

NIAF 41st Anniversary Gala: A Star-Studded Success

Kayla Pantano (October 20, 2016)



Political dignitaries, celebrities, and guests gathered in D.C. to honor standout Italians Americans and to celebrate a shared heritage.

This past weekend the [National Italian American Foundation](#) [2] (NIAF) hosted its [annual Gala Weekend](#) [3] at the Washington Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, D.C. Packed with cultural events featuring an abundance of delicious Italian food and immersive experiences, the highlight was the black-tie gala awards dinner that feted film and television directors [Joseph and Anthony Russo](#) [4] ([Arrested Development](#) [5], [Captain America](#) [6]), football great [Franco Harris](#) [7] (Pittsburgh Steelers), and many others.

Comedian [Joe Piscopo](#) [8] and [NIAF President John M. Viola](#) [9] emceed the evening with a mix of humor, charm, and sincerity. Gala Weekend Chairman Frank Giordano welcomed the evening's guests, followed by Italy's Ambassador to the United States [Armando Varricchio](#) [10], who expressed, "This is a great celebration of friendship between the United States and Italy." He continued to thank



NIAF and affiliates for raising more than half a million dollars in the wake of the August 24 earthquake that devastated Central Italy. In honor of both countries, the children's group of Italians in D.C. performed the Italian and American national anthems.

NIAF Board member Paolo Catalfamo and General Counsel Arthur J. Furia then introduced this year's Region of Honor, Piemonte, which was celebrated in video that paid homage to the area. Over 1,500 guests enjoyed Italian specialty fare and Barolo wine from the region as award winning Jazz accordionist [Cory Pesaturo](#) [11] took center stage. More exciting entertainment featured music legend [Tony Renis](#) [12], who received a standing ovation after admitting he had not sung in public for 20 years, serenading the crowd with his famous "[Quando Quando Quando](#) [13]." The Russo brothers also caused a buzz when they auctioned off a walk on role in the next [Avengers](#) [14] film, and announced a new NIAF program to assist young filmmakers in telling the Italian American experience.

As recipients of the Jack Valenti Institute Award, they delivered an inspiring speech saying, "We feel blessed to have had a classic Italian American upbringing." Their story of belonging to a tight-knot, loyal family is familiar one but touching and relatable. "For all the things you can take away from the Italian American experience, this may be the most important - your family will always be there," said Anthony Russo. "We stand on the shoulders of our parents and their parents."

When accepting his NIAF Special Achievement Award, Hall of Famer and Super Bowl Champion Mr. Harris recalled his Italian mother's cooking during his youth in New Jersey, whose father served in WWII and met his mother during the Allied campaign in Italy. He added, "Going to Italy, did it help me understand and appreciate my Italian heritage? It really did."

Other honorees included: [Stefano Pessina](#) [15], CEO of Walgreens Boots Alliance, Inc.; [Dr. Aileen Riotto Sirey](#) [16], founder of the National Organization of Italian American Women; [Giuseppe Lavazza](#) [17], Vice-Chairman of Luigi Lavazza S.p.A.; and [Maria Franca Ferrero](#) [18] of Ferrero Group. Pessina said of his Special Achievement Award in Business, "I feel very pleased to be a very small part of the great contributions Italian Americans have made to this country." Mrs. Ferrero, the widow of [Michele Ferrero](#) [19], accepted her honor via video, stating, "We are proud to support NIAF and its activities and support the Italian culture and heritage in the United States."

Between speeches, Italian singer and actress [Alma Manera](#) [20] performed moving pop opera renditions of "Magnificat," an extract from the opera "Maria Di Nazareth" by Mino Reitano. This was followed by an update from Board members [Anita Bevacqua McBride](#) [21] and Dr. John Rosa on NIAF's vigorous scholarship programs that administered 180 scholarships valued at \$950,000 in 2016.

A total star-studded success, celebrities were left and right from the likes of singer Deana Martin, daughter of the late Dean Martin, to actor Sebastian Stan of Captain America and Will Malnati, American restaurateur, entrepreneur, and podcast host. NIAF also welcomed important political figures, including [Congressman Tom Marino](#) [22] and former [Congresswoman Connie Morella](#) [23] of Maryland.

At the end of the Gala, NIAF Board Members thanked Board Chairman Joseph Del Raso in a touching speech to commemorate his retirement.

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- [4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russo_brothers
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