

PLENARY SESSION REPORT

OCTOBER 29, 2016

HOST

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## **Introduction**

This past quarter can be characterized as both contentious and sublime as far as CSJ issues were concerned.

## **The Columbus Day Holiday**

In late July and early August I was engaged in my usual rounds in the state visiting Districts 7 and 8 respectively. Precocious enough to know that the issues involving Columbus could surface at any time, I made sure to advise both districts to be on alert. Since the city of and the university at Syracuse last year had raised hackles about Columbus Day in District 7, I implored the lodge presidents and liaisons to be on watch and to notify me of any pending problems. In District 8 I asserted the same. Nothing has been reported to me to date.

No sooner than the above, my concerns were realized. In late August the National Education Association (NEA), the national professional organization for teachers, issued a public announcement that it would initiate a nationwide campaign to encourage school districts to change Columbus Day to either Indigenous Peoples Day or El Dia de la Raza (The Day of the Race, referring to Latin America), and it would spend \$57,500 to do it! The Italian One Voice Coalition (UNICO's anti-defamation branch) reacted immediately with cogent letters to the NEA President to halt such action and called for a strategy meeting in New Jersey with other Italian American groups to discuss a plan of action. National CSJ responded finally by initiating a nationwide online and ground petition drive entitled "Save Columbus Day." NYS CSJ immediately answered the call and sent out the petitions, encouraging all lodge presidents, CSJ liaisons, and CSJ Executive Board members to give this matter top priority by circulating them at all and any public events or meetings, and to encourage others, including those not members of the Order, to join the cause! We need 100,000 signatures nationwide online and on the ground by April 30th, 2017. These petitions will be directed to the President of the United States to take action through federal administrative activities that observe Columbus Day. These petitions will only be honored by the President until they reach 100,000. So, everyone please do your part to make the threshold a reality! If you remember, the same threshold applied to the past petition to grant Yogi Berra the Medal of Freedom. The threshold was met and then some, and Berra was granted the medal posthumously. So, we all can do the same with a matter far more serious and concerning, and I am confident we will reach the 100,000.

We have compounded and publicized our effort through the sale of "Save Columbus Day" t-shirts. If interested, please see NYS CSJ Treasurer Joe Vallone. As the CSJ Chairman I have made it a point to attend five Columbus Day events and one cultural event ("A Taste of Italy in Suffolk County) to wear a Columbus costume to starkly highlight and remind everyone during our Italian Culture and Heritage Month in October of the seriousness of our commitment to defend Columbus' legacy and demonstrate pride for one of our Italian icons. I'm sure many can all agree, and during this month this legacy was challenged head-on when an article appeared in the Southampton Press, a local weekly on Long Island, on October 14th.

Thomas Clavin, a writer from Sag Harbor, wrote a piece in the Press' Viewpoint section as a guest contributor. In his essay he called Columbus' first landing in 1492 an "invasion" that resulted in "genocide." I immediately contacted the Editorial Department and requested equal space too in the same section. Instead I was granted space in the Letter to the Editor section. In my piece I took Clavin to task semantically regarding his use of "invasion" and "genocide." Basically, I argued that "invasion" means forceful entry with hostile intent. Such was not the case with Columbus. In fact, his journal shows relations were cordial at the outset as various

items were exchanged peacefully. "Genocide" means a planned annihilation or extermination of a race or ethnic group. Columbus did not embark on his journey on August 3, 1492 from Palos, Spain with some pre-ordained plan to annihilate anybody! So, when analyzing revisionist exposes', pay careful attention to the semantics, and one will discover that the piece at hand will be off the mark and distorted.

I attest that our NYS CSJ will remain ever so vigilant to combat any unworthy or nonsensical challenges to our beloved Columbus Day!

## **Our Lady of Loreto Church**

The saga continues, and this quarter we suffered a serious setback in our efforts to landmark this historic building. On August 16th our coalition called a press conference in front of the church to pressure the Diocese to withdraw its permit application before the NYC Department of Buildings to demo the building. One by one each community group including CSJ demanded that the Diocese rescind its application. One week later the Department did just that. One of our coalition community members then secured a meeting with Mr. John Tynan from Catholic Charities POP, the development corporation leasing the property from the Diocese of Brooklyn. In that meeting Tynan unequivocally said that the church building was unsafe, that it was not going to be landmarked or sold, and that demolishing it was the first order, even though the first demo permit application was denied. (The Diocese has since applied again for the demo permit.) Another community member was able to enter the church to observe its condition. He reported that the basement had been torn apart, as piping and electrical lines were stripped recklessly. The first floor was pretty much intact, but the roof will require the most restoration. Since these encounters our Brownsville Cultural Coalition has had regular conference calls to strategize our next moves. We have all decided that our best and most logical course of action is to target the local city councilman, Rafael Espinal, Jr., and demand from him his support for our cause. If we secure his position, the City Council will approve the landmarking and the NYC Landmarks Commission will follow suit. Once landmarked, the Diocese cannot demo the building at all, and we will be entitled to restoration money for the exterior of the building. On August 31st, after the first demo permit was denied, we did have a meeting with Espinal to educate him on our position. Community members were extraordinarily passionate about the necessity of saving this building for their interest in providing a culture center in Brownsville. I interjected that the Letter of Resolution in 2010 agreed upon by city and state agencies and POP that any development on the parcel had to include the adaptive re-use of the church and that the Diocese's demo application was contrary to that agreement! Espinal agreed he had much homework to do besides understanding the Diocese's position. We found he did contact these city and state agencies to find out if these agencies had still supported the Resolution. Since then we have not heard from Espinal, and it is the reason now we have decided to meet with him again and demand his support now. He has had ample time to study the case and come to a decision. As of this writing the process of contacting Espinal is taking place.

As always, despite these entanglements with contentious issues, pleasurable experiences emerge that are much more positive and entertaining.

## **Luigi Del Bianco**

Finally, the issue of acknowledging Luigi has reached a conclusion, and it is a worthy one! In early September Lou Del Bianco, the grandson who headed the campaign to force the National Park Service (NPS) to acknowledge Luigi as the Chief Carver of Mount Rushmore, sent me a trailer about the documentary on his grandfather he had just finished (“Through Lincoln’s Eyes”). Firstly, it summarized his 25-year campaign and then segued to the love and appreciation he had for his grandfather since he was a young child and now an adult, a very real, heartwarming story. He included in the 11-minute trailer that the NPS had finally decided that Luigi should be recognized as the Chief Carver, but as is always the case with CSJ, an unexpected development occurred regarding Luigi Del Bianco.

In late September an article appeared in Newsday, the local Long Island daily, written by the Associated Press about this year being the 75th anniversary of the creation of the monument at Mount Rushmore. No where in this article was there a mention of Luigi Del Bianco as the Chief Carver, a slight indeed! I immediately fired off a letter to the editor informing him of the slight and the omission, and Newsday printed it. Soon after, I arranged a meeting on Long Island with Lou for the very first time. We had a very engaging and lively encounter over lunch, and I presented him with Newsday’s article and my letter to the editor. Right after that luncheon meeting Lou inserted these on his website for all the public to see! At our meeting I learned from Lou that in April there will be a formal unveiling of a plaque in Luigi’s honor at Mount Rushmore by the NPS! Mission accomplished! Furthermore, Lou has also just completed a book about his grandfather, and he has asked me to comment on it.

We all have to be so proud that NYS CSJ joined this campaign and aided the effort which Lou Del Bianco is so very grateful for. We should also be so enthused that we righted a wrong of history and succeeded in assuring that one of our icons receives the acknowledgment he so justly deserves as a skilled artisan! Remember, that’s one of CSJ’s missions—promote a positive image of Italian people.

## **“History in a Box”**

Ruminating about positive imaging, at this juncture our “History in a Box” program deserves separate topical attention, and is no longer just an occasional filler or dalliance. It has now evolved as an integral part of our positive image programming because it now has achieved popular acclaim among lodges, communities, and schools all over the state. I have now done 41 presentations to date and two more are on the way, HH Rogers/Cabrini Lodge in Tuxedo and Yonkers High School. It constantly plays to rave reviews and continues infinitely. Most recently our New York State President Carolyn Reres invited me to do the program at the Student Summit in Albany in September, and I enjoyed every single minute of it! It kind of brings me back to the classroom occasionally, a reminder of my past career and profession. So, when W. Tresper Clarke High School in Westbury, Long Island, requested the program, I jumped at it immediately and spent two consecutive days in October presenting the program to six classes ( 3 and 3). I also was invited by Gloria Maffettone, President of the America Lodge, to do the

program there as part of its activity for October Culture and History Month, where the program was received so warmly. So, if anyone anywhere in New York State is interested, contact me. I'll come running, and there's no charge!

## **More Positive Imaging**

As a spinoff from the above "History in a Box" program there has been other protracted activity by CSJ in the realm of positive imaging. We just spent thousands of dollars to replenish our storage facility with new orders for posters, bookmarks, and pamphlets that have been depleted because of the enormous interest by so many in the schools, and amongst the districts and convention delegates for these materials. Soon this material will be mailed and distributed to those who have ordered them. Please be patient since we were involved so much with Columbus Day activities in October and planning other cultural festivals. Particularly, I want to publicly thank GL Editor Sal Moschella for all the work he has done to make this a reality! He has worked so assiduously and constantly in producing brand-new, updated Medal of Honor and Baseball Hall of Fame posters, and he is presently working on updating our MOH booklet that accompanies our MOH Display kit. CSJ Executive Board member Rosemarie DiChiara has also been so diligent in coordinating our orders with Minuteman Press in Merrick and Superior Printing in Brooklyn. Together she and I worked on revamping the Columbus bookmark in updating his portrait, and laminating and colorizing the bookmark. After all, if we are going to engage in a vigorous campaign to defend Columbus, let us at least make sure we distribute material attractive enough to engage the public and demonstrate our caring.

Finally, I have converted 16 CSJ video cassettes out of over 40 to DVDs that I think are so informative and riveting that this material should be distributed to all our lodges periodically as a revolving library. I will introduce and promote them publicly with an article in the Golden Lion newspaper for all to see. Lodges can then contact me to borrow the disc free of charge for use in their respective lodges and then return it to me for others to use. This move allows our OSIA members to be educated enough to present positive image programming and have enough information to use in defending our legacy against defamation and stereotyping.

NYS CSJ is also getting known, an article of faith I want to achieve under my tenure as Chairman. Thanks to an effort by our Treasurer Joe Vallone I was able to be interviewed on a half hour You Tube program in late September produced by a filmmaker named Gerry Ferretti from Lindenhurst, Long Island. It gave me the opportunity to introduce and inform the public about the missions and accomplishments of NYS CSJ and to let the public know that Italian Americans do have a vehicle to contact in cases of defamation or discrimination, or to obtain positive image material it can use to educate themselves or their children about Italian culture and history. After the taping Gerry and I agreed to continue to work together on innovative programming to promote the work of OSIA and CSJ. Luckily for us coincidentally, Dave Setteducati, a member of the Dr. Vincenzo Lodge in Smithtown, Long Island, also invited me in mid-October to be interviewed about CSJ on his public access program "Italian America on Long Island." That program will air on Hauppauge Cablevision, Long Island in January. After the taping Dave and I began to ruminate about the possibilities of using his program to continue more about CSJ, maybe even taping the "History in a Box" program for all the public to see.

Lastly, I am elated that finally after so much prodding that WCBS Radio did the piece on Antonio Meucci at the Garibaldi-Meucci Museum. If you remember, back in March the Osgood

File on WCBS did a program commemorating the anniversary of Alexander Graham Bell's obtaining the patent for the telephone. Thanks to the alert provided to me by Tony Conetta from GMM who had heard the broadcast, I immediately contacted WCBS Radio and demanded equal time for Antonio Meucci, but after so many failed attempts to get the parties together to agree on a time to do the program and constant prodding by me of the Producer Tim Scheld at WCBS, it finally came to fruition! I heard the program, and I want to thank publicly Past National and State President of OSIA and President of GMM Joe Sciamè and GMM Educator Marianna Randazzo, our OSIA honoree in literature at our last convention, for such an informative, deliberative, fact-based program in setting the record straight about Antonio Meucci as the true inventor of the telephone, a job superlatively well-done! Grazie mille! Joe and Marianna were quite a team, and we should all be so proud of their knowledge and competence!

Stay tuned for the next CSJ update at the winter plenary session.

Respectfully submitted,

Lou Gallo  
NYS CSJ Chairman