The Italian American Family Gathers at "Il Centro" in Brooklyn

Giada Gramanzini (June 24, 2018)

On June 21, the first Italian-American Cultural Community Center built in New York City was inaugurated in Bensonhurst in the presence of political personalities representing the New York Italian American Community. The new facility will soon represent a reference point for both the promotion of the Italian cultural heritage and a multi-cultural society. Chairman of the Board G. Jack Spatola took the floor reminding the importance of the Italian Dual Language Program which is spreading in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Francesco Genuardi, Consul General of Italy, recognized the importance of Il Centro as an important landmark for the promotion of Italian language too.

It took more than 20 years, but now Brooklyn finally has a brand new cultural center thanks to the perseverance and hard work of **FIAO (Federation of Italian-American Organizations)** [2], a non-profit organization established in 1975. Born from the efforts of dozens of associations, FIAO has been providing services to the community since the very beginning with the aim of improving the quality of life of individuals and families, by focusing on the most needy people, such as immigrants, seniors and youth. The association offers social assistance, education and recreational programs.

A reference point for a multi-cultural society

Located at 8711 Cristoforo Colombo Blvd. (18th Ave) in Bensonhurst, Il Centro **[3] is the first Italian American Cultural Community Center built in New York City**.

The new headquarters intends to expand the FIAO's services mentioned above representing a reference point for a multi-cultural society. Therefore, the recently inaugurated facility will offer more activities thanks to the opening of new classrooms and space for community use, an indoor swimming pool, a gymnasium and a Performing Arts auditorium.

"The aim is to maintain our cultural heritage through the generations," said the Chairman of the Board G. **Jack Spatola**. "I believe that this center will give the opportunity to others who do not belong to our culture, to appreciate it even more. Because everyone likes and everyone wants to embrace our beautiful, rich, traditional culture. Il Centro was created for this reason, for our families, for our progeny. I hope that this project will be able to expand not only through future generations, but thanks to the entire population."

Besides, Spatola leads together with Principal Louise Verdemare-Alfano the **Dual Language Program** [4] at P.S. 112, started in 2015. Now, Bensonhurst finally has its own first Italian DL classes at P.S. 768 and, as Spatola said, "It is an extraordinary achievement. What about the heritage? What about our kids? Through the language and through the culture we're becoming even prouder of who we are in order to embrace everyone else. We have it, and now DLP is spreading in Manhattan as well. So, congratulations!"

The mission of Doctor Antonino Parisi

This cultural project is rooted in Doctor Antonino Parisi's mission: He was a surgeon coming from Sicily who, once arrived in Brooklyn, immediately bacame aware of how many poor people there were and how much it was right to help them.

Supported by FIAO and by all those donors who believed in what he used to do for the community, Parisi laid the foundations of his dream more than 20 years ago. But, he unfortunately could not see its realization as he passed away in 2006. For this reason, Il Centro will also be known as the Doctor Parisi Center.

The inauguration

Il Centro hosted an inauguration ceremony on June 21, summoning not only ordinary people but also the legislators of the city and the state of New York and the top political personalities representing the New York Italian American Community. Among them, the former First Lady of New York Matilda Cuomo, the Consul Generaly of Italy Francesco Genuardi and the Deputy Secretary General at the General Council of Italians Abroad **Silvana Mangione**.

Matilda Cuomo, widow of the former New York's Governor Mario Cuomo, took the floor with a touching speech about the family addressing everyone in the room, especially young people: "I don't care how old you get or how much you really succeed. There is one thing you will look back in the future asking yourself. For whom have I done the most important things in my life? La famiglia. The family unit is the only thing that matters. I am a teacher by profession and I often get into a lot of broken families and children who have troubles at home. So, I just remember the spirit of Italian people. If there is someone who believes in the spirit of the family, it's the Italians!"

Francesco Genuardi, Consul General of Italy [5], spoke as well, recognizing the importance of Il Centro as a landmark for the promotion of Italian language, culture, heritage, of the Italian way of

educating and raising children. “It is a big pleasure and honor for me and the consular team to be here in such a special moment," said Genuardi. "It is a dream coming true.

It’s a proof that the FIAO team leaded by Chairman of the Board Jack Spatola, President Carlo Scissura and Brooklyn Director of External Affairs Joseph Rizzi, did what many federations and associations in the world have always dreamed; that is building an Italian home and landmark in the heart of a fantastic borough like Brooklyn. We all knew that Brooklyn was cool but now it is even cooler!”

Il Centro is the first Italian American Cultural Community Center constructed in the City of New York. It is at 8703-8711 Cristoforo Colombo Blvd (18th Avenue), Brooklyn.

Il Centro is a cultural resources to Italian Americans as well as a model to all ethnic groups in how to preserve, celebrate and care one's own heritage in a multi-cultural society.

Visit their website >> [6]

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