

The Miracle of San Gennaro Lives in New York

Peter Esposito (September 25, 2011)



Little Italy, Mahnattan. Bill Russo talks of the San Gennaro Blood Drive, an original initiative sponsored by the American Red Cross, on September 18th, 2011, at the Old St. Patrick's Church Youth Center.

The concept of holding a blood drive at the San Gennaro Festival in the Little Italy section of New York City may be thought of simultaneously as novel, misplaced, and brilliant. It was certainly a first when Bill Russo organized the drive, sponsored by the American Red Cross, on September 18th, 2011, at the Old St. Patrick's Church Youth Center.

But even more interesting is how and why the blood drive came about. Since 1926, New York City residents of Italian-American descent have lined Mulberry Street in downtown Manhattan annually to



celebrate Saint Januarius, the patron saint of Naples. Since its humble beginnings as a small street fair of the Nappi, Vitale, Montanini and Tisi families, "San Gennaro," as the locals simply call it, has blossomed into one of the most famous and most beloved festivals in New York, becoming iconic of the Italian American community.

Yet not everyone shares the enthusiasm that has made the festival so popular. Many of today's residents in the area of Little Italy have complained about the supposedly excessive noise generated by the festival. (It is perhaps of note that there are very few Italian residents that remain in the neighborhood of Little Italy, though the festival does still attract many Italian Americans from outside the area.)

So in early March 2011, there was the proposal to downsize the festival and cut back on the number and length of activities. However, when Bill Russo proposed that the festival remain the same size and length, but offer something other than dancing and sausage and peppers, the idea seemed to ring home with many in the Figli di San Gennaro, the organization that has sponsored and organized the festival since 1996. Russo advocated for the First Annual Feast of San Gennaro Blood Drive, with the goal of giving back to the community something other than just food and music, as excellent as they may be. Sponsored by the Old St. Patrick's Church and the Figli di San Gennaro, the blood drive was successfully conducted on Sunday, September 18th at the Old St. Patrick's Church Youth Center.

This blood drive held special significance for a number of reasons. Saint Januarius, patron saint of Naples, has long been credited with the annual miracle of the liquefaction of blood in the city of Naples, Italy. Three times a year, the faithful gather in the cathedral to witness this miracle, in which vials of dried blood, purportedly of Saint Januarius, are brought out and processed through the streets to the Monastery of Saint Chiara, where they are left on the church's altar for as long as eight days, during which time, as the faithful gather around to offer prayers, the dried blood liquefies. This miracle has been recorded since 1389, more than a thousand years after the saint's death, and continues to this day. It is therefore particularly fitting for a blood drive to be held at the festival of San Gennaro.

It is not only religious significance that makes the blood drive so appropriate; there is also a more pertinent and directly relatable reason for the blood drive. This year was the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, and there was no community greater effected than Lower Manhattan. Many residents of Lower Manhattan lost their lives that day, and local businesses for months, even years, afterwards suffered from the ill economic and community effects of the attack. The San Gennaro blood drive therefore not only honors the saint whose blood liquefies annually, but also gives back to the community of Lower Manhattan, in a very real way, the blood that was shed that September morning 10 years ago. Regarding the success of the San Gennaro blood drive, Thomas Kane of the American Red Cross gives the following statistics: 84 people signed in, of these 84 people an impressive 69 were first-time blood donors, and 58 units of blood were taken. These 58 units of blood will assist 174 patients nationally. (For each unit of blood taken, 3 patients may be helped.)

As Bob Marshall of the Figli di San Gennaro stated, "Considering it was our first time, it was very successful...The Red Cross was pleased with the results." When we asked if the Figli di San Gennaro would be interested in continuing the annual blood drive, Mr. Marshall responded with a simple, "Yes." We hope that the success of this first blood drive will continue in the years to come, and that by this blood drive the miracle of Saint Januarius will be freshly remembered.

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