

It Takes an Italian-American Neighborhood. Interview with John Viola

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President and COO on how NIAF (National Italian American Foundation) is being rejuvenated and transformed into a rallying point for the entire community.

Tell us a bit about NIAF. How, why and when was it born?

The National Italian American Foundation was founded in 1975 to be our community's first national voice in Washington. NIAF was created to serve a real need in our community. At the time, that meant an organized presence in national politics. From there I think the community saw NIAF as a new way of doing things and began to look for "membership," which is how we ended up becoming a membership organization.



No one can help noticing how young you are relative to previous national NIAF leaders How does NIAF work to relate to younger generations?

Obviously my age (I will turn the big 3-0 on August 17th) says that NIAF's Board of Directors is committed to being at the forefront of a new generation of community leadership. In terms of how we engage younger generations, I think it's a threefold approach. First of all, we need to preserve our heritage and language so the next generations identify themselves as Italian Americans. And for me that means we need to correct the tragedy of abandoning Italian as a community language during World War II. We need to give the gift of Italian language back to the new generations so they can be a part of a larger Italian community around the world.

Second, we need to speak to younger Italian Americans in new ways, so we have begun to really concentrate on social media content, evolving the NIAF blog, completely re-engineering NIAF.org (which will be unveiled at our 38th Anniversary Gala weekend on October 25-26th here in Washington DC) and finding partners like i-Italy that do such a great job of deciphering the issues and reporting on what's important to Italians and Italian Americans. We are not journalists, but we can be a great platform for the community.

Finally, we need to be changing what it is we offer young people for their support. We are expanding from promoting traditional scholarships to creating job fairs, fellowships, internships with some of our members, entry-level jobs and other work experiences. Our generation faces an incredible uphill climb when entering the job market, and we want to make the resources and opportunities created by established and engaged Italian Americans available to the next generation of Italian Americans. I see lots of successful Italian Americans who like the idea of giving a young Italian American a shot at success, and I want our foundation to help make that happen more often. We need to look out for one another.

People think NIAF is just an elite Washington lobby. Why is it important for ordinary Italian Americans to belong to NIAF?

This is the single most important thing to me and the driving reason for my coming here almost 2 years ago. People think of NIAF as elitist because, frankly, we've often acted elitist. Like any organization, after almost 40 years you need to have a "gut check" and really reassess who you are and who you want to be going forward. I think I can safely speak for our leadership and certainly for myself when I say the new NIAF is for the entire community. I'm a big believer in respecting everyone. We want people passionate about our community and culture, regardless of their personal income.

All Italian Americans have a place here at NIAF because this organization can be the central place, the rallying point, the umbrella – or however you want to see it – for the entire community. We're committed to gathering the resources of engaged Italians and Italian Americans to support good, virtuous, and efficient grass-roots work in our community and projects of excellence that concern our people and culture. As we assimilate, and it gets harder and harder to access our culture at home or in a familiar neighborhood, we want NIAF to be the place where people can come and feel at home. We want NIAF to be the neighborhood! And I think if you've been to our recent events, both big and small, you are beginning to sense that.

What do you have planned for this year's gala in Washington?

Well, the Gala Weekend is certainly evolving, and that's a multiyear process. That said, this year will have old favorites and some new aspects. First of all, the traditional Saturday afternoon auction luncheon and the Friday night live entertainment have been combined into an all-new event called "Come Fly With Me," which we are really excited about. It's a Casino night, auction and party hosted by NIAF and Alitalia, and it is going to be a night of Italian-American fun like you've never seen before! It will be hosted at the Reagan Building here in Washington, which is a beautiful venue, and we have a ton of exciting details we are working on with Alitalia to really make the event special, but we're in the final stages of planning, so I won't give them away just yet! Let's just say if you think a



red-carpet event is something, wait until you walk the green carpet!

On a more serious note, we are really excited that this year will be the first in what we see as a long-term partnership with the Italian American Studies Association. This partnership means our attendees will be treated to quality conferences featuring the foremost Italian and Italian-American thinkers tackling questions that mean something to our community and its future. We will also hold a second “NIAF: Ieri, Oggi, Domani” conference, which was such a great success last year, and has turned into an opportunity for the community to speak directly to NIAF’s leadership, hear what we are planning for the coming year and, more importantly, tell us what is important to them. And of course, we have the movie screenings, wine tastings, and expo space that people love so much.

Our 2013-2014 Region of Honor is Campania, which I am personally excited about because it’s where my grandparents came from, and they will be introducing our audience to all kinds of food, wine, products and companies.

Finally, the Gala Dinner itself will have evolved a little from last year. We are trying to inject some entertainment into the later part of the event and make the first portion of the evening about highlighting our amazing honorees, telling their stories and hearing their thoughts. It really killed me last year (my first) when I saw how hard it was for people to share with us on their night of honor with a room of 2,000 clinking forks and knives, so we want to avoid that. We are also bringing in live subtitles on the big screens, so for the first time ever we won’t have any Italian-English language gap!

And then of course we have some great surprises planned for the Chairman’s after-hours party, which is really important to us, believe it or not. It’s the time when everybody gets to let down their hair and really bask in the glow of being around thousands of very proud Italians and Italian Americans. And the good company of family is at the heart of who we are as an organization. Anyone who saw me screaming “O surdato ‘nnammurato” at last year’s gala knows how much I love being together in the warmth of our songs and traditions!

At the 38th anniversary Gala of the National Italian American Foundation (Washington, DC, October 26) there will be three Honorees: Diana Bracco, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Bracco; Roberto Colaninno, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Piaggio &C. S.p.A., and George Randazzo, Founder National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame. More info: <http://www.niaf.org>. [2]

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