Honoring Legacies and Projecting Towards the Future at NIAF's New York Gala

R. C. (April 17, 2015)

The Kickoff celebration of the 40th Anniversary of the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) took place at Cipriani's in New York. This year a new award was given out: the Mario Cuomo Award in community leadership and public service, received by Attorney General Janet Di Fiore. Present at the Gala were also various prominent Italian American figures, such as the current Governor Andrew Cuomo, NIAF president John Viola, actors Chazz Palminteri and Ralph Macchio, news anchor Ken Rosato, chairman of NIAF Joseph Raso, and many others. All had great input on many topics regarding Italian American culture, integration, discourse, as well as the connection with Italy, especially in view of Expo Milano.

Illustrious members of the Italian American community fill the halls of Cipriani on 42nd Street, in the occasion of NIAF's New York Gala, the first in a series of celebrations for the organization's 40th Anniversary.

The event was devoted to the celebration of Italian culture and heritage and brought together various representatives of the culture to discuss the importance of NIAF, the role it has played, and the role it will play in building a strong Italian American network.

This year's celebration was very important because it introduced a new award: The Mario Cuomo Award.
The very first recipient of this award dedicated to the memory of Governor Mario Cuomo was Attorney General Janet Di Fiore of Westchester County, New York, who was rewarded for her achievements in public service and leadership.

Present at the event was current Governor of the State of New York and son of Mario Cuomo, Andrew Cuomo.

The Governor gave heartfelt speech, thanking NIAF for the recognition it gave its father, who cared deeply about the organization and was proud of his Italian heritage. "Wherever he was", he said "he was an Italian American first".

"My father" he continued "was dedicated to represent the best of the Italian American people. And he wanted to model the best of the Italian American culture. And he did".

After touching the audience with his father's inspirational and moving story, from the struggles he faced growing up in a working class family of immigrants, the hard work and commitment he exercised in moving up despite the discrimination he encountered, and up to the moment he died, just after he, his son, was officially sworn in as Governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo praised NIAF's choice of Janet Di Fiore as the first recipient of the award, saying his father, who knew her personally, would have certainly approved.

As Joseph Del Raso, Chairman of NIAF, brought up, "Mario Cuomo exemplified the best of Italian American intellectual and leadership activities.
Our community has always been proud to call him one of our own". The decision to name the new award after him was therefore a more than appropriate one.

Another important focus of the night was looking towards the future. NIAF president John Viola is amongst those who brought it up, first of all by his very presence: it is indeed a very promising signal to see someone as young as him in such an important position.

Viola told us about the first ever Italian American Leadership Counsel Forum, which had taken place that very morning, in partnership with the Lombardia region (the region of Milan), which has been named NIAF's 2015 region of honor. The forum discussed the upcoming Milan Expo and the future investment opportunities that will come from it.

In fact, Viola pointed out how, although it was started in Washington in 1974 and its headquarters remain there "to make sure that Italian Americans are represented in the halls of power", NIAF operates in New York – "the Italian American capitol" –, all over the country and is focusing on cultivating strong relationships with Italy as well.

When asked about the importance of NIAF, Viola answered "I see my role as introducing the communities of Italians all over the world to one another in a new way", thus emphasizing the organization's goal to act as a network and to positively promote Italian culture.

Italian Consul General in New York, Natalia Quintavalle, also present at the gala, expressed her impression that the organization seems to be succeeding in doing just that.
"Tonight I see many friends but also many new, interesting faces. This reflects how NIAF, the most

important and most ancient of all Italian American organizations, covering the entire national territory, is making a change and reaching both old and new members of the Italian American community", she explained.

As anchor for WABC-TV's morning and noon newscasts, Ken Rosato brought up in an interview he conducted with us in a completely fluent Italian, and as many Italian Americans will know, Italian heritage was once something people were ashamed of. "When I was little my grandparents kept telling me that it was important to only speak English at home" He told us.
"But when I turned 13 or 14, I decided I wanted to learn Italian because I thought it was important to have a connection with the roots of Italy"

Thanks to the work of individuals like Mario Cuomo and of organizations such as NIAF, more and more people have started to feel proud of their Italian heritage. The presence of Italian Americans in media is also useful in achieving such results. "There are many Italians in the US and it's important for them to be represented on television" stated Rosato.

Actor Ralph Macchio, whose parents are of Italian and Greco-Italian heritage, told us he has always been a "proud Italian American" and spoke of the importance of handing down the traditions of "the old country" to the younger generations.

And the success of NIAF's events shows that he is not alone, that many people find pride in their Italian heritage and that organizations focusing on its promotion can count on great support.

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