

PLENARY SESSION REPORT

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HOST

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INTRODUCTION

The issues this past quarter focused mostly on the landmarking of Our Lady of Loreto Church in Brooklyn and saving Columbus Day on the calendar.

OUR LADY OF LORETO CHURCH

The landmarking of this church has been tougher this quarter. Once the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) sent us a letter in November stating that over the last six years no viable proposal for the landmarking of the church has been provided through the Request for Proposals process, and since Catholic Charities POP, the development arm of the Diocese of Brooklyn, has provided a list of alternate proposals for the site to SHPO, POP can proceed to demolition. Of course, we responded immediately that the RFP was so restrictive no viable proposal was possible, especially since two interested entities submitted RFPs and were summarily rejected. POP also did not abide by the Letter of Resolution of 2010 which mandated that POP had to secure the building from any degradation over the course of those six years. We found from observation that doors were open and holes in the facade and roof existed. We accused POP of letting the structure deteriorate on its own volition and consequently demanded that SHPO stop the attempt to demo the church. Furthermore, since our Brownsville Cultural Coalition is now growing and the community is gradually coalescing around the interest of landmarking OLL that the Coalition be granted more time to search for an entity which could devise an appropriate restoration plan for landmarking. Consequently, we mobilized an immediate effort to contact local elected officials once again and apprised them of the precarious state of the church now. As a result we successfully now enlisted the support of State Sen. Anthony Avella who wrote to the Diocese and urged it to meet with the Coalition, a previous cause thus far we've not been able to accomplish. Hopefully, it will happen now. Two weeks ago we took our case to Brooklyn News 12 which aired our concerns. I personally enlisted the support of Brooklyn UNICO which started its own e-mail campaign to include not only its members but about another score of Italian organizations in Brooklyn. I have petitioned the Italic Institute of America and the Center for Italian Studies at SUNY Stony Brook to come on board too. I have reached out to two contacts to help us financially for the interior restoration effort. Hopefully, these latest moves will blossom to the extent we can apply greater pressure on POP and the Diocese to concede to our wishes and halt the demolition.

SAVING COLUMBUS DAY

This issue bluntly is now a constant saga with seemingly no end. This quarter challenges surfaced in the cities of Baltimore and Sacramento, and thanks to a strong effort there by Italian American organizations the city councils voted NOT to change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day. We faced our own challenge in New York State when the New Paltz Central School District entertained the change in early December. I am proud to say we organized quite a strong force in protest which sensitized the school board to "explore the issue further" rather than change the day. Taking no chances I assigned Executive Board member Ed Bochynski to monitor the situation regularly and report back to us. In late December I happened to notice in the "We Italians" newsletter that the Williamsville School District, a suburb of Buffalo, has been wrestling with the issue. I personally contacted the President of the Italian Federated Societies of Western New York, Peter LoJacono, and was impressed with the efforts they have advanced which were quite similar to our tactics. So far, the School Board there has held back, but Peter requested our help to put more pressure on, and soon we will mobilize our cadres to help out.

However, despite the fact we respond rather defensively and effectively, I want us to begin to play more offense. Consequently, I am imploring all members of the Order to continue to forge ahead with the "Save Columbus Day" petition drive. Please step up your efforts in your lodges and communities to fill the petition sheets and send them to National. We must strive to reach our goal of 100,000 signatures nationwide by April 30th to be sent to National CSJ and in turn to be sent to President Trump for action. In addition I would ask all of you to check any new 2017 calendars you see or have and check to see if Columbus Day is inserted. If not, notify us immediately, and we will take action. This concern had its origin when we learned last year that the Bethpage Federal Credit Union's calendars to its clientele omitted Columbus Day. Thanks to the vigilance of Board member Ed Bochynski who detected the omission, we fired off a letter in November to remind the company to reinstate Columbus Day in this year's calendar. We're now checking to see if the credit union followed through.

As a response to the NEA's proposal to encourage school districts nationwide to change Columbus Day and its willingness to spend \$57,500 to do it, I dispatched letters to the NYSSBA (New York State School Boards Association) and the NYSCSS (New York State Council of School Superintendents) and urged them to resist the NEA's drive and to remind them that the NYS CSJ will do all it can to resist also. We will also do a study of the textbooks in this state, evaluate them as far as the kind of coverage done by the publishers about Columbus, and decide on a course of action. We are also considering fabricating our own DVD on Columbus to send to the schools. We have even recommended to National to contact the Post Office regarding a forever stamp to commemorate the 525th anniversary this year of Columbus' landing in America. However, National has learned that the PO will only entertain commemorative stamps in multiples of 50, and it takes three years to obtain such a stamp. So, that means Columbus wouldn't be honored until the 550th anniversary (25 years from now), and we would have to at least start the process 22 years from now. Obviously, such a prospect is years away.

Nevertheless we will continue to maintain our vigilance statewide about this issue and respond as quickly and effectively as we can.

POSITIVE IMAGE BOOKS

I am ecstatic to tell you that two authors contacted me about books they have just finished writing, and each one does so much to enhance the positive image of Italian people. Peter Stepanek, who lives in Osterville, Massachusetts, had heard of the NYS CSJ and contacted me in June 2015. We have been engaged in conversation ever since. He had sent me his galley proof and eventually his entire book entitled "The 13th Silent Juror," a blockbuster publication of the wrongful prosecution, conviction, and execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti regarding a payroll holdup of a shoe company on April 15, 1920. One is riveted to this book because a family friend of Peter's, Adam Smolyer, knew who actually did the crime because the real killers planned the whole caper in Smolyer's house--- a gaggle of five Russian Communists who needed money to launch a Communist revolution in this country! When Smolyer broke the story to Stepanek, Peter sat with Smolyer through continuous interviews over time, which became the basis of his book and proved that Sacco and Vanzetti never did the crime! If this book is published, it would exonerate them for the crime and remove the historic stigma these

two Italians and their families had to endure for over 90 years.

The other author, Louis Del Bianco, just finished "In the Shadow of the Mountain," a chronicle of the saga Lou and his family had to withstand regarding the acknowledgment and recognition of his grandfather, Luigi Del Bianco, as the Chief Carver of Mount Rushmore. When reading this book, one sympathizes with Lou's entire family as they engage the officials at the National Park Service in a wrenching 25-year campaign to seek the recognition. NPS was so stubborn and unyielding because to them there was a collegial effort by all 400 workers from the local area of Keystone, South Dakota, who created this astonishing monument, and Luigi was just part of the group. However, the family stressed that Luigi was a rare, matchless, skilled artisan who was a master of wood and stone carving that understood the sculptor's vision and put it into practice! In fact, it was Luigi who trained most of the unskilled laborers to make it possible to complete the task! The tide turned when a new Midwest Director of NPS, Cameron Sholly, was much more conciliatory about the Del Biancos' quest and hired two historians to review the record. Both concluded that Luigi Del Bianco deserves special, singular recognition at Mount Rushmore and deserves to be named the Chief Carver! Consequently, in the next few months NPS will unveil a monument to Luigi as the Chief Carver. This unveiling is so significant because it shows how a modest, hardworking Italian immigrant from scant beginnings rose to the occasion to mold an iconic national monument known the world over, a true Horatio Alger "rags to riches" story.

Much to my surprise, both authors have asked me to seek a literary agency to advance these stories for publication, and of course, without hesitation I accepted the challenge and already have my eye on such an agency. I cannot wait for these publications to be released to the public because I profoundly feel it would enhance the public image of Italian people and really act as a countervailing force against the derogatory stereotypes we endure in the entrenched mainstream media.

While on the subject of positive imagery, I want to notify members of the Order that over the quarter NYS CSJ spent a lot of money to restock our inventory of posters, pamphlets, and bookmarks and stand ready to distribute these upon the request of anyone for their lodge, schools, or communities. Let us do our best to foster our rich, unparalleled legacy for all the public to see!

NYS CSJ IN THE CLASSROOM

For some time in the past the Executive Board was always interested in bringing young students the knowledge of the existence and work of CSJ. Once inculcated in the young generation it was our vision that bias and bigotry against Italians would erode over time and more appreciation for our Italian legacy would begin, obviously a long-term solution to eradicate bias and bigotry. Thanks to the seminal plans drawn by District 2 Chairwoman Jean Gagliardo we began a pilot event in introducing CSJ to a small gathering of teachers and lodge liaisons at the Marco Polo Lodge on December 3rd. We began with Executive Board member Vincent Marmorale's presentation of his documentary of Italians saving the Jews in Italy during WW2. A brief sketch of his film was shown, and then Vin distributed film snippets of the documentary on DVD with sample lesson plans to be used in the classroom, a perfect exemplar of positive imagery! I was then introduced and used my time to present to the teachers the function of CSJ and the importance of their followup to the students to make the students aware that an institution exists in OSIA to address the public's concerns about bias and bigotry against

Italians. I then asked the teachers to leave their seats and to cobble together as much positive image material on display for their students. The teachers were then re-assembled to engage in a small-group discussion with us as to how best we can effectively teach students about bias and bigotry. This information was recorded by Recording Secretary Keith Wilson to be shared with the members of the Board for review and comment, which in turn will be used for our next session with the teachers, who by the way desire another session in a few months. It is obvious then we made a dent in their sensibilities which could develop a long-established relationship between them and us, and over time could mean a change in perceptions about Italian people.

NEW YORK POST

As you probably know, the above publication has the reputation of occasionally sensationalizing stereotypes of Italians, particularly with reference to organized crime. Each time we persist in criticizing the paper for its insensitivity. On November 1st the Post did it again by posting an article entitled "Grandmafia: CVS Profiles Seniors as Thieves." Obviously, the use of the term "Grandmafia" was not necessary to substantiate an uptick in shoplifting by the elderly. This time we mounted an extraordinary and aggressive campaign against the Metro Editor Michelle Gotthelf to halt this egregious tack. So far, the paper has been subdued about these types of articles, and we remain hopeful that this posture will remain permanently. We still monitor carefully.

REP. TIM RYAN OF OHIO

I'm sure everyone caught the clip on TV when Rep. Ryan was interviewed about the Presidential campaign and slipped the comment, seemingly innocuous, about "dago wine" drunk in Ohio. I was on the phone the very next day with one of his aides, and before I could complete my complaint the aide told me that an apology would be dispatched the following day. True to his word, Rep. Ryan sent a letter of apology to National CSJ President Kevin Caira who in turn shared it with the state CSJ chairmen all over the country.

37TH ANNUAL BRUNCH/DINNER FUNDRAISER

Capping this report is a slight mention of the above annual event to raise money. We promise you a blockbuster with two very distinguished honorees: Joseph Tacopina, an internationally-renowned defense attorney who personifies the ideal for CSJ. He has through his reputation made a positive image as a successful Italian man, bought an Italian soccer franchise in Italy and therefore promotes the sport, and has written scathing articles critical of TV shows that depict typical Italian stereotypes. Enough has been said of Lou Del Bianco, and one can agree he surely deserves our recognition for his work and that of his family. The event takes place on Sunday, February 26, at Russo's-On-The-Bay in Howard Beach, from 12 noon to 5 pm. Please attend.

Respectfully Submitted,