

# PLENARY SESSION REPORT

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HOST

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## **Italian Heritage and Culture Month Celebrations**

I am pleased to report that I was personally able to witness such celebrations sponsored by a few municipalities, and the excitement of such celebrations seems to be catching on with them enthusiastically. On October 27th the Westchester County Legislature held a proclamation ceremony commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Antonio Meucci Lodge in White Plains. The legislators also added a recognition exercise honoring teachers of Italian and their students from all the high schools within Westchester County. On October 29th Suffolk County itself led by County Executive Steve Bellone sponsored for the very first time "A Taste of Italy" featuring sumptuous Italian cuisine from restaurants in the Smithtown/Hauppauge area and invited the leaders of our Order to attend, who all received proclamations personally from Bellone. On November 21st I was invited with others to critique the first ever Staten Island Italian Festival. All felt it was exciting enough to continue for next year. As I've always done before, I stressed the necessity of displaying Columbus much more prominently in the advertising and at the festival to protect and enliven his legacy.

We all know there were far more during the month around the state, but if any of the aforementioned are indicative of what is taking place, we then can all be proud that our heritage is very much alive, and we must by our presence continue to show such support and encouragement for our future's sake.

## **Our Districts**

You know that many of my reports to you have demonstrated that our Executive Board is hellbent on creating a strong grass-roots organization all over the state. It's finally paying some very handsome dividends. To wit, District 8 lodges are so committed to a promethean essay contest that boggles the mind. In fact, it's more of a research assignment for all participating middle and high school students who have to interview an Italian immigrant and discover as much as possible from him or her. District 1 is also following suit regarding an essay contest in its district, and is taking on the responsibility of leading the Order with a "Save Columbus Day Petition" that will circulate nationwide at the filial lodge and street levels, especially for those who cannot sign online. A draft enclosure is provided for your input. This district has also noticed that as Roman Catholic Churches consolidate due to budget constraints, churches are closing and some contain precious Italian art treasures that are stored away. Led by Lodge Liaison Daniel Calise of the Constantino Brumidi Lodge, letters have been written to Cardinal Dolan and the Italian American Congressional delegation in Washington highlighting the district's concern about their preservation. District 2 is preparing for its upcoming annual Bella Lingua Awards and community service programs. District 3 is canvassing local schools for help on Italian culture and language programs and will be hosting the next "Perlasca" film showing soon. District 7 led by Chairman Carmine Federico has just supplied the Onondaga County Historical Association in Syracuse with bookmarks and positive image material for its display of Italian immigrant history in the area that will run until March 15th.

As one can see we're making tremendous inroads in our local communities about our heritage and culture. Great job district chairmen and liaisons! Keep it up!

## **Holiday Inn Express in Latham Case**

While on the subject of district exploits and successes, I must take the time to single out District 6 led by chairman Joseph DiCarlo and Gabrielle D'Annunzio Lodge President Peter Sparano for their superb vigilance and perseverance regarding this case around Christmastime.

Joe and Pete had heard a radio commercial that the Holiday Inn Express in Latham, just outside of Albany, was hosting a Mafia-themed party on New Year's Eve with special offers and discounts. Members of their Gabrielle D'Annunzio Lodge were mobilized to make protest calls. The American Italian Historical Association of Albany, the Italian Community Center of Albany, and the Italian Club of Troy joined them in the calls, all these even before CSJ involvement and a testament to grass-roots action! In retrospect we discovered that many of the calls from these organizations went unnoticed. When Peter finally notified me of the situation, I personally called the hotel and inquired about the party seeking information. The hotel clerk basically played down the affair. When I finally did get to talk to the General Manager Todd Hanlon, he told me he had to investigate the matter because he was not in control of the event. I told him that we demanded that no performance, publicity, skits, whatever, were to be performed that night that were defamatory against Italians, and I requested that he return a call to me as far as what action was being taken. The call never came. I left messages requesting return calls. They still never came. By this time Joe and Peter noticed that the radio commercial did not mention anything about a Mafia party but was now billed as a Las Vegas Party. However, thanks to Joe's sleuthing, he found the hotel's ad on a website that shockingly billed the party as "NYE MAFIA PARTY" with a large picture of men dressed like Al Capone. We were incensed! Not only had they supposedly downplayed the affair, they had now added insult to injury by underhandedly advertising the party on the web through their original intent!

At this juncture I left my final call to Hanlon expressing our visceral discontent and bellowed that I would suggest to my superiors that we boycott their hotel and encourage others to do the same, particularly because of their insincerity and underhandedness. I then fired off a letter to their corporate management and the hotel's owner, James Morrell, demanding a written apology and mentioning the boycott. Five days later I received a letter from Morrell, an Italian American who is a member of the West Albany Italian Benevolent Society where he was honored as its Man of the Year two years ago. He then proceeded to tell me that he FIRED TODD HANLON AND HIS MANAGEMENT COMPANY since the party, and he profusely apologized. Because of his noble gesture and as a fellow Italian American, I will write to him to accept his apology and drop our demand for a boycott. I also notified the aforementioned groups of this action by Morrell.

A whale of thanks is to be extended to Joe and Peter for their constant vigilance and persistence in this matter. They were just extraordinary, and it demonstrates what grass-roots action can do to effect a result! My hat is off to them! Great job guys!

### **The Southampton School District Case**

No sooner than the above case, another popped up in short order. Lynn Marino from the Cellini Lodge was contacted by a one Joan DePaola-Tutt, an Italian American from Southampton in eastern Long Island, about a looming crisis. The Southampton School District was drafting its school calendar for the 2015-2016 school year and it was contemplating eliminating Columbus Day as a holiday! We all know that this matter has been simmering throughout the country, but now it was in our backyard! We had to act fast! I contacted Joan

personally to get all the information I could. She eventually provided me with phone numbers and e-mail addresses of school board members and school personnel. I immediately contacted the District Superintendent Dr. Scott Farina, an admitted Italian American, who told me that the district WAS NOT contemplating eliminating Columbus Day from its calendar! in fact, he told me he was personally not in favor of such a thing! He further explained that next year's school calendar had an anomaly. Labor Day will be the latest it's ever been on the calendar (Sept. 7th), and Easter and Passover are so spread out over a 13-day period that it will be difficult to schedule the state-mandated requirement of 180 school days with snow days included. So, the district was contemplating bringing in the students on Columbus Day and the second day of Rosh Hashanah just this year to meet the requirement. Having been a teacher myself, I suggested that he bring in the students before Labor Day, which is done when Labor Day comes late on the calendar. He countered that in Southampton that was not possible because many residents are still away on vacation and those that are around are gearing up and preparing for the annual Shinnecock Pow-Wow, a staple of Southampton culture. I rebutted by saying that toying with Columbus Day is a very sensitive matter amongst Italian Americans, especially what was happening all over the country about the holiday, and it's a day of great pride and enthusiasm honoring a great Italian icon. Farina then suggested that since the school calendar was only a draft thus far, he invited me to make my case before the School Board the following week. During that time I mobilized the CSJ Executive Board, the Knights of Columbus in the area, the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Rocky Point, and I called Joan to mobilize Italian American residents, all to show support for me at the Board meeting. Joan even suggested that people write letters for me to read before the Board. So, we were ready to go!

Interestingly enough, the word of this crisis started to spread, and I was privy to e-mails of Southampton residents demonstrating their concern. A few days later I received a phone call personally from Dr. Farina that HE FOUND ANOTHER DAY AND STUDENTS WOULD HAVE COLUMBUS DAY OFF! In retrospect I conjecture he heard the thunderous hoofs coming and did not want to bear the brunt of bad publicity for the district. I thanked him wholeheartedly for his action.

We can sigh with great relief and we really dodged a bullet THIS TIME, but how many other districts might be contemplating the same thing in our own backyards. Please be ever so vigilant about this matter and let CSJ know as soon as you can.

### **The Chuck Todd Case**

Prior to the above cases, a rather disturbing event occurred during this year's election campaign regarding defamation of Italian Americans. On the "Morning Joe" (Joe Scarborough) show a political analyst was offering his analysis of the Grimm-Recchia Congressional race on Staten Island. Michael Grimm and Dominic Recchia are both Italian Americans. Chuck Todd, a guest commentator on the show, immediately interrupted the analyst and blurted out, "Oh, that's just a tiff between two mob-warring families!" Joe Scarborough was visibly stunned and peered directly into the camera and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I totally disassociate myself from that comment" and then turned to Todd and said, "Chuck, how can you say that? Holy cow!"

The Italian One-Voice Coalition, CSJ, and other Italian groups pounced on the issue! Todd was flooded with e-mails, and an on-the-air apology was insisted. On a subsequent "Morning Joe" show he publicly apologized. He personally sent me an e-mail and said, "That as a Jew, knowing my people's difficulties, I should have known better." Our Counselor Mike Santo then on behalf of CSJ formally wrote to Todd accepting his apology.

It is just so amazing and mind-boggling that so many take such license when it involves Italian Americans. In that regard it should be mentioned that the shows "GODFATHER OF PITTSBURGH" AND THE "CAPONES" HAVE BEEN DROPPED BY THE NETWORKS INVOLVED! We can now say that even if we find it difficult to terminate these shows through our own efforts, the public eventually realizes that these shows are schlock and eventually fall on their own weight. So, there's always hope if at first we don't succeed.

### **The New York Racing Association/"Wandering Dago" Settlement**

THIS MATTER JUST IN THIS PAST WEEK! The New York Racing Association, one of the defendants charged by the food truck for throwing it out of the Saratoga Raceway in 2013 for its label, has settled its case with the food truck. Demanding \$360,000 for lost sales, the food truck settled for \$68,500 with the NYRA only. The suit against the state agency Office of General Services for terminating the food truck for the same reason at the Empire State Plaza, a complex of state offices, is still pending. Supposedly, the food truck attorneys complained that the NYRA had eliminated some e-mails on the case that could have been further evidence of the NYRA's transgressions against the food truck. The presiding judge disagreed. Soon after this judgment, the settlement was reached.

Ruminating further, this occurrence seems to suggest that the food truck is more interested in compensation for lost sales rather than the overarching constitutional issue of free speech first amendment rights. Does the settlement reached above mean that the food truck will be reinstated at the Saratoga Raceway or not? What are the real consequences of the above action, especially for CSJ concerns? Therefore, the matter has been referred to Counselor Mike Santo for further review and contemplation.

We continue to watch with great anticipation and interest. Stay tuned.

### **Films**

Now on a more positive note, there are two films circulating that do so much to present a positive image of Italians and Italian Americans. In November the CSJ led by Executive Board members Liz Rizzo, Vincent Marmorale, and I showed the "Perlasca" film at the Center for Italian Studies at the SUNY Stony Brook campus. All of you know from past reporting that we intend to show this film throughout the state over the year because of its extraordinary redeeming value of an Italian icon and Italian history. Vinnie provided the intro before the film and Liz a postscript after the film. Forty people attended the showing and were literally riveted throughout the film. There I met a Dr. Shelley Sampson who is a member of the Jewish group Hadassah and gave me leads on six other Jewish groups we could contact as far as inter-ethnic relations. We have shown the film in Districts 1 and 2 and now turn our attention to District 3.

District 3 Chairman Tony Corsello has already secured a venue for the film in the district, and so we just have to pick a date. For those of you in district 3 please make it a point to attend. You won't be disappointed, and we need to show support for those things that are very positive for Italian Americans.

For those of you in District 1 you are fortunate to have another showing there. Liz is so agog about this film that she has organized a showing sponsored by our P. Vincent Landi Lodge in Rocky Point at the VFW hall at 109 King Road on Sunday, February 15th at 1 pm. A lunch will be served for a small cover charge. You can reach Liz at 631/219-6385 (c) or at [esxanadu@aol.com](mailto:esxanadu@aol.com) for further information. Come one! Come all!

I hope during the holidays you saw the film "Unbroken," A MUST-SEE, if you are a truly passionate Italian American about your heritage. Directed by Angelina Jolie, the true-story film depicts Louis Zamperini who endured Italian slurs at a young age, rose above them to become an Olympic athlete, enlisted in the army during WW2 and endured a 47-day ocean drift when his plane crashed into the sea and subsequently endured brutal torture amongst the Japanese for two years. Arriving home after the war, he was overcome by PTSD and descended into the netherworld of a licentious life. When finally attending a Billy Graham Crusade in 1949, he instantly became a converted Christian and turned his life around. I was so enthralled by the movie I wrote to Jolie commending her for a film that finally and demonstratively shows Italians in a positive light and urged her to influence her colleagues to do the same. I have not received a return letter, but we must whenever possible commend filmmakers for this kind of work if we are going to turn the tide against those movies that show us in a negative light.

In early January I noticed an article by a Newsday reporter Frank Lovece that covered Angelina Jolie showing the film at the Vatican before the pope. I then tried to contact Frank so as to have CSJ piggy-back on the article and express a public and positive statement to advance our cause of positive imagery. He e-mailed me back and said he was also an Italian American and was delighted that CSJ was interested in his story. He further stated that I could suggest like-minded stories to him for him to cover for CSJ. I then pounced on the opportunity and told him immediately about the Perlasca movie at the Landi Lodge. He forwarded my suggestion to his editor and hopefully CSJ and the lodge can great attention for the Perlasca film. We wait with great anticipation!

### **The Italian Language Task Force**

On another positive note, many of you should remember that at the September CSJ/AATI/AIAE Conference at Hofstra University I proclaimed the formation of an Italian Language Task Force to combat the loss or recession of Italian language programs in the schools around the state. On November 24th having recruited a total of nine people from CSJ, AATI, and AIAE, we met at the Candlelight Diner in Commack, Suffolk County. It's quite a distinguished group of teachers with loads of professional experience and one former school board member. We basically at our first meeting brainstormed about our mission and then I divided the group into 4 subgroups, each targeting a school district to gather information on the status of the Italian language. We chose four which we felt right now are in a serious bind—Islip, Seaford, Utica, and Massapequa. I have reached out to the Principal of the Islip Middle School and the District Language Coordinator and await return calls. Keith Wilson has already made contact in

Massapequa and reports that Levels 1 and 2 are vibrant there. He will now contact Bethpage, Plainedge, and Farmingdale. Tom Adamo and Sal Canzoneri of the Giovanni Caboto Lodge of Seaford met with District Superintendent Brian Conboy on December 4th to discuss the opportunity of re-instating Italian in the Seaford School District. Much hinges on the possibility of two language teachers retiring for any chance of re-instating Italian next year there. District 6 CSJ Chairman Joe DiCarlo reports that Italian at Utica was dumped already. There we will have a tough time as far as re-instatement is concerned, he reports.

Next week I am meeting with Dr. Annamaria Monaco, Suffolk Community College Language Chairman and President of AATI regarding the Italian Advanced Placement program in the country. As many of you know that by May 2016 we must have 2,500 students taking the A.P. exam or else the College Board will drop AP Italian in the high schools nationwide. We will plan a strategy.

CSJ Executive Board Culture Committee Chairwoman Jean Gagliardo is presently devising a plan to connect CSJ and teachers of Italian more closely together as far as distributing educational materials and discussing curriculum.

Hopefully, our efforts will maintain the Italian language as vibrant as possible in this state and around the country.

### **The Second Annual June Culture Festival**

Since September, the 14-person Committee has been meeting to prepare for the Saturday, June 27th culture festival at the same Smithtown Historical Society Fairgrounds. We are focusing now on raising money to support our overhead, especially for the entertainment portion. Ninety-two vendor applications have been mailed already, thanks to Liz Rizzo, Keith Wilson, and Pat Ferrari, and they will do more. I have been focusing on contacting the Smithtown, Nesconset, and Huntington Chambers of Commerce to act as sponsors and corporate promoters. I am also presently engaged in having grant applications submitted to Suffolk County and Wells Fargo, thanks to the research and willing, helpful hand provided by a Karen Bomzer. We have just met with DePasquale Enterprises to discuss the possibility of their providing vendors and sponsors for the event. I have already also written a blurb about our event that will appear in the Newsday Summer Fun Book this year. We've also just turned our attention to discussing program which includes the possibility of returnees from last year and new prospects, especially to widen the diversity of the festival.

So, we are much the wiser than last year, and we are committed to cutting costs, getting the best bang for our bucks, and turning out an even better festival.

### **The Figli di San Gennaro Board of NYC**

Serendipity can be so exhilarating! On January 6th National CSJ VP and Figli di San Gennaro Board member John Fratta extended an invitation to me to attend a monetary award presentation hosted by the Board. At that presentation \$149,000 was distributed to community groups from the proceeds of the annual Feast, and CSJ was one of the recipients! Thanks to the efforts of John and Board member and District 3 State Trustee Ernest Magliato, CSJ was

awarded \$5,000 this year! It could not have occurred at such a more propitious time! Much of our promotional materials are going fast and must be updated, including our Medal of Honor Kits. As you know we are preparing for the upcoming culture festival and need to bank as much money as possible. Districts 1 and 8 are preparing essay and research contests and will need money for the monetary awards for the winners.

So, to John and Ernest, MILLE, MILLE GRAZIE, I MIEI FRATELLE! We at CSJ really appreciate it!

### **TheThirty-Fifth Annual CSJ Brunch/Dinner Fundraiser**

It's that time of year again! So, please do not forget Sunday, February 22nd at Russo's-On-The-Bay at 12 noon! We will be honoring National CSJ VP John Fratta and Producer of Incanto Productions of Astoria Simona Rodano. Both are extraordinary exemplars of a positive image of Italians we all can be so proud of.

We at CSJ are working doggedly to make it a great event. Led by our indomitable Event Chairwoman And CSJ Executive Board member Josephine Morici Cohen who has chaired ALL 35 events, we're in for a great time! She reports that reservations are now coming in. Keith Wilson, our Journal Chairman, reports ads are also coming in, and we ask that all of you take the time to have your lodges take ads, or take one yourself. Start sending in your reservations now and show your solidarity and support for one of the crown jewels of our Order! It will be memorable.

Thank you.

Respectfully Submitted  
Louis J. Gallo, Jr.  
NYS CSJ Chairman