

PLENARY SESSION REPORT

AUGUST 1, 2015

HOST

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## **New Appointment**

I personally want to graciously thank State President Carolyn Reres for appointing me for another term as New York State Chairman of the Commission for Social Justice, and I pledge to work as diligently under her administration as I did for the previous one.

## **Positive Developments Last Quarter**

The quarter significantly began with an exciting event in the Wappingers Falls Central School District at John Jay High School in Hopewell Junction upstate on May 11th. For the last 27 years this district has held an Italian Awards night sponsored by the Joe DiMaggio Lodge under the leadership of Joseph Zingone. In this district this year 786 students studied Italian and on this night 350 students were awarded for having a 90% average or above for the year! Furthermore, a major scholarship was also presented to a student in each of the four high schools in the district. Every stakeholder imaginable attended this affair—principals, school board trustees, superintendents, lodge members, and of course teachers, and hundreds of parents and students. The auditorium was filled to near capacity! How exhilarating it was to see so many committed to such a cause with such enthusiasm! I was so fortunate to be asked to address the audience, and I took advantage by complimenting all for showing such support to the cause and the students and stressing to all that we must continue to encourage the students in the district to continue this accomplished legacy of studying Italian. Undoubtedly, the study of the Italian language is very healthy in Wappingers Falls! Thank you one and all!

Shortly after the above event I was asked by Past State President Carlo Matteucci and Basilone Lodge member Bill Fontaine to make a presentation to the Knights of Columbus in Patchogue, Long Island, on May 18th about Columbus because this council was very concerned about the controversies surrounding this Italian icon. My presentation focused on the tremendous impact his discoveries had on the development of western civilization, and I proceeded to dispel the criticisms and diatribes against him. The council was so appreciative that the leadership extended a generous donation to CSJ on the spot. I also want to thank the brothers and sisters of the Basilone Lodge for attending and showing support for me. I would say we made an impact.

As far as registering an impact, delegates to this year's state convention made themselves loud and clear at the CSJ Open Forum. Approximately 20 people attended who so passionately expressed their feelings that readily came to mind. One issue right from the start was their impatience and stridency about CSJ leading the charge to save Columbus Day. Ground petitions to be circulated nationwide are ready and District 1 CSJ will captain the movement. Many expressed their demand to urge the Grand and Supreme Lodges to expedite the internet petition now so as to coordinate with the ground campaign. Many felt we are already late in the game to reach critical mass while the opposition will use the Columbus Day holiday, as it does every year, to disparage Columbus and the holiday dedicated to him. Time gone by means our work will be harder to do. I told the group that high on my agenda is meeting with our new State President Carolyn Reres to allow us to move forward now. The second most popular issue was to encourage CSJ to collaborate with other defamation organizations from other ethnic and racial groups besides Italian ones to build a coalition to work hard to fight bias and bigotry, thereby creating a formidable force that will command respect and get results for all involved. Kudos to District 3 Chairman Tony Corsello and CSJ Liaisons Frank Cicero and Carl Ciaccio for blazing a trail with COJO (Council of Jewish Organizations) on Staten Island in May and providing me with contact information to launch this effort. CSJ Executive Board members

Immediate Past National CSJ President Tina Haemmerle and Vincent Marmorale have also volunteered that they have contacts too. At our annual summer cultural festival we met Rep. Lee Zeldin whom I asked to help us with collaborating with Jewish groups and he agreed. Without a doubt we will be moving in this direction for the future.

Another future prospect CSJ is definitely dedicated to is the awarding of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Yogi Berra of the famed New York Yankees. In May Yogi celebrated his 90th birthday and soon after a nationwide petition was circulated in his name to try to obtain this honor. CSJ jumped at the effort on Facebook and with National. In order for such a petition to be seriously entertained 100,000 signatures had to be gathered by June 8th. By that day 103,000 were secured, and Jim Scafidi who works closely with the Yankee owners, the Steinbrenners, said that it was OSIA that greatly aided in reaching the required threshold! Our next stop is the President of the United States, and once again I asked our Rep. Lee Zeldin to help us, who agreed. Beyond baseball Yogi has dedicated himself for a long time to education (He sponsors an annual scholarship with Columbia University and has established a museum in New Jersey), an annual golf tourney for special-needs Boy Scouts, and transitioning aid to the LGBT community. His versatility then truly makes him deserving of this honor, and CSJ will try to make it happen!

Another interesting happenstance is simmering, which could aid CSJ in fighting bias and bigotry. In May we were alerted by Marcy Dabbene, the wife of the late and former CSJ Chairman John Dabbene, about an article in i-Italy magazine about an actor named Anthony DeVito who publicly proclaimed that he now will never take any acting roles in movies about the Mafia. Hopefully, we feel this event could be the breakthrough that would undermine these movie portrayals if enough actors come forward as Anthony has. I will attempt to reach out to Mr. DeVito and maybe we could encourage more to do the same. As much as this decision could impact his future acting career, we need courageous people as he to take that first step on the inside to stifle the movie industry's penchant for stereotyping Italians. I will approach this matter with great anticipation and hopefully report to you with promising results in the future.

By this time late June had arrived and we were ready for our second annual Heritage and Culture Festival at the Smithtown Historical Society fairgrounds. Although dreary weather dampened the attendance, the usual fare was launched with great excitement and enjoyment for all. This year it became quite clear that this event was finally getting the notoriety it justly deserves. The local weekly the Smithtown Messenger put the festival on its front page along with a full two-page inside report describing every facet of the festival, including comments by patrons and vendors. The weeklies the Smithtown News and the Kings Park Town Crier also covered the event, and every prominent local elected official was represented at the opening ribbon-cutting ceremony. A whale of thanks goes to a fabulous committee besides yours truly: Tom Bandise and Geri Iannello Graham (Sellaro), Diana Grauer (Toscanini), Cathy LaGrega and Luisa Potenza (Basilone), Charlie Lucie (Como), Liz and Bob Rizzo (Landi), Tony Rotoli (Vigiano), Joe Vallone (Papallo), Keith Wilson (Columbus), Pat Ferrari (Caboto), and Gene DeMaria (Unattached). We met subsequent to the festival and critiqued it thoroughly. We still have room for improvement yet, but by and large this festival is a great showcase of Italian heritage and culture, and committee members approach its preparation with immense diligence and pride for nine months.

On the subject of the festival I would like to add that CSJ purchased and sold at the festival a 32-page booklet published by a former fundraiser honoree Arba Sicula entitled "What Italy Has Given the World," a compendium about our Italian legacy and how it has influenced world civilization, which is available to all members and lodges of the Order. The price is \$5. Please feel free to contact me if you want the booklet. Furthermore, I was notified by Executive Board member Silvano Orsi that his Italian festival in the Rochester area had 8000 people, and Radio Station 95.1, which originally had used Italian slurs on the air and apologized, attended the festival, applauded Silvano's efforts on stage, and pledged to sponsor the festival next year! Surely we really turned a negative into a positive! Lastly, I was invited by the Borough of Staten Island to participate in this year's planning of its Italian festival in October. I was again asked to dress as Columbus in costume and to lead a small procession within followed by representative Italian groups who will showcase their organization. Bill Castello from the Garibaldi-Meucci Museum and an artist and I are preparing a Columbus banner to lead this procession. Eventually we will show you the prototype.

The next day after the festival the Order sponsored its annual Founders Day celebration. We were elated that this year's honorees hail from the CSJ Executive Board—Counselor Mike Santo and Josephine Morici Cohen. Absolutely no words are necessary to describe these two and their influence and accomplishments in the Order. Coupled with the Bene Emeritus recipient District 7 CSJ Chairman Carmine Federico and Elena Cornaro Award recipient Dr. Annamaria Monaco-Hernandez, who works very closely with CSJ on Italian language issues, CSJ has demonstrated that it is a font of success and prestige for all in the Order to depend on and be proud of.

On the subject of pride and positive image, we cannot overlook the following: Finally, Executive board member Vincent Marmorale's film documentary is ready and presently showing on Netflix! "The Italian Secret: Forgotten Heroes of the Holocaust" features a comprehensive portrayal of so many Italians saving Jews during WWII, including riveting testimonials from Jewish survivors about Italian people. These testimonials will make you proud! Publicity for this film has been sent to all officers and lodge presidents throughout the Grand Lodge and preparations will be made to do the same nationwide in the Order. Please see this film and educate yourself about another snippet of our legacy and heritage. You will enjoy it! District 8 CSJ had its first Italian Awards Night in July as a consequence to its commitment to a districtwide research and essay contest on the Italian immigrant experience over the course of this year. Financial awards were distributed to deserving students, and local papers covered and published the event. Congratulations to Event Chairwoman Marjorie Focarazzo and District 8 for inculcating this subject right down to our young people at the grass roots! Thanks to the volunteering of Janet Galvin, CSJ Liaison from the Caboto Lodge, we will be updating our Medal of Honor kit to include four more recipients. She will work accordingly with Golden Lion newspaper Editor Sal Moschella and eventually do more research on other recent recipients who might be Italian for us to include too. Lastly, in late July we all learned of the induction of Craig Biggio and John Smoltz, two Italian Americans, into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Each holds some impressive, marvelous records, and consequently I sent out a Facebook post and a letter to the editor of our daily Newsday on Long Island that these two Italian Americans are not only icons in their sport, but also are truly representative of Italian character concerning hard work and dedication. We all should be beaming with pride.

## **Negative Developments**

Although most of the quarter involved many satisfying positive developments, we always get our share of the negative. Beginning in early May a one James Nortz, the head of the Rochester Business Ethics Foundation, wrote an article that appeared in local business journals entitled "Does Your Corporation's Mission Statement Pass the Mafia Test?" This title was not only stunning for its idiocy but also for the organization this executive headed, a BUSINESS ETHICS foundation (emphasis added). Since this article was written in Rochester I asked that District 8 CSJ Chairman Dr. Joseph Rube' encourage his liaisons to write in protest, and along with me they pounced on Nortz. We basically said it was insulting for any legitimate business to judge itself on an organized diabolical crime syndicate. The "Mafia test" judges employees on honor, respect, obedience, and loyalty, which by the way any business would pride itself on. These traits are not confined to the Mafia per se! We charged that the "test" was not necessary, nor should it have been in the title of the essay. Eventually Nortz responded that he did not mean any harm, and he stated that he was always conscious of defamation as the ethics head. We encouraged him to continue that way.

As the school term was ending, I received a call from a Carol Ferrante, a teacher of Italian at Paul D. Schreiber High School in Port Washington, Long Island. She told me that students told her that the University of Virginia and Penn State University did not accept transfer of credit from high schools to their institutions regarding Advanced Placement in the Italian language course and test. This occurrence can spell doom to our efforts in promoting the Italian language for the future. If capable students learn that colleges such as these do not accept such transfers, they will not take Italian or AP Italian, enrollment will drop, and eventually school districts will drop Italian. I sent letters to both universities and received an immediate reply from UV. The admissions officer said that as long as the student gets a 4 or a 5 (5 being the highest) the student WILL get the credit transfer to UV. When Ferrante was notified of this policy, she was so grateful and enthralled and would report it to her students. I have not heard as yet from PS, and I hope the policy is the same. A follow-up phone call to my letter was placed. We'll wait and see.

On the subject of policy New York City Schools have a revolting development. Thanks to the vigilance of National CSJ Vice-president John Fratta we learned that the NYC Department of Education has approved on its reading list for its schools a 3-book series entitled "Al Capone Does My Shirts, Shines My Shoes, and Does My Homework." Upon assiduous research and investigation one learns that as far as the plots are concerned there are only peripheral references to Al Capone, which begs the questions why is he even part of the title and how does such a title affect young impressionable minds about Italians? John and I contacted NYC Chancellor Carmen Farina requesting a meeting to discuss this case. I even e-mailed the author of the book twice to encourage her to meet with us as well. I have received no answer to date. John then organized a protest rally before the NYC Department of Education building but rain held back the attendance. At the site we met the Chancellor's Scheduler to arrange a meeting but eventually we were told Farina refuses to meet with us. At this juncture I suggested to John that we now turn to the mayor because just at the end of the State Legislature's session this year a law was passed granting the mayor control of NYC schools for one year. We presently are deliberating on our next step and we remain committed to urging the Department to take this series off the approved reading list.

Just as disturbing is the recent press coverage by the Daily News of the Cuomo-DeBlasio flap on some government issues. Newsday covered the same stories and published conventional

profile pictures of the two in these stories. However, when the Daily News covered the story on July 1st on its front page, it showed the two in dark suits with fedoras facing off with submachine guns firing at each other. The reference is obviously clear, and it's not the first time. When deBlasio was inaugurated in January, the Daily News ran a story about five major labor unions which would have heavy influence in his administration. However, the picture in the story showed deBlasio in a dark suit with a swarthy complexion and a serious look on his face sitting in a puffy armchair surrounded by the five union heads referred to as the capos of the "Five Families." Again the reference is clear, and CSJ is flustered beyond belief! Since the latest article was the last straw, I fired off a phone call to the Editor-in-Chief Colin Myler and spoke to his assistant Lue' McWilliams requesting a meeting with Myler about the Daily News' coverage of Italians. I'm still waiting for the meeting date and will not relent. This kind of coverage is maddening and it must be stopped.

Another maddening development involves the food truck the "Wandering Dago." Having left the Capital District area as a result of its past legal troubles, we learned from the Columbia County Lodge in District 6 that a poster is circulating about a food truck rodeo taking place on August 27th sponsored by the Kinderhook Business Association in Kinderhook that mentions the WD as a participant. We have a copy of that poster, and we are in direct contact with the Lodge and the rest of District 6. At the July 14th Executive Board meeting a strategy was discussed, suggestions were made, and Counselor Mike Santo was consulted. I sent an e-mail to the business association requesting a meeting to discuss this wrenching development, and I wait patiently for a response for now. We'll see what happens.

It is our hope that the positive developments continue to proliferate and we begin to get satisfying results that either assuage or terminate the negative developments.

Respectfully submitted,

Lou Gallo