

NIAF. Two Days of Italian/American Affairs

Anthony J. Tamburri° (October 14, 2007)



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This past weekend, October 12 and 13, the National Italian American Foundation held its annual gala in Washington, DC. Honoring Rudy Giuliani, Bill Novelli, Nancy Pelosi, Ellen Pompeo, Connie Stevens, and Martin Scorsese (who received the first Jack Valenti award, in memory of the long-time MPAA chief), New York's gracious Maria Bartiromo emceed NIAF's 32nd black-tie affair with more than 3000 people in attendance.

Giuliani, Pelosi, and Stevens delivered wonderfully articulate and heart-felt speeches; Giuliani, as expected, peppered his with that usual streak of comedy we so often witness. Scorsese, in receiving his award, made it clear that he has always worked within the system's rules, taking issue, so it seemed, with those who may have, over the years, questioned his aesthetic repertoire. Pompeo, in turn, delivered a notably short speech, while musing aloud why she was even there.

At the traditional Friday night "Salute to the Martini," gala goers were treated to an evening of music



by the legendary singer and song-writer Neil Sedaka. As ever before, Sedaka belted out his old classics with the same passion and delight as he did back when he first performed them.

One of the weekend's highlights was a two-hour panel dedicated to the question of whether there is indeed an Italian-American vote. Michael Barone, Joseph Cerrell, Robert Novak, and Bill Schneider rounded out the panel; Kenneth Ciongoli, NIAF's chairman, moderated. With Italian Americans split three ways (36 percent Republican, 37 percent Democratic, 30 percent Independent), it seems at first glance unlikely that Italian Americans might swing an election. However, were Giuliani to make it out of the Republican primaries, some people present thought that only then, perhaps, Giuliani's ethnicity might indeed have an impact. The one question that seems to loom is, what would the anti-Hillary Italian/American democrat do? Would s/he vote for Giuliani, foregoing any party allegiance? Would that vote be more of an anti-Hillary vote or a pro-Italian/American candidate vote? These are questions that at this time we obviously cannot answer. However, it is something we in the Italian/American community should eventually explore. Such a point surely recalls for us the 1984 presidential elections, when the then vice-presidential candidate, Geraldine Ferraro, was tainted with accusations of her and her family being involved in organized crime. At the time, to our chagrin, the then major Italian/American associations remained silent, leaving her to fend for herself.

There were over 200 young Italian Americans in attendance as part of the NIAF's Youth Program of student to leaders, aptly labeled S2L. Sixty of those present were, in fact, hosted by New Jersey's Cav. Joseph Coccia and the Joseph and Elda Coccia Foundation. They were treated to a series of seminars and workshops on a number of prospective professions and various related issues.

Another feature of this year's NIAF was the presence of more than 120 high school and college teachers and professors of Italian. As happened two years ago, the American Association of Teachers of Italian held its annual convention in conjunction with the NIAF. Part of the collaboration involved close to twenty future teachers attending various sessions and workshops of the AATI. The keynote lecturer for the AATI was journalist and Columbia University professor, Alexander Stille.

Furthermore, as people mulled around during the two-day affair, they could roam through the "Piazza d'Italia" and visit the numerous stands of the many Italian and Italian/American companies and organizations present. Two promising enterprises include the Dolce TV channel and ItalNet TV station, both neighbors of ours here in New York. We look forward to their eventual realization.

Finally, there were many friendly faces in the crowd: NY Supreme Court Justice and NIAF national board member Dominic Massaro; Italian Heritage and Culture Month's president Joseph Sciamè; Soprano Christina Fontanelli; and Italian American Museum president Joseph Scelsa. Appearances from the entertainment world included: Yogi Berra, Tony LoBianco, Gina Lollobrigida, Dion DiMucci, and Jerry Vale.

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