

PLENARY SESSION REPORT

OCTOBER 25, 2014

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## **Travel to Districts 7 and 8**

Subsequent to my last plenary session report to you, I took the time to travel to Districts 7 and 8. You know that I have repetitively said that I would take the time to build a strong grass-roots CSJ statewide organization. My visits to these said districts completed my rounds statewide. I must say I was very pleased at the reception I received there. Both districts stated they could meet my request to appoint liaisons from each lodge and do the work of CSJ. Despite distance problems in District 7 attendees at the meeting felt they could rely much on internet and phone communications to get the job done. District 8 responded promptly and energetically. In each of the three lodges in the district liaisons were chosen quickly and went to work enthusiastically. A culture festival was organized by the Geneva Lodge for Heritage Month in October. Hobart College in Geneva agreed to teach Italian to lodge members every Thursday in October. A book display on Italian literature was organized in the Geneva Public Library. All three lodges are now organizing an essay contest in the district for middle school and high school students. The icing on the cake was the acceptance of Dr. Joseph Rube' as the new district CSJ Chairman. Such developments mean that District 8 is now a vibrant, full-fledged organization within the large scheme of CSJ. I want to thank District 8 State Trustee Tony DeCostanzo, Lodge Presidents Mike Cutillo of Geneva, Cynthia Woodhams of GAIL, and Vinnie Giannantonio of Vincent Lombardi for all their interest, help, and dedication for launching these efforts for CSJ. We're proud and appreciative of all you have done, and you are a role model for all the other districts that are trying to organize more effectively. I commend you! Buona Fortuna to Dr. Joe and new liaisons Steve Muzzi, Sandy Schading, and Matt Grosodonia! We expect much from you now.

At the District 8 Meeting the issue of cuts and threats to Italian language study in the local schools was a topic of discussion, and a strategy was devised along with teachers of Italian who were invited by me to attend. Last May CSJ pressured the Greece School District to introduce Italian in Odyssey High School because of strong parental and student demand. I'm pleased to report that the Greece District this month has decided to introduce the Italian, and for that matter all other languages requested. Of course, I e-mailed the Board and commended them for their action.

It's obvious we have made great progress in this district, and Dr. Joe Rube' has assured that he and the liaisons will continually monitor the situation and such progress.

## **The Annual Hofstra University September Conference**

CSJ along with the Italian teacher organizations, the American Association of Teachers of Italian (AATI) and the Association of Italian American Educators (AIAE), and the Italian culture organization, the Italian American Studies Association (IASA), met in September to present information on the mission and programs of each organization. CSJ provided a comprehensive display of our positive image materials. About ten members from OSIA were in attendance, particularly State First Vice-president Carolyn Reres, State Second Vice-president Bob Ferrito, District 4 State Trustee Cathy Lembo Lloyd, State Photographer Nat Mannino, CSJ Executive Board members and Culture Co-Chairpersons Jean Gagliardo and Leo Cimini, and District 2 Caboto Lodge Liaison Janet Galvin. Thank you for your support!

At this conference I announced the formation of an Italian Language Task Force to tackle the challenges to the study of Italian statewide in our schools and colleges. We have targeted Sewanaka, Utica, Seaford, and Islip right now since the challenges there are very serious. Dr.

Annamaria Monaco, President of AATI, and Cav. Josephine Maietta of AIAE have communicated to me that they will be selecting liaisons from their organizations very soon to join us in this strong coalition. We will all be meeting in a few weeks to devise strategies and plans to address these challenges simultaneously. Eventually, this coalition will become the sentinels for Italian language study, and as we are successful in these districts, others will be added and targeted. I ask that OSIA members be as equally vigilant as these crises arise and notify CSJ immediately if you hear of a threat.

### **The Staten Island Parade**

In August I received a call from Capodanno Lodge President Frank Cicero about a stunning development. The Borough of Staten Island was canceling its Columbus Day parade! Many members of the Order weighed in on the issue, which at that point I decided to call for an immediate meeting of the CSJ Board. From that discussion came a very aggressive stance that CSJ would take against the Borough, but after careful review by State President Joe and Counsel Mike Santo, it was decided that one plank of our plan would be launched. A meeting was held in Manhattan with State Senator Diane Savino and attended by President Joe, National CSJ VP John Fratta, and me. We learned that the parade cost too much money, and a culture festival instead would be substituted which would be far more meaningful and productive. We agreed and decided that the Order and CSJ would participate.

During the hullabaloo about the parade's cancellation, Sen. Savino had made comments that were critical of the history of the parade and Italian immigrants, which caused a firestorm amongst members of the Capodanno Lodge. A letter-writing campaign was launched by the Lodge which appeared on a full page in the Staten Island Advance newspaper. The letters demonstrated much pride in the members' heritage and took Sen. Savino to task about her comments. At the Manhattan meeting this matter arose but Sen. Savino stood by her convictions.

To demonstrate the Order's commitment to the new festival I attended a festival organization meeting in Staten Island with many other Staten Island Italian American organizations, State Sen. Diane Savino, and deputies of the Staten Island Borough President James Oddo. These organizations explained the worthy activities they would introduce, but I was critical of the fact that there was no mention of Christopher Columbus in the title of the festival ("From Rome to Richmondtown") nor in any of the publicity. All agreed and the deputies asked me to introduce an interesting presentation on Columbus. I decided on a novel idea to dress as Columbus in costume and character, and through the medium of a modern interview I would dispel all the misperceptions and misconceptions about the legacy of Columbus. So, on Festival Day District 3 CSJ Chairman Tony Corsello interviewed me on stage before a live audience. The interview was well-received by the public at hand and gave CSJ the opportunity to demonstratively take a strong stance in defending the legacy of Columbus before any and all critics. It attracted great attention throughout the festival because it was an innovative and provocative way to raise the issue, and it was very enjoyable to do. For such inclement weather on Festival Day there was considerable attendance by the public, but this festival has vast potential and Borough President Oddo told me it will be held next year.

While this development was occurring we learned that the city of Seattle and its School Board passed a resolution changing Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day, lately a typical phenomenon around this time of year as I have previously forewarned. Of course, there was a buzz throughout the Order over this occurrence, but thanks to myriad Italian American organizations, including a pact between OSIA and NIAF (National Italian American Foundation), Save Columbus Day petitions have been circulating on the internet nationwide. Please, if you should come in contact with any of these, sign immediately. The OSIA/NIAF one demands from the President of the United States that a Capitol Hill luncheon and evening celebration take place on Columbus Day, and the President is to address the nation espousing the contributions of Italian Americans now and in history— a tall order and a necessity indeed! Let's follow through. It also should be reported that on the internet there are petitions to also end Columbus Day. So, nationwide we have a real battle on our hands. Offer your support when and where you can!

## **Italian Heritage Month**

This month this year was quite busy for CSJ. Board member Liz Rizzo, our Researcher, did a terrific job in writing to all public libraries in Nassau and Suffolk Counties urging them to celebrate our heritage with activities for the entire month. We did receive replies, and we were elated at how so many were so proud to abide by our request and told us what they were doing. Next year Liz intends to expand her requests to New York City and upstate and mail to all public libraries a packet to aid them. This effort has been a passion for Liz since last year, and she was finally able to launch it. Thank you Liz!

A serendipitous experience happened to me that launched CSJ in another direction. As an expediter I spend much time in Brookhaven Town Hall, and one day I noticed in the lobby a large poster on an easel that showed that Brookhaven Town was sponsoring a cultural heritage day for Hispanics in September. Since there was no mention of Italian Heritage month nor ever in the Town, I fired off a letter to Supervisor Ed Romaine, whom I know personally, and reminded him that October was Italian Heritage Month and that the Town should treat Italians just as equally as it does Hispanics in this regard. An aide contacted me and told me that Romaine wanted me to chair such an effort next year. Of course, I told him I would accept the honor, and I began to ruminate about some kind of a combined Hispanic-Italian Cultural Activity, especially since one of my long-term goals is to reach out to other ethnic and racial groups to help us in our quest to fulfill CSJ missions. This idea could launch us in that direction! I will reach out to the Town next year to make this a reality.

CSJ certainly plays a role in this month just as our lodges and the Order at large does. Our contribution this year was twofold: we decided to sponsor the one-man show "The Class of Life," produced and performed by Paul Failla, in conjunction with the Columbus Lodge at the Farmingdale Public Library. This show portrays his Italian American background in a theatrical way, demonstrating his love for his occupation as a Suffolk County police officer, family, and values. He has done this show for so many lodges already, and we felt his show would be an exciting kickoff for the Columbus Day weekend. As usual it was. We also launched the first showing of the Perlasca film at the same library about a week after Paul's show and invited members from B'nai B'rith to attend. Giorgio Perlasca was an Italian meat vendor for the Italian

army and personally witnessed the atrocities against Jews during WW2. He was so infuriated that he literally launched a one-man Machiavellian campaign to save 5,000 Hungarian Jews through crafty diplomacy, outright bribery, and sheer corruption, and he succeeded! He was honored after the war by Hungary and Israel, and a movie was made about his exploits. Although attendance at the movie was woeful, it offered CSJ the chance to continue our historic collaboration with this group. The President of BB, Harold Mitchell, personally called me and thanked me for the invitation. He loved the movie! On November 8th at SUNY Stony Brook at the Center for Italian Studies at 2 p.m. we will launch the movie again, our Suffolk County venue. Please attend. This activity is an advantageous way to build a strong bond with the Jewish community, another channel for CSJ to help its quest in fighting defamation and bigotry. It's a riveting film! We plan to take a whole year to show this film in New York City and upstate, so everyone in the Order can view it. Personally, I want to thank Board members Vinnie Marmorale and Liz Rizzo for all the preparation they do and the expertise they have in this area. They both exhibit such passion on the subject that it is contagious for anyone who comes in contact with them. Mille grazie to Vinnie and Liz!

Next, since the Ladies Auxiliary of the Columbus Lodge wanted to contribute to the month, they asked me to present my "History in a Box" program, my seventh presentation, and the ladies were really appreciative of it. I do have offers next month and will continue the program.

We will round out the month with the viewing of a film entitled "The Sicilian Girl" which has caused some controversy amongst Order members because it is a film depicting Sicilian Mafia brutality. I have selected a panel to view the film at the Huntington Public Library. I have asked Arba Sicula, the organization which we honored last year at our dinner/dance, which also promotes Sicilian history, culture, and language, to join and evaluate the film with us. They are sending a representative. We will present our findings to you.

## **Miscellaneous**

The following items are matters that have surfaced over the quarter that I think you will find enlightening. In previous presentations and reports I have told you about the efforts of author Doug Gladstone and Louis Del Bianco to force the National Park Service to acknowledge more provocatively the work of Luigi Del Bianco as the chief carver at Mount Rushmore in the 1930s. Lately and yet oddly, the Service has ordered sixty copies of Gladstone's book, which it has in its possession, but has not offered the book for sale in its shops. The matter has been relayed to the National CSJ for further investigation. If you remember some time ago, I notified all members of the proposed senior citizen complex on City Island in the Bronx whose developers were applying for a variance before the New York City Board of Standards and Appeals. This complex would surround its residents with Italian culture until the day they died. CSJ Board members wrote letters in support of the project. I am elated to report that the Board granted the variance, but the complex has to be reduced in size. Be that as it may, we can be proud of such a unique project for senior Italian Americans to enjoy! Voila! Lastly, taking advantage of the momentum and pleasure from last June, CSJ Board members and members of the Order have just begun planning the second annual Italian Culture and Heritage Festival to be held in

Smithtown again on Saturday, June 27, 2015. Our first order of business is obtaining grants, sponsorships, and preparing contacts with vendors. Mark your calendars now and don't miss out!

Respectfully submitted,