

A Triad of Women to Look Up To

Eleonora Mazzucchi (January 15, 2009)



This year's honorees at "Three Wise Women" were Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro, Angelina Fiordellisi and Dr. Silvia C. Formenti

On January 9th the [National Organization of Italian American Women \(NOIAW\)](#) [2] honored three women who represent excellence in their fields. The annual "Three Wise Women" event takes inspiration from the Epiphany, in Western culture the commemoration of the Magi, or three Wise Men. It is fitting that the organization, a necessary counterweight to male-dominated clubs, should take advantage of the holiday to underline the achievements of three outstanding Italian American women. This year's honorees, Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro, Angelina Fiordellisi and Dr. Silvia C. Formenti, were greeted at the Upper East Side headquarters of the [Columbus Citizens Foundation](#) [3].



Within the light wainscoted rooms that are the signature of Fifth Avenue townhouses, and an opulent Oak Room of elaborately carved wood, one hundred or so guests were invited to eat, drink and partake in a NOIAW auction. The space lit by chandeliers, and adorned with lights, garlands, frosted branches and a towering Christmas tree--helped along by the presence of some vocal children in little blazers and red sweaters--exuded a distinctly Epiphany-like ambience. A few preliminary speakers, introduced by President Carol Silvagni Macleod, shared stories reflective of the organization's mission. Linda R. Carlozzi was in NOIAW's mentorship program and is now a lawyer, Matilde Leo, a mirthful story-teller, former jazz singer and probation officer, was able to go to law school through a NOIAW scholarship, and NYU student Lisa Bonarrigo sentimentally recounted her cultural exchange in Italy, sponsored by NOIAW. The women's personal accounts also provided insight into whom the organization attracts, what their common history is: Carlozzi's mother was a seamstress, as was NOIAW founder Aileen Riotto Sirey's and Rosa DeLauro's. Matilde Leo humorously mimicked an Italian-immigrant accent when she told that her mother's greatest ambition for her was to become a bank teller: "Tilde, go work in a bank, it's air-conditioned!" It is with this background in mind that NOIAW emphasized its dedication to scholarship, mentorship and cultural exchange programs

The three wise women took to the podium, introduced by Founder and Chairwoman Aileen Riotto Sirey. Angelina Fiordellisi, an accomplished actress, was bestowed NOIAW's honor for her artistic contributions. As founder of the New Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village, she has created a venue for budding playwrights and performers and helps to preserve the integrity of the downtown arts milieu. A native of Detroit, she is also married to director/ producer Matt Williams. Her gifts as an actress were apparent; her perfectly articulate voice and moving words painted the picture of an Italian American upbringing shared with many sisters (some of whom were present, prompting one person to joke that growing up they were probably known as "the Fiordellisi girls") and a mother who taught her the "importance of love, marriage and family." The subject of matriarchy would pervade the speeches of the other honorees too. Dr. Silvia Formenti, who is the first Sandra and Edward H. Meyer Professor of Radiation Oncology at NYU and Chair of the Department of Radiation Oncology (she is also the only senior leader of the NYU Cancer Institute who is a female chair), spoke of the strength of the Italian women she grew up with. As an oncologist who treats many women with breast cancer, she said she sees that strength mirrored every day in her patients. Their seeming "smiles of resignation" are really "smiles of tenacity," from which she draws inspiration.

Rosa DeLauro, Democratic Congresswoman from the 3rd district of Connecticut, who, incidentally, is a survivor of ovarian cancer, gave what was perhaps the most vivid of orations. This event, she began, "is about remembering and reflecting on the people who came before us; people like my mother who worked in a sweatshop". She recalled that her mother would bring her to see the sweatshop after school, to show her what it was like "the lesson was clear: work hard, make something of yourself." Her mother would go on to forge her own path in politics, becoming the longest serving alderwoman in New Haven. She also told of her grandmother who ran a pastry shop, an example from a hard-working class who "did what they needed to do." To the many women in the room her diction was riveting, particularly to those from Connecticut, where she founded a NOIAW branch. One audience member murmured "She's amazing;" Ms. DeLauro's career is equally deserving of praise. She is one of the foremost members on the House Budget Committee, chairwoman of the Agriculture Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee and serves on the Labor-Health and Human Services-Education Subcommittees. She has been called a "hero for working families" and was short listed for the post of Labor Secretary in the Obama administration. Most recently, along with former Senator Hillary Clinton, she led the passing of the Paycheck Fairness Act which will end the unfair salary disparity between men and women performing the same jobs

Ms. DeLauro's words couldn't have been truer: "We live in a matriarchal society, ladies." With the inspired selection of DeLauro, Fiordellisi and Formenti, NOIAW showcased paragons not just of female leadership, but of leadership period.



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