

PLENARY SESSION REPORT

APRIL 22, 2017

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INTRODUCTION

Much of our work this past quarter was devoted to saving Columbus Day on the calendar and the landmarking saga of Our Lady of Loreto Church in Brooklyn. We also had two notable successes.

TOWN OF RIVERHEAD, LONG ISLAND

The quarter opened with an issue originating from the Township of Riverhead's Parks Department in January. Thanks to the vigilant eye of Board member Liz Rizzo we learned that the Department had circulated a brochure to Town residents about a "Murder Mystery Lunch" to take place in March involving a "who dunnit" amongst two Mafia families, the Baccalalops and the Barzinis. I dispatched a letter to 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. Score this one for CSJ! Although Coyne cancelled this event in Riverhead I have surmised that the entertainment company that promotes this activity still has it in its repertoire. I will contact this company and demand that they terminate the activity entirely since it probably circulates in other locations.

SAVING COLUMBUS DAY ON THE CALENDAR

This perpetual issue garnered lots of our attention this quarter. With our constant attention of the Southampton School District we learned that the School Board did not change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day again for the second straight year as they prepared its 2018-2019 school calendar. Nebraska, Alaska, and San Francisco did make the change. Peppardine University in southern California was the site of a fierce demonstration by its students who protested vehemently about a Columbus statue on campus that the weak-kneed administrators literally will "deport" (their words!) the statue to its Florence, Italy campus. Immediately an ongoing petition drive ensued on the internet to protest such action, which we will entertain more formally once we clear some other important issues we're addressing.

You all also know that since last fall CSJ has been circulating our own petition nationwide about saving Columbus Day. As a way to galvanize more momentum towards our own self-imposed deadline date of April 30th I re-ignited the online petition in February, and it has accelerated quite well. Change.org continues to notify me even now 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 approach 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 total 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 in Buffalo. In fact, the petitions got a bump thanks to the intercession of District 1 Liaison Dan Calise when he invited me to a K. of C. Suffolk Chapter meeting in February where before 100 or so men I cogently requested them to reclaim their legacy when the K. of C.

lobbied Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt 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 said 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 a campaign just beginning sponsored by the Columbus Citizens Foundation (CCF) in NYC regarding saving Columbus Day. CCF at a dinner meeting in March proposed a mobile app on smartphones 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 notify the public. So, get ready!

Finally, we have just been alerted by our Colorado OSIA brethren and National CSJ President Kevin that State Rep. Joseph Salazar is re-introducing a bill once again to dump Columbus Day in favor of Indigenous Peoples Day! I guess last year's 7-2 vote against his bill in committee last year didn't register with him. At a nationwide conference call initiated by President Kevin we discussed our strategy for the upcoming debate on April 26th, and CSJ NY has been asked to take part again. We will, and we will use the same tactics as last year involving e-mail and phone call blitzes to all representatives on the Veterans and Military Affairs Committee. Colorado has already begun its efforts in contacting the lawmakers and lobbyists. We're confident enough we'll succeed this year too.

OUR LADY OF LORETO CHURCH IN BROOKLYN

The issue here is literally a daily matter. A day does not go by without constant communications amongst those comprising the Brownsville Cultural Coalition (BCC). To date our efforts have been impressive as we fight Catholic Charities POP, the development arm and lessee for the Diocese of Brooklyn, from forging ahead with the full demolition of this treasured historic edifice. Appearing before Community Board 16 of Brownsville along with others, we have secured a support letter from them to landmark OLL. Sadly the Diocese has fought this action and appeared later before the Board demanding a rescission. The Land Use Committee of CB 16 did reverse the decision, but the action is not legal because a quorum was not present. The NYS Land Conservancy has agreed to grant 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 with a discounted price. Brooklyn UNICO has volunteered to do any interior work with its members. However, Councilman Rafael Espinal representing the area, CC, and the Diocese remain hellbent in ignoring our pleas to reconsider their position of demolishing OLL in favor of affordable housing at the site, but we plod on! In January Mario Togliola 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. We also appealed to the sensibilities of the listening public to apply pressure to Espinal and the Diocese. In March BCC held a press conference at the OLL site along with St. Sen. Tony Avella and Assemb. Latrice Walker to plead the same. On March 26th I was invited to attend a testimonial dinner of the Federation of Italian American Organizations of Brooklyn, which for me was a workday to lobby members of the FIAO Board, Monsignor Jamie Gigantiello of the Diocese, and others from other Italian organizations to enlist support and suggestions for strategy. We literally continue daily to beseech Governor Cuomo, state and city agencies, elected officials, and our own organizations to forestall CC's march to full demolition. We have also revived our petition on the internet to save OLL, and in that regard we have now 1,000 signatures. It's encouraging to see at this juncture that the groups comprising BCC fight on incessantly and passionately and devise creative strategies constantly to obtain our desired result— —the landmarking and thereby preservation of OLL Church so that the Brownsville residents can have a culture center for their benefit. Stay tuned for further developments.

BUFFALO NEWS

At the end of March the Buffalo News really committed a gaffe! On Sunday, March 19th and Monday, March 20th the paper ran a two-part series about the history of the Mafia in western New York. The Federation of Italian American Organizations in the area was angered and shocked that such a reputable paper would actually run articles like these on our reverent celebration and feast of St. Joseph's. It asked us to help draw a response. Immediately we dispatched some initial e-mails from CSJ and the Order, and very soon after, the author Dan Herbeck apologized in an e-mail to two of our Order members for his poor judgment. The Federation is even going further by attempting to meet with the editor and the author.

Consequently, our actions have really solidified our bond with the Federation, and the Federation President Peter LaJacono is spreading the word in western New York about our solidarity with its members and our effectiveness. Score another for CSJ!

ODDS AND ENDS

Despite all these pitched head-to-head battles with our targets, there's always some sublime occurrences that make our ordeals bearable and the work of CSJ pleasurable. In past reports we have reported that we have struck a relationship with a man from Loudonville in the suburb of Albany who has fought bias and bigotry for fifty years of his own life and is always willing to share his thoughts and experiences. In early February Pat Morelli came down to us at our Grand Lodge headquarters and before twenty people he offered Part 2 of his presentation on bias and bigotry. His greatest mantra was to CREATE our own products regarding positive image material because only then can we CONTROL the desired image we want the public to think and believe. Eventually over time perceptions then will change. Such encouraging remarks actually reinforced what we at CSJ are doing as far as promoting a positive image of ourselves and culture. You know we spend lots of dollars on such material and distribute it freely to our lodges, community groups, and schools. Pat has also encouraged us to continue to recruit others for his presentations besides just Italian organizations. Those in the field of print and broadcast media, public relations professionals, educators, and students matriculated in colleges and universities in these fields should be exposed, which obviously would have an effect to change mindsets for generations.

With respect to changing mindsets for generations, I traveled to Lincoln High School in

Yonkers in early February where I presented "History in a Box" to five Italian classes. I've now done 47 presentations over the last few years and have more requests to satisfy.

In late February CSJ teamed up with the Brumidi Lodge to show the movie "Vendetta" about the worst mass lynching in any one day against Italians in New Orleans on March 14, 1891. The objective of course was to educate members of the Order about a disturbing part of our and American history. The movie graphically portrayed the brutal bigotry in the post-Civil War South that afflicted so many of our compatriots horribly at that time. About 50 people attended, and a few remarked of the unbelievable, shocking treatment. We surely have come a long way!

I've begun another round of meetings around the state with the various districts in order to maintain close ties and to keep our liaisons motivated at the grass roots. I have already met with Districts 2 and 3, and I am so gratified of the liaisons growing understanding, intelligence, and passion they display. Our liaisons really care about the work of CSJ and are willing to help! Most significantly, Anthony Barbero, District 3 Liaison from the A.P. Giannini Lodge in Brooklyn, sent me a pledge he envisioned that all of us can use when we face the Italian flag to show respect to our departed members when we initiate our formal meetings. It says a great deal about our connection to our original homeland. I have sent it to the Grand Lodge headquarters for distribution, and I hope all of you receive it and use it. Thank you Anthony!

Most surprising this quarter though was the stunning notice that AATI-LI (American Association of Teachers of Italian) selected me this year to receive their annual Dante Award for 2017 on May 13th at Pompei Restaurant in West Hempstead. President Annamaria Monaco bluntly told me that AATI appreciates so much what CSJ has done for the Italian community, including our concern for the promotion and protection of the Italian language in our schools over the years. Members regret they cannot bond with us even more closely because they initiate so much activity related to the teaching of Italian that consumes much of their time. In that regard I am always invited and do attend its annual Italian Poetry contest held at Old Westbury College every spring. One cannot believe how proficient in the language students all over Long Island who attend and participate are! I sit in on the contests and am amazed at their competence. This year I sat with a group I thought was advanced, but I was told they were only Level 1! Believe me, these teachers are doing a fantastic job, and at the contest the teachers publicly tell them to continue their Italian studies throughout their academic careers. We truly have an ally in perpetuating our language and culture! What a pleasure!

I have truly saved the best for last. I have recruited four new Members of the Order to sit on our Executive Board, and I am ecstatic they accepted the appointment! They have already dove headlong into the work of CSJ without missing a beat! What chemistry! I graciously extend a very warm and euphoric welcome to Ed Bochynski from the Columbus Lodge, Tom Bandise from the Dr. Vincenzo Sellaro Lodge, Marianne Prince from the John Michael Marino Lodge, and Tony Rotoli from the Vigiano Brothers Lodge. With them now on board I expect even greater effectiveness of CSJ than before.

Respectfully submitted,

Louis J. Gallo, Jr.