



# THE MANY ADVENTURES OF MONGO DEPOTATO

MARIO DEMATTEO IS A STORYTELLER, COMIC CREATOR, POET AND URBAN FARMER.

WRITTEN BY WENDY HINMAN

Mario DeMatteo is many things, but foremost a storyteller. We all have this capacity, but we can grow out of it. That storytelling wonder gets distracted by other things in life. DeMatteo relates his early wonder like this:

“When I was little I couldn’t pronounce my name, it came out Mongo DePotato. Wearing my mom-made cape and mask, fist held high, I declared, ‘I am Mongo! Mongo De...Potato.’ It always made Mom laugh. Making Mom laugh is the best. Eventually I could pronounce my name, but I always kept my alter ego close by. I would come up with tall

tales about Mongo DePotato and tell them to my friends. The stories made me feel like I had special magic inside.”

DeMatteo grew up in Carlsbad. He lived just off Tamarack for decades. He went to St. Pat’s, where “it’s sad for me to say, but I became a bully.” By the time he graduated from Carlsbad High School in 2002, a couple of significant things happened. He did a short stint in juvie for fighting and he had a group of friends who started



A young Mario DeMatteo pops an ollie off Tamarack (photo courtesy of Mario DeMatteo).

reading the Bible. We grow out of storytelling sometimes by not slowing down to see them or to tell them. As DeMatteo started at Point Loma Nazarene University, his life was moving along an expected groove. Then, he said, “I drowned in a shallow swimming pool.”

## FULL STOP

On vacation in Costa Rica during a college summer break, DeMatteo dove into a swimming pool he thought was deeper. His body broke. When his head hit he didn’t feel that pain; his first sensation was a lack of it. “I couldn’t feel my arms.”

How could he get to the surface? He was enveloped in a sense that death had come. But there was blood. He credits his bleeding with his saving. “My friends saw the blood” and pulled him out. He has faint memories of an ambulance and then he woke up in San Jose to “a little nurse holding my hand and praying in Spanish.”

As Mongo DePotato tells it, “I turned into a big kid and my stories got replaced with soccer balls and surfboards.

I forgot about my special magic. Then in 2004, my whole life broke into a gazillion pieces. I hurt my neck diving into a shallow swimming pool. I still remember the bottom, all brittle and bone pile. I was 20 years old, paralyzed and afraid. For the next six months I was in the hospital figuring out this new life on wheels. I remember relearning how to scribble the alphabet. I started scribbling my little stories again to pass the time, to make Mom laugh. Making Mom laugh is still the best. My special magic helped me through the dark and I've been holding on to it ever since."

"I was super lucky," DeMatteo says, "to have good family and good friends." In those six months, it was the faces of family and friends who gave him strength. And books. "Books became my refuge," he says. Because of his Bible reading days in high school, DeMatteo said, "I knew who to call on." And the poetry he started writing for girls in sixth grade came back to him. In recovery, storytelling became his superpower.

### COMIC ADVENTURES

Art and words and the art of words became DeMatteo's pursuit. He ran a screenprinting company for five years. He went to Cal State San Marcos to finish the degree that got lost along the way. He has a master's in Comparative Literature (reading it) and an MA (writing it). He married a poet, Karla Cordero. He got involved with a creative team and produced a graphic novel on the life of the Apostle Paul.

The graphic novel, DeMatteo says, "is a very impactful medium for kids." In our screen age, there are so many "reluctant readers," he adds. "Reading is down, retention is down," but graphic novels pull those hesitant readers in. It's the art that grabs the imagination and then the words carry the all-important story. DeMatteo, with Mark Harmon and Ismael Castro, set St. Paul in a Star Wars-like world to tell the apostle's story. Which is a rather "and-then-what-happened?" adventure.

They also gave St. Peter's tales of ups and downs and all arounds their own graphic novel run. Peter's story is gritty and close to the ground. So much different than what you think of the guy who had the Basilica and churches named after him.

The team's latest graphic novel is a retelling of Corrie Ten Boom's story of "The Hiding Place." DeMatteo adapted the story and directs the art, Castro is the illustrator. Elizabeth Sherrill helped bring the ideas to fruition, as she did with Ten Boom's original book. It is the story of courage, survival, heartbreak and forgiveness in German-occupied Netherlands in World War II and Nazi death camps.

Reading stories and writing stories opens up our curiosity and our inner world. A world we feel and see even as we sit motionless. The spiral and swirl of discovery and ideas is exhilarating. And the best in our inner worlds leads to real living outside.

### A TOMATO PLANT AND THE BURNING BUSH

DeMatteo's mom gave him a tomato plant. She reminded him of a childhood idea to start a pasta sauce company. All great pasta sauces begin with a tomato vine. Sitting around

this growing thing with his best friend Marcos, pruning, staking, caring, DeMatteo felt the gate of a new adventure opening before him. "We made a mango salsa," he says. "It was our burning bush."

The soil beneath us holds many stories. DeMatteo's original tomato plant turned into a fascination with urban farming. Jason and Peter Franco of Wellness Landscapes made DeMatteo's backyard more accessible and built three large raised beds, wheelchair height. Out in the garden, "it was like surfing," he says. "I lost all sense of time. Weeding, pruning; it is an endless journey. That was 15 years ago." Fifteen years and thousands of pounds of veggies given away, a currency of friendship.

As art and words must be shared, so must the fruit of the ground. About seven years ago, DeMatteo dreamed beyond his backyard. With the help of his friends Ryan Simpson and Marcos Mujica, two organizations took root, the Agrarian Institute and Bonsall Berry Farm. The mission statement of the nonprofit Agrarian Institute is: "to plant seeds of hope in our community, so that every family, especially those facing homelessness and food insecurity, have access to organic food."

In 2022, DeMatteo and his friends bought 28 acres in Bonsall and turned rough land into the Bonsall Berry Farm "to create a magical place where families can pick berries, pet farm animals and explore the great outdoors." Dreams become reality by teams. This team's dream is like the old proverb, "If you give a man a fish you feed him for a day," only with urban farming. If you give a family lettuce, they make a salad, but if you teach them how to grow, they have salad neverending.

They put it like this: "The Agrarian Institute and Bonsall Berry Farm were founded by three North County San Diego natives with a shared passion for regenerative farming and heartfelt hospitality. What started as a dream has grown into a community-driven family farm where sustainability and connection take center stage. Our goal is to create a legacy farm—a place where our children and grandchildren can grow, play and make lifelong memories. Built for the community and by the community, the Agrarian Institute and Bonsall Berry Farm are more than a farm; they are spaces to nurture relationships with the land, with food and with one another. Together, we're planting seeds for a brighter future." The farm will fully open to the public in June.

The great thing for a storyteller working on a regenerative farm is that every season unfolds a new story. And every visitor holds stories within them. On the org chart, DeMatteo is the co-founder and VP of marketing. That's just fancy talk to say he's the keeper of the stories. It should say he is Mongo, Mongo DePotato, and he has special magic.

For more information on all the stories DeMatteo has inside him, go to:  
<http://beartruthbooks.com>  
<https://www.theagrarianinstitute.org/about>  
<https://www.bonsallberryfarm.com>



a) Ryan Simpson, DeMatteo and Marcos Mujica down on the farm. b) The master plan of the Agrarian Institute. c) Karla Cordero and DeMatteo getting engaged in Sedona, Arizona. d) DeMatteo brings his special magic to kids in graphic novel style. e) DeMatteo in his backyard, where the vision of helping others experience the good earth began (photos courtesy of Mario DeMatteo)

