

NEW YORK STATE COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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PLENARY SESSION REPORT

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HOST

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Fighting Defamation and Stereotyping

We opened the quarter with our continuous battle with the Aflac commercial "Family Business." In the prior quarter we spent time mobilizing our lodge base by urging our lodge and Board members to send e-mails, Facebook posts, and phone calls demanding that Aflac drop the ad, but to no avail. Consequently we changed our tactics.

We began to network nationwide with other Italian groups to put more pressure on Aflac. Working with One Voice Coalition in New Jersey, the National Italian American Human Relations Foundation and the National Italian American Bar Association in Chicago we flooded Aflac with more letters and e-mails. We even decided to choose two agencies in Chicago and New Jersey and flood them with phone calls all day urging these agents in these offices to cajole corporate to drop the ad. Aflac still did not respond.

At this point I did some research and discovered that the Dr. Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta, Georgia, awarded Aflac a "Salute to Greatness Award." I wrote to the Center that the ad was in no manner reflective of the spirit and intentions of Dr. King, and implored them to aid us in requesting that Aflac drop the ad. I also discovered in my research that Fortune 500 magazine published by Time, Inc. dubbed Aflac the "Most Admired and Ethical Company" in the health insurance field. I wrote to Time and told them nothing could be farther from the truth! I urged them to watch the 34-second ad, and it would show that their award would be an embarrassment to them. I implored Time to intercede on our behalf and have Aflac drop the ad. Neither of these efforts produced any effect!

Thanks to the efforts of the above groups we were able to secure letters from Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition and a Serbian group in Chicago, which wrote letters to Aflac to urge them to drop the ad, and still we did not prevail.

The Executive Board has advised me though to continue our efforts, especially since the ad still runs. I will re-contact our national collaborators to decide on a new course of action.

In the meantime Board member Angela DeCosimo, our Media Monitor, spent much time researching and monitoring the TV series "New Mob Wives." She has prepared a letter and an e-mail chronicle for the Board's review. At our May meeting we will entertain her efforts and decide on a course of action, if any. Thank you Angela!

Organization

During the quarter I have contacted all District Chairpersons to check on their efforts in recruiting lodge liaisons. They are really trying very hard to do their best, but progress has been minimal. At the Leadership Forum on April 5th I made an impassioned plea to all lodge presidents present to forge ahead vigorously in this regard so as to aid us in our quest of building a strong grass roots organization at the community level. We hope we succeed.

Invitations

As the State Chairman I was afforded two gracious invitations by two institutions. Once again Dr. Arthur Flug of the Holocaust Center of Queensborough Community College invited me back to his internship class on bias and discrimination, where again I instructed the students on how to address a personal bias attack, how organizations like CSJ address such biases and the criteria we use in deciding whether we address the bias or not. Dr. Flug informed me after the class session that from now on I would be a regular on these topics every semester. Obviously, such a circumstance will allow me to extend such knowledge to a whole host of students from

the younger generation, which will afford us the possibility of changing the whole mindset of the future. Quite an opportunity indeed!

The second opportunity involved an alert provided me by AATI (American Association of Teachers of Italian). In an e-mail message to me the President of AATI, Craig Butler, informed me of a bilingual show at the Queens Theater in Flushing Meadows produced by a Simona Rodano of Incanto Productions in Astoria on March 21st called "Sempreverde (Evergreen)." Literally given a ringside seat free of charge, I was fascinated by the production! With colorful staging and costumes, athletic acrobats and aerialists, kaleidoscopic videos, and strobe lighting, she pounded the message about the need to preserve our environment, minimize waste and recycle— —all of it done with a combination of Italian and English dialogue and student participation of first through fourth graders. They never lost their attention for the-little-over-one-hour program! Absolutely amazing!

Simona thanked me for coming, and I told her CSJ would do some kind of youth program with her in the future.

Positive Imagery and Promoting Culture

Naturally, the above happenstance leads us to discuss positive imagery and promoting culture. Firstly, Dr. Mario Mignone of the Center of Italian Studies at SUNY Stony Brook informed me in an e-mail message about a project on City Island, the Bronx, that involved a request by the Italian Hospital Society for a variance before the Board of Standards and Appeals of the City of New York for senior citizen housing for Italian Americans. If the project was awarded the variance from the city, it would allow Italian American seniors housing suffused with Italian culture on the premises until the day they died. CSJ was asked to intercede to try to help get the variance. Encouraging Board members to write, some of us did send e-mails to the Board of Standards and Appeals conjuring the Board to grant the variance. We still await its decision.

Having opened a channel with B'nai B'rith as described last quarter, both CSJ and BB have decided to strengthen their bonds through the launching of a movie. Board member Liz Rizzo, our Researcher, found an engaging film on Movie Pak called "Perlasca." Giorgio Perlasca was an Italian meat vendor for the Italian army and personally witnessed the horrible treatment of the Jews during WW2. Disgusted by what he saw, he decided to launch a one-man campaign to save 5,000 Hungarian Jews. Using crafty trickery, diplomacy, and outright bribery, he did all he could to save Jews, and he succeeded! He was eventually honored by Hungary and Israel, and a film was made to publicize his exploits.

We want to show this film in the presence of Jews and Italians! We are attempting to show this film at a Nassau and Suffolk venue in the spring and fall respectively and at the Garibaldi-Meucci Museum in August. Stay tuned and don't miss it!

We didn't stop there. On April 10th District 3 Chairman Tony Corsello, Capodanno Lodge Liaison Frank Cicero, and I returned to St. Clare Elementary School to speak to parents and students directly. Tony physically presented an explanation and portrayal of our positive image materials to parents, and I presented my now legendary "History in a Box" program to the 6th grade class. Frank topped our presentation off with a plea to join the Capodanno Lodge. We particularly stressed through our presentations the necessity of studying the Italian language in order to pass down our legacy and heritage to posterity. Principal Jo Rossicone was elated by our presence, and we hope it resonated with the parents and the students.

Turning our attention to District 1, lodge representatives are working laboriously and assiduously to launch a smorgasbord of Italian culture on Saturday, June 28th from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Frank Brush Barn property in Smithtown under the auspices of CSJ. The diversified program is just about set, and the team is working vigorously now attracting vendors and sponsors and addressing matters relative to the grounds. Stay tuned and come!

As usual, interrupting our forward advances, another crisis emerged affecting positive imagery. On April 8th I was informed by President Joe Franzone of the Marconi Lodge of a rumor that the Islip School District on Long Island was considering terminating Italian in the upcoming budget. When heard, we sprung into action immediately, as we are so sensitive of these occurrences! I immediately contacted the Assistant Superintendent of Instruction to verify the rumor, and she said it was true! I requested a meeting, and I got one. In the meantime President Franzone gave me the name of a teacher of Italian, and I organized a luncheon with her and a colleague. At that meeting I was provided with details of the Italian language program in the district, so I would attend the meeting with the Assistant Superintendent equipped with the knowledge of the situation. Aided by our counselor Mike Santo, I attended the meeting and met with junior high and high school officials. In summary, I requested that the district attempt to maintain present programs for this year, and I would meet with the teachers and engage in a recruitment campaign for the upcoming school year. At the next budget hearing of the school district on April 23rd the teachers informed me that the Assistant Superintendent mentioned that the district would work hard to preserve Italian in the lower grades. There was no mention of any cuts at the hearing. I am presently planning to meet with the teachers to strategize a campaign to strengthen the Italian program. Stay tuned for further developments.

Jennifer Rube'

However, besides all these developments, nothing was harder to take this quarter than the sudden passing of Jennifer Rube', our District 8 Chairwoman! We were literally blitzed!!

When Jennifer accepted the chairmanship, she WAS undoubtedly our CSJ point person in District 8, no holds barred! When she accepted the chairmanship, she literally launched a juggernaut! She was trying very hard to recruit lodge liaisons, knowing my fierce directive about this. She also was preparing a district essay contest, and had it pretty much organized. Three days before her passing she requested from me money prizes for the contest for junior and senior high students, which I was ready to present to the Board.

To memorialize her incipient efforts, the Board has decided to contribute \$100 to her lodge's scholarship fund and to also buy a \$250 brick at the Museum, both to be presented at the convention.

We will miss her sorely, and I can only imagine in wonderment the great potential she would have unleashed. It would have been sensational!

Rest in peace, sister. We will never forget you, and thanks so much for all you did in such a short time. God bless!

