had several children, one of them on his shoulders, and they had to wade through waist high water to get back to the center. Which they finally did and we discovered it was a terrible, terrible tragedy.

AM: It was horrible, yeah, yeah.

H: Can you talk a little bit about the cleanup of the flood and how you and your classmates came to be known as the "Mud Angels"?

AM: Sure, well I guess the first point was that you know we were toying with going home but nobody could get out of there. So we knew people needed help and so there are a couple of places that we could choose to help work in and we chose to work at the Biblioteca Nazionale, National Library. So we as the waters receded, slowly receded, a group of students went to the library sort of hauling out books and we formed a human chain where books were passed along. These were incredibly valuable, ancient books and they were just covered with mud and we were passing them along. And it was just, the amount of mud was just incomprehensible. That was it more than the water at that point, it is just the mud. It was just, we were covered with it, just covered with mud.

K: And the air was polluted, too. We walked out of the hotel and we saw that the waters had receded but there was this stench in the air of diesel fumes and what had happened was that all of the cars and all the

buses that were flooded had you know secreted all of their gas and oil into the floodwaters and that had been left behind as part of the muddy residue. So we kind of walked down through an increasing level of mud until we got to where we were we were trying to help. We were trying, we didn't know what to do, we would do what people told us to do. So they said pass these books along. Then after a while they said, "oh we have real experts who are coming in to take care of the books, you students just get shovels and rakes, or whatever you can and start piling up the mud." and so we did that. And we have a picture of us with our friends sitting on a heap of wood outside of the in Piazza Santa Croce, right outside of the Biblioteca where we were sitting down just exhausted from shoveling mud on that particular day covered, covered with mud. And it was hard to get it off.

AM: And we all had jeans on.

K: Oh yeah.

AM: Everybody wore jeans then, of course you know like they do now. But jeans were identified with Americans at that point because they weren't ubiquitous in the way that they are today.

K: And so they called us the bluj. Oh the bluj's are out, that's blue for blue jeans is what they called blue jeans, bluj. And they said, "oh the bluj are like angels so they called us originally the Bluj Angels, the blue jean angels and after this became such an international story they said "well there are people working in the mud and they're like Mud Angels," and that name stuck and that's what you know what's really left with. But we didn't know we were Mud Angels right away. We just, we were helping and were covered with mud, we couldn't bathe. Some of us found that there were ponds right outside of the flooded area where ducks had you know started to nest and some people went over there and they got water from the pond, the duck pond became a popular bathing place to get as much mud off as we could. But I don't think it was very sanitary, and our leaders were worried about our health and they said let's take a vote, should we send everybody home or should we stay and tough it out and work?

AM: And everybody of course stayed. There was no way we were going back, no way at all. And then we had an incredible offer from the Italian government and the Vatican, to thank the United States and all its students, particularly the FSU students for all their help. And they gave us a I think was a week, a week stay at the Hilton, which for many of us was an incredible luxury, in Rome. So we got to go down to Rome, stay in the Hilton for one week, all expenses paid, and the cherry on top of everything was that we got an audience with the Pope.

K: And the trip down was interesting on the bus because we were all really still covered with mud and smelling like diesel so one of the beautiful things was right away we could go and shower.

AM: Yeah.

K: We could wash ourselves off and we could get fresh clothes on. And we had taken some ties and suits for the men and some nice dresses for the women. Ann Marie had a beautiful black dress on, I remember, with a veil.

AM: Well that's because I was one of one of two students, Bill Bryant was the other, fortunate enough to be picked to go down and represent the group of FSU students and meet the Pope personally. So in Saint Peters Church basilica there were hundreds and hundreds of people with goats and animals, I had no idea you could bring animals into the basilica but they were there, and the Pope was in the middle on his chair

and Bill Bryant and I had the opportunity to go down and meet him and kiss his ring and he gave us each a gold medal and thanked us very the heartfelty for all the help that the students did, the FSU students did, in helping the city of Florence and Italy during the flood. And that was a great, great honor.

K: And I think we celebrated Thanksgiving there.

AM: Yeah I think so, I think we did.

K: And we got back it was you know it was it was around Thanksgiving and you know we had to make up all our classes then.

AM: Yeah then we go back to school!

K: Yeah we had real work to do, school work to get our grades from FSU.

AM: But it was it was a good thing to go back. We were all ready I think, absolutely ready. And our professors were incredibly understanding and it was it was quite an experience, no question once in a lifetime experience.

Z: I'm sure that that whole experience was just so unforgettable and that you were able to meet the Pope and you know the flood and just it sounds like your memories are so detailed and you have such a recollection of that time so it just sounds like really something that will always be with you.

AM: Well we still have a Mud Angel Zoom call every two weeks with a group of about 10 of us.

K: Including our professors.

AM: Including one of our professors! Absolutely and I mean those are bonds that will last forever.

K: And two of our friends from there were in our wedding.

AM: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

K: We got married after that.

AM: Yeah, yeah.

K: When we got back.

H: Yeah, why don't, can we talk about that a little bit like what was it like returning home to Florida after this experience? I mean you just spent all that time in Italy and went through something really incredible, what was that like returning home and then getting married?

AM: Well it was again, that was that was a very different kind of experience. You know, sort of decomposing and debriefing everybody, and telling the stories and the wedding was of course wonderful and we went back to school in Tallahassee at Florida State afterwards because Ken was getting his Masters degree. And I'll never forget one of our friends and professors who was not in Italy with us, but gave us a wedding present and it's still on my desk today, and it's a framed saying it says "If you have a heart and a shirt, sell your shirt and go to Italy" and that was that was good. And we try to go back as often as we can.

K: And really, I mean we went back to school in Tallahassee and I got my Masters then, Ann Marie was teaching nearby and we kept up with a lot of our friends from there for years and we still we still do. We saw some of them a couple of years ago at the 50th anniversary

AM: We saw a lot of them.

K: Yeah! Almost 100 people went back. We saw them at the anniversary reunion of the flood back in Florence. And you know people have changed a little bit, but it was still wonderful going back and seeing everybody there. But we've had so many adventures since then that were, that really were impacted by what we what we did over there. We've traveled the world, many times. We've gone back to Italy many times. And we still go back. We're planning to go back again this summer in fact.

AM: And when we celebrated, three years ago when we celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary, because we never had parties or anything for that, we decided oh we're going to have a big party and of course there was no question about where it would be, it was in Florence.

Z: That's so wonderful. You mentioned going back this this year, and that Ken you'll be teaching at FSU Florence, can you just talk a little bit about that and just the continued impact that study abroad has had on your lives even until today?

K: Sure. Well I was I was a professor at Penn State University, University Park for a number of decades and there I taught courses in mythology and folklore and when we were back there last summer

AM: Back in Italy

K: Back in Italy, in Florence, I was talking to Frank Nero the director of the center there and explaining how I had taught all these courses and we came up with this idea that I could teach some of the courses that I taught at Penn State but I could also create a new course called the "Culture and Legacy of the Mud Angels." So we have this history course about what happened in 1966 in Florence during the flood. And a lot of the people who were there are willing to be interviewed again by students, so we'll have some oral histories that students will do turning in papers and I hope will put together a kind of a unified story based on multiple points of view about what had happened to individuals who were there, and how this has impacted their lives. So I'll be teaching one course in classical mythology and one course in Mud Angels. So I have a good resource here, Ann Marie is going to speak to the class. I've talked to several of the Mud Angels who said I will go to Italy to speak in your class, so we're counting on that too. We're hopeful that travel to Italy will be just fine this summer. I think it will because right now there are lot of students who are studying in Florence.

AM: But one thing that is incredible to notice is we studied in this hotel when we were there near San Marco, The Copy, it was a very modest hotel and now FSU has this amazing, glorious study center, this palazzo there, that's run by phenomenal staff Frank and his team do remarkable things with the students. I mean, all of our mud Angel Contacts they said we want to go back to school, we want to go back to Florence to study, we want to be at that new palazzo so it's very, very exciting and I just think you know the opportunity to travel abroad to study abroad is one of the great opportunities that you can have. I mean you need to see the rest of the world. It's just terrific.

K: And after we were married, as we had children we have two children who are grown now, they traveled with us to places in the world where they saw many things that most children you know wouldn't

see. We spent a year and in Romania, we spent time in Italy, we spent time in all of the other countries in Europe and our children decided that they were going to study abroad as part of their undergraduate experiences and so they did.

AM: So both of them studied abroad and now we have two grandchildren and our granddaughter is studying Italian in school and we hope that she'll study in Florence too but of course that's up to her to decide.

H: That's really, a really beautiful like full circle kind of story and experience to get to see that in your own family but also for the students who will be studying in Florence who might have the opportunity to take your class this summer, Ken, I think it's incredible that this legacy that Florida State has, this experience and this connection that we have with the city of Florence is so important and I think it's so it's amazing and remarkable that you're continuing to honor that legacy and to teach other students about that experience and really just the community that Florida State has with the city of Florence is unlike any other I'm sure. So it's really remarkable that you're continuing that.

AM: Well even the 50th anniversary of the flood when we went back and they had us there at the Florida State's study center, the whole city we had badges on, people would stop us at the market and say "you were the Mud Angels!" it was like we were famous people and it wasn't just old people like us, I mean there were kids, teenagers, headlines in the newspapers that we were there. It was just a powerful experience and Florida State is really made its mark in the Renaissance city of Florence.

H: And it's thanks to people like you for continuing to honor that legacy and for sharing your story so that other people can know about it and we can continue to share this incredible story. But that kind of leads us into our final question and that is the question we ask everyone we interview on this podcast and that's what advice would you have for anyone who's considering studying abroad?

AM: My advice would be go, don't even think about it. I mean it's just I don't know if it will you know you have to maybe borrow a little bit more money, or you know may have a tighter budget, you just can't even imagine how worthwhile it will be.

K: Since that time I've worked with international education quite a bit and I've had students from different schools going to study abroad and every student that I've interviewed coming back from that study abroad experience, whether it was for two weeks or two months or for a year, said this changed my life.

AM: Right.

H: Yeah that's something we hear from people all the time and we very clearly heard from your story how much this experience changed your life so thank you for that advice.

Z: Thanks for joining us today, we're so glad to have you on the podcast and it's been such a pleasure to hear your story and hear the legacy of the Mud Angels.

AM: Thank you! Its our pleasure.

K: Yes thank you for asking us about it.

AM: Yes, thank you!

Z: Before we disembark, we want to talk about Valentine's Day.

This holiday has roots in Italy beginning with the Romans. There are a few ideas as to how Valentine's Day originated, but some say that it was originally a pagan festival, Lupercalia, which revolved around fertility and matchmaking and was held in February. Later, in the 3rd century, the day was named St. Valentine's when two martyrs, both named Valentine, were honored by the Catholic church. Shakespeare and Chaucer helped romanticize Valentine's Day in their writings, making it more popular throughout Europe. It eventually evolved into what we know today.

H: Today, Valentine's Day is known in Italy as the "Feast of Lovers" and is celebrated with flowers and chocolate, much like it is celebrated in the US. Italy is a romanticized travel location, and many stories, movies, and books highlighting the romance of Italian culture. This romance is alive and well today as more couples become engaged on Valentine's Day in Italy than any other day of the year. We hope that each of you will someday be able to experience the romance of Italy through your travels.

Z: Thanks again to Ann Marie and Ken for sharing their story with us today. And as always, thanks for listening.

H: This podcast is a production of FSU International Programs. The music for this podcast was composed by John Bartmann. Our logo was designed by Vanessa Guirey, who also does our sound engineering. Editing, transcription, and research is done by us, Hannah Meister and Zoë Crook.

<https://www.npr.org/2011/02/14/133693152/the-dark-origins-of-valentines-day>

<https://www.explore-italian-culture.com/valentines-day-facts.html>

<https://www.sandanielemagazine.com/en/events/thats-amore-celebrating-valentines-day-italy/>