

New York State Commission for Social Justice
2021 Sumer Plenary Session
Report

Brothers and Sisters, thank you for all your support to our CSJ. I am pleased that we are finally meeting in person after the past sixteen months. This past quarter we have witnessed some victories in our fight to keep Columbus Day and our statues around the Country. Following is an update on all our activities during this period.

Attacks on Columbus

New York City Department of Education

As I reported last quarter, the New York City Department of Education first changed Columbus Day on their school year calendar to Indigenous Peoples Day. They then received the heat from our Italian American Community and announced that October 12th would now be known as Italian Heritage Day/Indigenous Peoples Day. That change as also met with serious opposition from our community. On May 12th, CSJ, the Grand Lodge of New York along with many other Italian American Organizations held a press conference/rally at Columbus Circle demanding that the mayor reinstate Columbus Day to the Department of Education calendar. Many news outlets carried the press conference, and it was attended by some elected officials, candidates for office and celebrities. Unfortunately, the mayor announced he will not change the holiday back. If you remember from our last article, the mayor and the chancellor claimed they had no knowledge of this change taking place, until it was announced to the press. So, at a meeting of the Council of Presidents Columbus Day committee, we asked Attorney Michael Santo to file a Freedom of Information (FOIL) request to the Department of Education. We are requesting the following information.

- 1) Who made the decision to change Columbus Day to indigenous Peoples Day?
- 2) Who made the decision to then change it to Italian Heritage Day/Indigenous Peoples Day?
- 3) When was the mayor and the chancellor informed of this decision?
- 4) We also requested all minutes of meetings, emails, and phone logs regarding this issue.

We did receive a response from the New York City Department of Education (DOE) that they received our request and a search for the records we requested will be conducted. In their response they stated they anticipate getting back to us by August 11, 2021. Once we receive DOE's response, we will take any necessary steps to return Columbus Day to the school calendar.

We are not and will never give up on this fight until Columbus Day is placed back of the school calendar.

Port Jefferson School Board

We were notified that the Port Jefferson School Board decided to change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day. Immediately, it was acted upon by CSJ. Lou Gallo called the superintendent's office and asked for a meeting with us to discuss this change. The next day we were told a meeting was not necessary that the change was rescinded, and Columbus Day was back on the calendar. It is issues like this that we stress the importance of being notified as soon as something like this arises. With Port Jefferson, we were notified and immediately acted on it and were successful.

Randolph School District

As I am sure many of you have been seeing the fight in Randolph New Jersey School District to keep Columbus Day. The Italian American Community in New Jersey, along with Once Voice Coalition and our National CSJ came together and demanded that Columbus Day be restored, and that Indigenous Peoples Day be placed on another day. The school district, in probably one of the dumbest moves, decided to remove all holidays from their school calendar and place the words "school closed". This move infuriated all residents of Randolph, and the protest was even louder than before the original change. After many protests and well attended public meetings, the school board replaced all the holidays back on the calendar including Columbus Day. Congratulations to all involved in this fight!

Italy's Parliament Supports Christopher Columbus

On June 16th Italy's Parliament overwhelmingly approved a motion in defense of Christopher Columbus. The motion's stated purpose is as following:

“The Italian Chamber of Deputies commits the Government

- 1) To take action, on the political and diplomatic level, so that Italian cultural heritage in the United States and the symbolic figure of that heritage embodied by Christopher Columbus may be safeguarded;**
- 2) To use all the communication tools available to the government, to grant the enhancement, both at the level of bilateral Italy-United States relations and at a multilateral level, of the real historical role of Christopher Columbus, an explorer moved by the noble sentiments of discovery, at the basis of the evolution of society and the whole of humanity.”**

OSDIA and our CSJ would like to thank the Government of Italy for voicing their support for Christopher Columbus. This action by the Government of Italy will add a new level of support to our cause in defending Columbus.

Columbus Statue in Syracuse

Our brothers and sisters in Syracuse are fighting those that want to remove the Columbus statue in their city. This statue was paid for by members of the community, whose relatives still live in the community. The Columbus Monument, in Columbus Circle was designed by the Syracuse-born architect, Dwight James Baum in 1934. When this issue first started Mayor Ben Walsh sent signals he supported our Italian American community and the Columbus statue. Then he formed a commission to decide if the statue should be removed. The Italian Americans on the commission were outnumbered. Finally, right before Columbus Day, those leading the fight were told that the mayor was announcing his decision. They urged him to hold off on making any announcement until after Columbus Day. The mayor ignored that request and on the day before Columbus Day he announced the statue was being removed. The Columbus Monument Committee filed a notice of intent with the Courts to prevent the mayor's action. This case is pending. I want to thank Carmine Federico, Bob Gardino, Nick Piro and all who are engaged in this battle.

John Dabbene Essay Contest

These are the winners of the 2021 John Dabbene Italian Heritage Essay Contest:

District 1

Isabella Armato

10 Salt Meadow Lane
Stony Brook, NY 11790
Paul J. Galinas Jr. High School
Fr. John Papallo Lodge #2684, President Enrico Annichiarico

District 2

Gabriella Maresco

270 N. Kings Avenue
Massapequa, NY 11758
Plainedge High School
Columbus Lodge #2143, President Gary Caparco

Alaina Pinto

53 Hilldale Road
Albertson, NY 11507-2211
Wheatley Middle School/Old Westbury
America Lodge #2245

District 5

Giovanna Nicole Lacerra

19 Woodford Road
Scarsdale, NY 10583
School of the Holy Child Middle School
Romanesque Lodge #2198, President Luisa Fuime

District 7

Jonathan Sexton
3101 Longfield Road
Glenwood, MD 21738
Glenwood Middle School
Stella D'Argento Lodge #1916, President Rozann Greco

I would like to congratulate each of the winners of this contest. I would also urge all districts that did not participate in this contest to enter it next year. Congratulations to Geraldine Ianiello Graham and all the liaisons for doing an excellent job with this program.

As we begin to get back from this pandemic, I am happy to report this year's Columbus Day parades in both Manhattan and Long Island will take place in person. I am urging all our brothers and sisters to participate in both parades and show your support for Columbus.

Finally, I would like to thank President Tony Naccarato for doing an outstanding job during this pandemic. He served us well with class and did everything that needed to be done to keep our lion on the move. Thank you, Tony!

I would also like to congratulate our new State President Michele Ment. You have the full support of myself and the CSJ.

In closing, I want to thank the CSJ Executive Board and our district liaisons and all my brothers and sisters for all their support for our CSJ. Please continue to keep your ears to the ground and should you hear something negative to our community, please notify me immediately.