

CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE 5/4/17

Cordiali Saluti Ai Miei Fratelli e Sorelle!

I hope all of you had a great time during all the spring holidays, but it wasn't much of a holiday for the CSJ as we tackled some very unnerving issues these past few months.

Right around my last report in this column a burgeoning issue emerged out in the Town of Riverhead in eastern Long Island. Thanks to the vigilant eye of Executive Board member Liz Rizzo we learned that the Parks Department there had sent out a winter brochure to its residents about a "Murder Mystery Lunch" event involving a "who dunnit" murder between two Mafia families, the Bacchagaloops and the Barzinis. I dispatched a letter to Mr. Ray Coyne, the Parks Superintendent, explaining to him that the activity was offensive, and with a rich historical legacy of Italian people he could have made a better choice. I followed up the letter with a personal and private meeting with Coyne in his office to seek an immediate cancellation. Upon my arrival he was instantly apologetic and within one hour supplanted the Lunch with another activity. Although CSJ scored here, I have surmised that the entertainment company that promotes this activity still has it in its repertoire. I plan to contact this company and demand they terminate the activity entirely since it may circulate in other locations.

Around the same time as this occurrence the issues swirling around Our Lady of Loreto Church percolated, as usual. Mario Toggia, researcher from the Italian Studies Association, and I appeared on the John LaBarca radio program "Italian House Party" to passionately express our feelings and demand that our adversaries change their position and support the landmarking of this treasured edifice. Furthermore, we also appealed to the sensibilities of the listening public to apply pressure to Councilman Rafael Espinal, Jr. and the Diocese of Brooklyn to heed our pleas. A few weeks after this attempt I along with other members of the Brownsville Cultural Coalition (BCC) appeared before the Land Use and Zoning Committee of Community Board 16 in Brownsville and urged its members to support the landmarking. Eventually we did get its support, but sadly the Diocese fought this action and appeared before the CB demanding a rescission. The Land Use Committee subsequently reversed its decision, but the action was not legal because a quorum was not present when the vote was taken. So, we remain in limbo here, but we forged ahead with admirable results.

In March BCC held a press conference at the OLL site along with St. Sen. Tony Avella and Assemb. Latrice Walker to plead our case relentlessly again before the viewing public. Later in the month I was invited to a testimonial dinner sponsored by the Federation of Italian American Organizations of Brooklyn (FIAO) where I lobbied members of the FIAO Board, Monsignor Jamie Gigantiello of the Diocese, and others to enlist support and suggestions for strategy for our cause. The NYS Land Conservancy has agreed to advance BCC money to do a conditions assessment to determine the cost of stabilization and restoration of OLL, and we do have an engineering firm at the ready to do it for a discounted price. Brooklyn UNICO has come forward to volunteer its members to do any interior work to save money. We have revived our petition on the internet to save OLL, and to date we have 1,100 signatures of those who support the landmarking! We literally continue to beseech Governor Cuomo, state and city agencies, elected officials, and our own organizations in the coalition to forestall the Diocese's march to full demolition. We also have presently enlisted legal advice from interested attorneys who want to help, and established a "Go fund Me Site" to raise some seed money for our efforts.

In late April equipped with such advice, we had to hasten to State Supreme Court in Brooklyn to stop the demolition as the wrecking company began to erect the scaffolding and the fencing around the church. The judge agreed with our argument and levied a temporary restraining

order to halt the demolition, subjecting us and the Diocese to another court hearing on May 9th to show cause why the church should not be demolished. We immediately called for a rally at the OLL site to attract attention and galvanize the public, which attracted loads of media attention in both print and broadcast media in NYC. Amongst all this hoopla Councilman Espinal dug in and finally, publicly proclaimed he stood foursquare behind demolishing the church in favor of affordable housing on the site.

As of this writing we are planning our strategy, mobilization, and work for the upcoming court date. We pray to God we hope we will be successful. Stay tuned!

Another seemingly perpetual saga we wrestle with is of course saving Columbus Day on the calendar. You all know that since last fall CSJ has been circulating a petition nationwide about saving Columbus Day. As a way of galvanizing more momentum towards our own self-imposed deadline of April 30th I re-ignited the online petition in February, and it has accelerated quite well. Change.org continues to notify me about the increased volume. It has definitely gone viral since I've noticed comments from all over the country and even from Italy! As we approached the deadline I contacted National CSJ President Kevin Caira and requested an extension to keep going, and he agreed. We still do not know the tally to date for the petitions both ground and online, but we have picked up new groups whom I have made contact with that are doing lots of the ground petitions—the Knights of Columbus (Suffolk Chapter), the Italian Cultural Society of Farmingdale, Long Island, the Federation of Italian American Organizations of Western New York, and a Joseph DiVincenzo, an at-large OSIA member from Buffalo. In fact, the petitions got a boost thanks to the intercession of District 1 CSJ Liaison Dan Calise when he invited me to a K. of C. Suffolk Chapter meeting in February where before about 100 or so men I cogently requested them to reclaim their legacy when the K. of C. lobbied successfully Pres. FDR and the U.S. Congress in 1937 to create the Columbus Day holiday! Consequently, not only were petitions signed that night, but also the leadership in attendance was going to bring the matter to their superiors. Hopefully then, we can count on the Knights to join us as an equal partner.

As far as the Federation I am elated to report that as a result of our collaboration with them we were able to defeat the attempted resolution to change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day proposed by the School Board President of the Williamsville School District outside of Buffalo in a 7-1 vote. Only the president voted in favor. Such a result offered me the opportunity to encourage them to join our petition drive, which they happily did.

On another front thanks to the efforts of Past National and State President Joseph DiTrapani, I was able to join an incipient campaign sponsored by the Columbus Citizens Foundation (CCF), the organizer of the annual Columbus Day Parade in NYC, regarding saving Columbus Day. At a dinner meeting in March CCF unveiled the formation of a mobile app on smart phones known as “Emojitalia.” It's still a work in progress and entails a 99-cent purchase of the app in which thousands of people can start a petition drive or contact elected officials about saving Columbus Day. We were asked to bring it to the attention of our respective groups for review and input. At our April Executive Board meeting our commissioners gave the idea a ringing endorsement without doubt or question! There will be continuous meetings at CCF, and once all matters are completed a press conference will be called in NYC to inform the public.

Finally, we were alerted by our Colorado brethren and President Kevin in April that State Rep. Joseph Salazar is re-introducing a bill once again to repeal Columbus Day as a legal holiday, not even making it Indigenous Peoples Day! You know last year we defeated his bill right in committee 7-2. On a nationwide conference call initiated by President Kevin we

discussed our strategy for the upcoming debate on April 26th, and NYS CSJ was asked to take part again. We launched an e-mail and phone call blitz to the newly-constituted State, Veterans, and Military Affairs Committee, but despite our and Colorado OSIA's efforts we lost in this committee on a strict party-line vote (6 Dems for repeal; 3 Repubs for no repeal). The bill then moved to the Local Government Committee of the Assembly where it was defeated finally on May 4th! That result should finish Salazar's attempts for good to dump Columbus Day! Goodbye Salazar, not Columbus!

Another issue we terminated briskly occurred with the Buffalo News. Right on Sunday and Monday, March 19th and 20th respectively, St. Joseph's Day, two news articles were released on the front page that covered the history of the Mafia in western New York. People all over the state couldn't believe it! What a day to publish such articles! Teaming up with the Federation in western New York, we e-mail blitzed the author Dan Herbeck about his terrible judgment, and instantly he apologized and admitted he should have known better. Shake your head on that one!

However it may be, we always seem to experience some positive rays of sunshine along the way. I delivered my 47th presentation of "History in a Box" at Lincoln High School in Yonkers to five Italian classes in February. We had a successful 36th annual brunch/dinner fundraiser at our usual haunt, Russo's-On-The-Bay, honoring Joseph Tacopina, an internationally-known attorney and Louis Del Bianco, grandson of the Chief Carver of Mount Rushmore. We collaborated with the Brumidi Lodge in showing the movie "Vendetta" about the lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans in 1891, the worst in American history, with fifty people in attendance. I began my rounds once again, visiting CSJ Districts 2 and 3 and have noticed more knowledgeable growth and passion amongst the lodge liaisons. I personally attended the annual Italian Poetry Contest for middle and high school students at Old Westbury College sponsored by the American Association of Teachers of Italian (AATI) and was so flabbergasted at the capability of these students in articulating Italian in poetic style. Soon after I was notified that AATI would honor me for its annual Dante Award on May 13th, which I really consider wholesale recognition of NYS CSJ! Most enthralling though was my recruitment of new members to the Executive Board that will make us even more effective—Ed Bochynski of the Columbus Lodge, Marianne Prince of the John Michael Marino Lodge, Tom Bandise of the Dr. Vincenzo Sellero Lodge, and Tony Rotoli of the Vigiano Brothers Lodge.

So, that's the latest from your NYS CSJ.

Fraternally,

Lou