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The Officers' Log

MAJOR GIFT RECEIVED

The Italic Institute has just wiped out its debt thanks to a grant from the Mancini Family. The tax-deductible donation of \$45,000 is the second largest recorded in our 21 years of operation. The Mancini Family requires that the money be used to eliminate our outstanding debt. John Mancini, spokesman for the family and our current IIA Chairman, says that the donation is “a gift of faith.” “Our family has been blessed by good fortune in these depressing times,” explained Mancini, “and we want to insure that the Italic Institute is also strong enough to weather this economic downturn.”

Vice Chairman Rosario Iaconis, who accepted the check, characterized the Mancini Family gift as “all the more amazing coming at a time when non-profits are teetering on the brink of failure throughout the country.”

Institute President Bill Dal Cerro said of the gift, “It was a bolt out of the blue. It wipes



John Mancini delivers the good tidings to Vice Chairman Rosario Iaconis

the slate clean and positions the Institute to rebuild its financial foundation.”

LA CASA ITALIANA

Dialogue Begins



Rosario Iaconis, Barbara Faedda, John Mancini

In the last *Log* we reported how the Casa Italiana at Columbia University has very little interest in Italian American affairs despite being built and donated to Columbia by our community in 1927.

Through the intercession of Institute member Judge Dominic Massaro, Chairman John Mancini and Vice Chairman Rosario Iaconis first met with Italy's Consul General Francesco Talo' and then with the acting Director of *La Casa*, Barbara Faedda. A major reason that Italian Americans are not a significant component of *La Casa* is that the building was sold to the Italian government in 1990 and a new charter sets the mission.

Both Consul General Talo' and Dr. Faedda agreed that more needs to be done to blend the Italian American
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AURORA SUSPENDED

The Council of Governors has suspended all *Aurora* operations, effective immediately. Eight classes were planned for the Metro New York area and a new site in Chicago, all commencing on or about November 1, 2008.

Citing New York State's fiscal problems, Institute debt and the continued indifference of the major Italian American organizations, the governors believed that the program could not pay for itself. The decision was made despite promises of \$41,000 in state and city grants. “On the one hand local legislators are promising all this money



before Election Day,” explained our Chairman John Mancini. “But the newspapers report New York State is cutting all ‘member items’ by 50%. We have been through that once before and lost \$15,000.” [In 2001, the Institute had fourteen *Aurora* sites that were adversely affected by 9/11. Such are the problems associated with public grants.]

What disturbed the governors even more
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community into La Casa's activities. This is especially appropriate for the Italian American students at Columbia. It is generally agreed that those students feel no special attachment to *La Casa*, which was essentially built for them in 1927. Dr. Faedda, who is an Italian citizen, agreed to compile a preliminary list of Italian American students which will be a step toward soliciting their interest in Italic studies on campus.

La Casa was founded to be the center of Italic studies in the nation. It has a very long way to go and hopefully both Columbia and the Italian government will acknowledge the intent of the founders.



BALBO REMEMBERED

The year 2008 marked the 75th anniversary of Italo Balbo's historic flight across the Atlantic to the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. To commemorate the event in Chicago our Vice Chairman (Midwest) Don Fiore made himself available at a number of venues in his capacity as America's foremost expert on the flight.

As a guest of Robert Allegrini, Regional Vice Chairman of NIAF, Don spoke to a luncheon crowd of business executives and media representatives. Conveniently, the luncheon was held overlooking Lake Michigan within sight of Balbo's flawless landing of 33 Italian seaplanes after a 19-day air voyage that began offshore of Rome.

A monument to Balbo still stands by the lake and the citizens of Chicago named a nearby street Balbo Drive. Don Fiore continues to do his best to keep Balbo and Italy's great feat in aeronautical history alive. Our Institute is grateful to President Dominic Massaro and officer Robert Allegrini of the American Society of the Italian Legions of Merit for a grant that made this commemoration possible.

ABYSMAL STATE

The Community Has Lost Its Bearings

If you haven't figured it out yet, the Italic Institute is not the Pollyanna of organizations. We, more often than not, see the glass as half empty. This attitude derives from two things. First, we are not a foundation, but a worker in the fields. We don't raise money to give it away but need it to accomplish our mission. Second, we were founded in 1987 to do something the other organizations weren't doing, namely, raise the intellectual standard of the Italian heritage. We refer to the mission as changing an "immigrant" mentality to a "classical" one. In terms of having enough money to achieve our mission and making intellectual progress, the Italic Institute continues to be endlessly frustrated. We thought you'd like to consider some of the major obstacles blocking our success.

Academia

Because there has never been a tradition in the Italian American community for formal heritage training, the folks who make up our academic leadership, i.e., Italian Studies programs etc., are mainly focused on the immigrant experience and very little else. The books they write and the courses they teach invariably revolve around *nonna*, the cinema, and the Mafia.

The late A. Bartlett Giamatti, president of Yale, once wrote of the immigrant generation, "...they would not have believed they were affected by Roman culture." Well, neither would most of our paid academics, who value the fictional art of *The Sopranos* more than the reality of our unequalled heritage.

Behold a sampling of Italian Heritage Month at one New York City college campus: *The Legacy of an Honor Killing in a Sicilian American Family 1919*; *Buddy* (ex Mayor Cianci of Providence, RI)- *America's Notorious Mayor*; and *Beyond Wiseguys*, a film lauding the producers of stereotypes. This is truly a community running on empty.

Cultural Strategy

In 2005, the Italian government and some of the major Italian American organizations raised \$500,000 to create an Advanced Placement test for high school students. The College Board accepted the money with the proviso that 10,000 high school students, nationally, take the test. Enrollment in Italian language rose, but only 2,000 students took the exam. This was wide off the mark. Consequently, the College Board planned to scrap the test unless the community came up with \$6 million for a new test and met new student goals. A new foundation was formed to raise this money. Unfortunately, there was still no plan to

create demand for Italian language via after-school youth programs such as *Aurora*. Community leaders believed that doing the same thing they did in 2005, only with millions of dollars, would yield a different result. As of this writing, the plans went awry when the Italian government refused to contribute. It is probably a wise decision considering the faulty strategy relied on “supply-side academics.”

Vanilla Journalism

There are a number of magazines and periodicals circulating within the community. They are all well-written and culturally informative but most stay clear of controversy and open debate. Unfortunately, with such restrictive journalism the community loses the ability to reflect on itself. No debate means no criticism. No criticism means no high standards. The bottom line is every issue is a validation of mediocrity and preservation of the status quo. Imagine if leadership, charitable giving, youth education and other issues were subjected to open journalism.

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ANOTHER LONE ACTIVIST

by Bill Dal Cerro, President

In the last *Log*, we noted that the community needs more heritage builders and less party planners. An excellent example of the former is Joseph Maselli, founder of the American Italian Renaissance Museum located in downtown New Orleans.

The three-story building, dedicated to preserving the history of Italians in the Crescent City, features exhibits, a research library and the original books of Italian American historian Giovanni



Bill Dal Cerro took this photo of Joe Maselli standing in front of a Jazz exhibit at Joe's museum in New Orleans

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has been the indifference of the major Italian American organizations and the Italian Consulate.

It is the general consensus among Institute officers and governors that the Italian American community, in general, has little understanding of youth acculturation, that is, introducing language and heritage at an early age. The examples of Greek School and Hebrew School do not seem to connect any dots. “Most Italian Americans leaders,” suggests Vice President Tony Vecchione, “think the home is the best place to learn heritage. That misguided philosophy has brought us to a dead end.”

Whether *Aurora* can survive this downturn will depend on community attitudes. A telling example is heavily Italic Nassau County on Long Island, home of the Italic Institute and birthplace of *Aurora*. Not one Italian American legislator supports *Aurora* with grants, nor do wealthy individuals such as Kenneth Langone, founder of Home Depot who lives in Nassau County and donates enormous sums to education and medical charities. (We have asked him on four occasions.) Parents and children in Nassau have supported *Aurora* for twenty years with their attendance but families are hard-pressed to meet the financial requirements to operate a class. With a combined income of over \$14 million each year among the Big Three organizations, there is enough money to make programs like *Aurora* a permanent Italian School system for our children in major suburbs.

Schiavo. Maselli was also responsible for constructing the nearby Piazza d’Italia, a colorful architectural plaza with an Italian flair.

Maselli, a successful businessman, started the museum after being denied membership to an exclusive country club back in the late 1960s. Maselli’s pro-active stance was a far cry from today’s leadership, which either ignores insults, demands payments from corporations (eg., Pepsi) or invites defamers to their galas.

The American Italian Renaissance Museum is located at 537 S. Peters Street, about a 10-minute walk from the French Quarter. Visit their website at airf.org.

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Charitable Blind Spot

When the original Italian American organizations were founded, the mission was self-help: to assist immigrants, to succor the poor and bereaved, and to create a social safety net. Later, they became a means of political leverage. Membership was enhanced by offering nominal scholarships to lure in young families. As community wealth grew, medical charities became the object of Italian American generosity. Never was the goal of any of our charitable groups to formally acculturate its children. There was, and still is, a charitable blind spot for heritage education. As though only a fool would need to be taught to be “Italian,” passing heritage to children is considered a family matter. Few have connected the dots between a child’s formative years and preserving the Italian culture. What is obviously the basic tenet (i.e., youth education) of the Catholic Church, the Boy Scouts, public schools, Greek Schools, you name it, hasn’t rung a bell in Italian American organizations.

With such a superfecta of errant priorities, is it any wonder that our heritage is solely defined by movies, commercials, parades, feasts and galas?

NEW DUES POLICY

Beginning January, 2009, annual dues will be \$50 for all members. The Italic Institute will no longer issue invoices or reminders for annual dues. Instead, all members of record will receive an *Officers’ Log* with a return envelope at the start of each year. The envelope should be returned to us with a check for \$50. Remember, there will be no reminders thereafter and your name may be deleted from our membership roll if no payment is received. We regret the need for this austere policy. Postal and printing rates have risen. But, the Italic Institute still has the lowest overhead of any Italian American 501c3 organization.

If you want our message to continue you must help sustain it.

We are the alternative!

Annual Dues are now \$50

A FILM AND AGENDA

By Anthony Vecchione, Vice President

On January 20th, the U.S. premiere of a short Italian film, *Mussolini, l’ultima notte*, was held in Manhattan to a sparse crowd under the auspices of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute and the Consul General of Italy, Francesco Maria Talo’.

The film alternated between authentic newsreels and dramatizations of the Fascist years. Italian actor/director Ugo De Vita, who plays the title role in this semi-documentary, had an opportunity to explore the political complexity of a Fascist dictator who is usually painted as a strutting clown or summarily lumped in with mass murderers such as Hitler, Stalin, or Mao. In this De Vita failed. Despite the few dramatized scenes of a broken man in 1945, this Mussolini was still the old newsreel version. In fact, De Vita goes off on unexplainable tangents, padding the film with an overlong, unrelated peptalk given by Mussolini before the war to party members about faltering relations with France. And worse, Italy’s shameful, but comparatively mild, 1938 Racial Laws are read aloud while scenes of Nazis and German troops fill the screen. Imagine retelling the similarly shameful story of the Jim Crow South or of the forced eviction of 10,000 Italian Americans from the West Coast by the U.S. Army while watching Nazi Storm Troopers parade on the screen. It would be an overt form of propaganda.

De Vita’s gross distortion of the facts is further brought home when inferring that Italian Jews were deported to German concentration camps under Mussolini’s watch. The historical data reveal that no Italian Jews and few foreign Jews were handed over to the Germans prior to Mussolini’s fall in 1943. B’nai B’rith has already produced the seminal documentary covering this subject. Aptly enough its title is *The Righteous Enemy*.

After the film, everyone in the audience was handed an announcement entitled *Giorno della Memoria: January 27*. It listed a number of events relating to Italian Jews and the Holocaust to be held over a period of four days at Italian or Italian American venues in New York City. One can only wonder why Italian Americans and their agencies need to be brought into Holocaust activities. Why is the Italian consulate drafting our agenda? With all our issues here in America do we really need to accompany Italians on their guilt trips?

It is now obvious that the Mussolini film and the *Giorno della Memoria* were related, but clearly not to Italian American interests.
