

PLENARY SESSION REPORT

JULY 30, 2016

HOST

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INTRODUCTION

Except for a few irritating issues much of CSJ's attention this quarter was spent on two major crises sprinkled with some very positive developments.

TED CRUZ AND NEIL CAVUTO

At the beginning of the quarter these two known personalities made pejorative, crass, glib statements that were both shocking and upsetting against Italians that we had to immediately address. On April 12th during the Presidential Primary campaign Sen. Ted Cruz appearing on Glen Beck's radio program slammed Donald Trump by saying that Trump had made business dealings in the past with jailed mobsters and had to realize that the Presidency was not La Cosa Nostra. On April 23rd Neil Cavuto, commentator on Fox News Live, was discussing with other commentators about the competition amongst Republican candidates in the same primaries in attracting delegates to the party's convention when he said that it was like a food fight in an Italian household. The reaction amongst CSJ lodge liaisons and Order members was so vociferous that one participant called me to tell me that he could not get through Cruz's campaign phone line. Despite the barrage against Cruz and Cavuto they never responded. However, it should be noted that it's important to respond vigorously enough in these matters with the intention that should the perpetrator venture in these waters again that maybe he or she would take a moment to reflect on the previous event and reaction and deter further action. In this regard I think we succeeded immensely.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Perusing lately some Facebook pages it has been discovered that some of us find ourselves on such pages as Mob Central, Mob Daily, or Hardcore Italians. Although the creators design these pages to be humorous, they really portray Italians in a very poor light particularly as buffoons and criminals. If you are found to be on these pages or someone sends them to you, take the time to post comments that insist these pages be dropped and demand something much more positive. Sometimes you'll be able to discover who the creator of the page is, and you can register your complaint accordingly. These pages do proliferate, so it's very important we react and insist on change. Otherwise, social media becomes a convenient vehicle to perpetuate defamatory stereotypes. Please do whatever you can in this regard.

CASA ITALIANA, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

In mid-May I was contacted by John Mancini, the Executive Director of the Italic Institute, about this issue. As far back as the 1920s wealthy Italian donors and the Italian government together created this cultural institution on the grounds of this university as a means to perpetuate Italian culture in this country. Eventually a handsome library was created and undergraduates on campus were encouraged to use the facility. However, over time things changed. The Board of Guarantors (Directors) and the Executive Director were replaced with non-Italians. The library's contents were scattered throughout the campus and undergraduates were not permitted to use the facility. Soon after, Casa Italiana became the Italian Academy and researchers were asked to reside on campus to do work they took pride in but had nothing to do with Italian culture. The Italian government became upset. In other words, a cultural institution was literally transformed to a research

facility that had nothing to do with its original mission. Even more irritating was the fact that State Sen. Ken LaValle of Port Jefferson, L.I., had sponsored legislation to give tax-exempt status to the Academy. John and I met with Sen. LaValle and requested that he sponsor legislation to abolish the tax-exempt status until the IA had returned to its original mission. There has been no word yet from Sen. LaValle and so John and I intend to meet with him again to stress our concerns. We'll keep you updated.

MISCELLANEOUS NEGATIVES

Along the quarter other negative minor developments arose. Around Fathers Day in June we learned that a t-shirt was being produced that said "Touch My Daughter and See If I'm in the Mafia." Obviously this shirt was in poor taste, and we objected and requested that the company terminate production. Thanks to Executive Board member John Fratta we discovered Battery Park TV, an online TV show, that contained an opinionated piece about Gov. Andrew Cuomo's Italian American aide Joseph Percoco. Steven Greer, the producer, bluntly commented that the alleged transgressions in the Cuomo administration committed by Percoco were a page out of the mafia. Having written an e-mail criticizing Greer's stance as a rambling diatribe with no facts, Greer contacted me by phone to discuss the matter further. Eventually in the discussion he conceded he had no factual information, but then claimed he always presented positive information about Italians in the past. To prove it he sent me such information, and I commended him for it and encouraged him to move in that direction in the future. I'm always gleeful when we turn negatives into positives.

In the same month of June two other media productions arose that we reacted to. One was a movie entitled "Sicilian Vampire" produced by an Italian American named Frank D'Angelo, which really demonstrated the lengths producers take to portray these negative stereotypes. The plot focuses on a mafia don who vacations at an isolated hunting lodge where he's bitten by a bat. He immediately assumes supernatural powers which he uses to retaliate against rival crime families to set the score upon his return from vacation. I wrote to D'Angelo to bring to his attention that there was no need for such a plot with a Sicilian connotation and that the main character could have been anyone else who could have used his so-called powers in any other fashion. I also stressed that he had a wealth of Italian heritage at his disposal which he could have used to present a more positive image of Italian people. Lastly, there is now an animated cartoon TV series in the making presently entitled "the Cannolis" starring Soprano actor Vincent Pastore. It's about an Italian baker who lives in Little Italy in Manhattan who has crazy characters in his family. Of course, one character in the neighborhood is Tonio Tortellini, the local hood himself idolized by Pastore's son in the series. Since the series is in the making, I will direct the Board, lodge liaisons, and Order members to get more involved in shaping the series to our liking. So, I've begun by writing to the production company about dropping the mafia character and all references to the mafia or organized crime. Other than that the characters are rather innocuous. We'll update you.

SOUTHAMPTON SCHOOL DISTRICT CALENDAR

As you know this issue has been a continuous saga for the last year, and we confined much of our attention this quarter in meeting with Southampton residents and monitoring the situation. We met regularly over the quarter getting reports from the residents and developing strategies along the way. The School District did not entertain the issue of Columbus Day on the school calendar at all during its work sessions and regular meetings throughout the quarter. In the meantime CSJ led by Treasurer Joe Vallone decided to invest in fabricating "Save Columbus Day" t-shirts which would be sold to Order members and the public to keep our interest and the issue alive. To date we've sold about 120 out of the 200 ordered.

Just prior to this writing we learned from the residents and a local weekly article that the school district has decided to keep the generic calendar they developed in March intact as is, which basically laid out only those days that the schools were in session and when they were not with no designations for holidays or conferences. Over the course of the year community forums with a cross-section of all community groups will be called to discuss and decide the fate of Columbus Day and other holidays for the 2017 calendar. Of course, we will be a player and exert whatever influence we can to protect this memorable holiday. In fact, we were just poised to send e-mails to all Board members about keeping the Day intact since they did say in March they would set the calendar by August. In this regard we can relax somewhat, and we'll encourage the residents to monitor the situation in the meantime and react accordingly. Stay tuned for further developments.

OUR LADY OF LORETO CHURCH

As with Southampton this issue also dominated our attention this quarter. It is sad to say that in June the Diocese filed an application with the NYC Department of Buildings to demolish the church, which has set off an explosion of e-mails amongst all the stakeholders every single day to stem this action! More community groups have come on board. A postcard campaign in Brownsville was initiated in the neighborhood. NIA Productions, a 501(c)(3) theater consultant company, has elected to act as the umbrella organization of all community groups. It has started an online petition to save the church with close to 500 names already, and is preparing an effort to be a 501(c)(3) cultural organization entitled the Loreto Culture group. Preservationists, researchers, and church advocates have contacted state and city landmark commissions to seek their help and share strategies in turning the tide. I organized community groups to meet with intermediary Monsignor David Cassata to seek help and intercede with Bishop DeMarzio and wrote a personal letter to Bishop DeMarzio pleading with him to reverse his action. I am presently working with Mitchell Weiss, a NYCPD Community Liaison, to contact Mayor DeBlasio to intercede and will be preparing a letter to Gov. Cuomo and local city council members to do the same. I have already sent a bevy of letters a few months ago to all area elected officials to get involved and help. I will also work with Simeon Bankoff from the Historic District Council to publicize our concerns in order to attract more supporters and contact local developer Jeffrey Dunston to return on board with his architectural plans to restore the church. In this regard we are also reaching out to the Nazareth Christian Fellowship which submitted one of the first proposals a few years ago to save the church and was denied. So, the assault is on and hopefully we'll be successful as before in stopping this action against OLL!

What remains galling is that in 2010 the Diocese and local city and state agencies agreed and signed a document that stated that any development on the parcel where the church is situated must include as part of any development the adaptive re-use of OLL! Obviously, the

Diocese's action in applying for demolition contradicts this agreement! We will attempt with anyone's help to remind the diocese accordingly! We have all organized a meeting with area elected officials on August 3rd at the Brownsville Heritage House to discuss these matters and mobilize them to help. Literally, the indomitable commitment by all stakeholders has been enlightening, unrelenting, and encouraging. I hope we can convince the Diocese to change its mind.

POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS

On the other side of the ledger are those positive developments that make CSJ so worthwhile against the aforementioned negative developments. "History in a Box" has been picking up speed. To date I have made 32 presentations and 4 more are on the horizon from August to November — — the Sellero Lodge, a Smithtown children's group, the America Lodge, and the H.H. Rogers/Cabrini Lodge. I just can't wait to do them. If anyone is interested, please contact me. More recently I've done the Brumidi, Toscanini, and Caboto Lodges, which made me so exuberant as a result of their rave reviews. THANK YOU SO MUCH! IT MAKES ME STRIVE ON!

Thanks to District 2 CSJ Chairwoman Jean Gagliardo and Executive Board member Liz Rizzo letters have been sent to city and state public libraries to urge them to prepare programs for the public for our upcoming annual October Culture and History Month with a particular emphasis on Christopher Columbus (for obvious reasons). There is a patent necessity to balance out the criticisms against CC with positive imagery and his changing course of the development of the Western Hemisphere no doubt.

We are looking ahead to meet with the TCA (the Transportation Columbia Association) of NYC transit workers to address their concerns about the lack of promotions in the industry for Italian Americans.

We are pleased to report that on April 27th NYS CSJ working with the Colorado CSJ and Grand Lodge was successful in persuading the State and Veterans Committee of the Colorado House of Representatives to defeat the proposed bill to change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day with a 7-2 vote. The Colorado groups are now working in this election campaign to defeat the author of the bill Joseph Salazar in favor of Jessica Sanderson. If defeated, we probably won't see another effort to try this again, but Salazar has said that if he is elected, he will try again. GOOD LUCK COLORADO!

On May 13th I was invited once again by Joe Zingone of the DiMaggio Lodge to attend the annual Italian Language Awards Night held in the Wappingers Falls School District with 12,000 students in the district. In this district 700 students take Italian and on this night 400 of them received awards for proficiency in Italian from grades 7 to 12! As usual Board members, superintendents, teachers, parents, and Order members were in attendance to witness and applaud the recipients. It's quite a sight to discover the dedication these stakeholders take in advancing the study of our beloved language. This district is truly a role model for the whole state! Kudos to you Joe Z!

On May 20th I was urged by Michelangelo Lodge member Gene Biancone to meet with the Superintendent of Westhampton Beach School District to explore now the possibility of introducing Italian to this 900 students district. Gene plies on to convince school officials to do just that. We met a few years ago to explore this matter before, but with budget constraints the Superintendent did not feel comfortable in taking the plunge. As we met again on the above

date we found the situation even more dire. To save money the District cut French and Latin, so Italian now has no chance. I simply urged the Super to investigate the possibility of maybe starting a small Italian Club to encourage interest at the Middle School level, and if that development should blossom, then maybe we can investigate the possibility of introducing Italian. We'll see.

Lastly, I am so enthused to announce that on May 28th I was contacted by Lou Del Bianco that finally the National Park Service at the 75th anniversary of the erection of the monument at Mount Rushmore that Luigi Del Bianco has been declared the Chief Carver of the monument! Protocols now have to be followed to make this designation and honor official according to federal laws. No longer will he be just lumped together with the 400 other workers who aided in the creation of the monument. We want a special monument to Luigi at the site and insist that Luigi be mentioned separately in the guided tours in the park as the Chief Carver. A combination of the Del Bianco family, author Doug Gladstone, and NYS CSJ all working together made this a reality. HOW SWEET IT IS AND BE PROUD!

Respectfully submitted,

Lou Gallo
Chairman

