

## INTERVIEW WITH CHAIRMAN JOHN MANCINI



**Log:** Our current issue #32 seems like a turning point. What is the future of the Italic Institute?

**Mancini:** Since our founding in 1987 we have made it clear that the IIA is a movement, not just a corporation. This is our 22nd year and definitely an economic challenge. We walked right into a mega-recession that forces us to adjust our strategy. But we've adjusted before. Today, we are debt-free, but income will dictate our future activities.

**Log:** How do you define that movement?

**Mancini:** Simply put, we mean to restore the Classical Italian heritage: Rome, Latin and the Renaissance, beginning with our children and young adults.

**Log:** Is suspending the *Aurora Program* a major blow to the movement?

**Mancini:** It sure is. It wasn't costing our community a dime. Essentially, we created the first Italian heritage program using public grants. At one time we had fourteen classes. We reached 4,000 youngsters. But twenty years of operating also brought cash flow problems and deficit spending. Grants don't cover all costs and come well after bills are due, not before.

**Log:** What have you learned in 22 years?

**Mancini:** In 1987, we assumed that only 10% of Italian Americans (about 1.6 million) would understand our movement. The reality is our cultural collapse since the 1930s has been far worse than we supposed. Hollywood is finishing the job. Today, we would be lucky to attract 10,000 people to our cause.

**Log:** What type of people do we appeal to?

**Mancini:** Older people. People who see the difference between our classical approach and the food and glitz they see elsewhere. Unfortunately, because our community has no formal heritage training for children it is rare to find anyone below the age of forty or fifty interested in heritage. Look around. Most young adults who have an ethnic "awakening" don't make it past the cuisine. Add to that intermarriage and it never gets beyond food and Godfather movies.

**Log:** What was so special about the 1930s?

**Mancini:** The 1930s saw the second generation, that is, children of the immigrants, flower. There was little intermarriage. Italy was a world power, innovative, proud and without a Mafia. The educated children of the immigrants didn't view their parents as objects of derision or the local crooks as romantic characters. Italian food and organized crime weren't the obsessions they are today. We have Italian American magazines from the 1930s that are a world away from the superficial glitz being peddled today.

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**“ Ignoring our pre-teens is our community's greatest failure. ”**

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**Log:** What happened?

**Mancini:** Italy was the enemy in WW II. Fascism tainted everything. Everything associated with it: Italian nationalism, Roman history, became radioactive. The media trivialized Italy's war effort and its national character. Shame and ridicule are powerful weapons. The second generation took to the hills and the third generation pretended it came off the Mayflower.

**Log:** Aren't you ignoring the fantastic progress we have made since the war?

**Mancini:** We can't deny that Italian Americans are economically and socially robust. But so are Greek Americans, African Americans and Asian Americans, for that matter. Our community isn't anything special, even with two judges on the Supreme Court. There have been Jews and blacks on the court decades before us. It only proves that we are the equal of anyone. Didn't we know that?

**Log:** So what's the vision?

**Mancini:** After the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, our ancestors were deprogrammed by foreign occupiers and the Catholic Church. A small segment of central and northern Italy managed to remain independent of these forces and produced the Renaissance. Renaissance literally means "rebirth." It was the rebirth of Classical (Roman) Italy. All the Italian genius in art, science, commerce, architecture, even the discovery of America, came from Roman roots and that rebirth. Unfortunately, except for art, the Renaissance had little effect on southern Italy. Today, we believe that just as the rebirth of Classical Italy released Italian genius, so could it change the way Italian Americans see themselves and their place in America.



**Log:** Why do we need to change anything?

**Mancini:** This is precisely what 16 million Italian Americans are asking us. They read about Italian food, Italian art and Italian cars and they are convinced they have the world on a string. Even the rave reviews of Mafia movies and the elevation of Italian crime to an art form swells many with pride. Since the Second World War they have replaced Fascism with the Mafia. It's iconic. It represents strength, virility and organization, whether real or in the movies and newspapers. If that mentality doesn't need to change, then nothing does.

**Log:** What evidence do you have of this?

**Mancini:** Mafia-mania is a billion dollar industry. Just read the newspapers and watch television. We even see it among Italian American academics. Many defend *The Godfather* series and *The*

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## **“My officers and I have worn out our welcome with some leaders of the community.”**

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*Sopranos* as inspirational art. Some even write books incorporating the “wiseguy” or “the mob” as cultural starting points. But ask them to write a book about our links to Roman Italy and they will roll their eyes. Instead, they wax nostalgic about the Arab occupation of Sicily or uncover honor killing in Italian families. I went to one college panel discussion led by Italian American academics on the city's payroll determined to prove that we are congenital racists.

**Log:** So, what are the bright spots?

**Mancini:** There are none, except our members. We spent twenty years looking for bright spots. Lot had an easier time finding ten righteous men in Sodom. The wealthy refuse to respond to pleas to finance youth education. The major Italian American organizations will not accept us as a resource. *The Italic Way Magazine* and the *Aurora Youth Program* were national models for them. Instead, they use their profits to sustain medical charities or one-shot mini-grants. Heritage education is a minor concern. One major organization recently gave a scholarship to a high school student with one Italian grandparent for an essay she wrote on learning how to swirl spaghetti. Would anyone consider this a bright spot?

**Log:** But don't scholarships help our community?

**Mancini:** Anyone who has sent a kid to college knows that a \$500 or \$1,000 scholarship doesn't go very far. Scholarships are a fundraising and membership gimmick. “Scholarship” is a buzzword that does little to preserve our heritage. Scholarships are an assimilation tool. Italian Americans are well beyond that stage. They will find a way to send their kids to college just

as every American family does. What Italian Americans need is self-education. Better to give an 18-year old a free trip to Italy than hand him a scholarship.

**Log:** Have you discussed this with Italian American leaders?

**Mancini:** My officers and I have worn out our welcome with some leaders of the community. We are simply amazed at the conformity of thought among these leaders and board members.

They are all undoubtedly good, generous men and women but they are not asking themselves the tough questions. Why are we still thinking like immigrants? What is the real purpose of our organization? If the Renaissance never got to southern Italy it certainly didn't make it to our neighborhoods in America. We all need to rise above the neighborhood mentality. If the Catholic Church allowed youngsters to reach 18-years of age without attending CCD and then handed them a \$500 scholarship to study accounting, just for being "Catholic," we wouldn't have much of a religion either. Why do we have to spell it out for anyone? Greek Americans spend six years of their childhood in Greek School. Jewish kids learn Hebrew and celebrate a 3,000-year old minor military victory every Hanukkah. Our young adults see a statue of Augustus in front of gambling casinos and have no idea he was one of the greatest men in history. No one is teaching them.



**Log:** What is the Italian government doing to help our community?

**Mancini:** The Italians want to promote Italian products and tourism in the USA. Whatever money the Italian government invests in America, such as subsidizing language programs in American schools, is done to reach non-Italians. They have wasted quite a bit of money with this strategy and have now refused to help fund the Advanced Placement tests. Since WWII the Italians have never seriously considered Italian American children as a future resource. Now, they have a strategy to involve us in an annual Holocaust remembrance. What does that have to do with Italian Americans and our needs?

**Log:** Why did the Advanced Placement test fail?

**Mancini:** When the first Italian Advanced Placement test was instituted a few years ago, the U.S. College Board set a goal of 10,000 students taking the test. Well, after five years the most it could come up with was 2,000 students. Latin has double that number.

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## **“Better to give an 18-year old a free trip to Italy than hand him a scholarship.”**

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**Log:** Why couldn't they reach 10,000?

**Mancini:** Despite the beauty and usefulness of Italian it is still perceived as minor compared to “classy” French or “ubiquitous” Spanish. Even Italian American parents see Italian as nice but not vital. What is missing is the demand for Italian. Kids need to be exposed to Italian early and outside the school system, like our *Aurora Program*. Investing all your money in AP tests is basically “supply-side” academics.

**Log:** What is the perfect picture?

**Mancini:** We see a new generation of children being enrolled in a local *Aurora Program*, learning the Italian language, rudimentary Latin and 2,500 years of Italian history. We see those children attending a summer camp and earning a trip to Italy. We see even see a prep schools for teenagers . We call it the *Aurora Track*. We see a community securing its future and producing young men and women who know what their ancestors did for Western Civilization and America, not the blank slates we produce today. They will then be prepared to carry our heritage.

**Log:** Will this happen in your lifetime?

**Mancini:** No, nor anyone else's if we continue to support these short-sighted activities of many organizations. It won't happen if we continue to be impressed with glossy gala photos. It won't happen if we don't go public with our dissatisfaction. We need to complain loudly. Our community enjoys sentimental things: stories about the immigrant generation, the old traditions. Even I enjoy these things. I came out of an old Brooklyn neighborhood. My father and grandparents on both sides were all Italian immigrants. But taking comfort and joy in our memories is not the stuff of progress. Today, our kids and grandkids are mostly mixed blood. They need more than anecdotes and warm family gatherings to pump up their Italian pride. Ignoring our pre-teens is our community's greatest failure. Limiting our heritage to scholarships, pandering to self-motivated Hollywood filmmakers and glorifying food and fashion are meaningless in the long run. They contribute to our superficiality.

**Log:** So, what can our members do to help the cause?

**Mancini:** They need to support our efforts financially and demand new direction from the major organizations. We have stopped billing for membership dues. It was just another layer of administration and overhead. Instead, we shall send out January newsletters (*The Officers' Log*) with return envelopes. There will be a single membership level at \$50 per annum. A new *Italic Way Magazine* is in the pipeline and *Aurora* can be restarted next year if we can build membership and resolve our cash flow. The Italic Institute must continue. We can't leave the field to the old guard. Our future cannot be behind us.

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## TID BITS

### **CHINESE IN ITALY** [excerpted from an article in the *Chicago Tribune* by Christine Spolar]

The transformation of Prato, just outside Florence marks a remarkable chapter in European immigration. This city has become the latest gateway for Chinese ambitions.

Like some city neighborhoods, suburbs and small towns across the U. S. where Mexicans and other immigrants gather in search of jobs, Prato is a place where two culturally different communities can live side-by-side and never really know each other.

"In all my travels, I had never seen anything like it," said Roberto Ye, a son of Chinese immigrants and an Italian citizen who opened a Western Union office in the heart of Prato. "I said to myself, This is not like being in Chinatown in Chicago or New York or anywhere else. This is like China. White people are the foreigners here."

To understand the impact, follow the money. This year, Chinese immigrants in Italy sent home a whopping 1.68 billion euros, about \$2.4 billion, the lion's share of all 6 billion euros in remittances recorded by Italy's government.

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### **ITALIAN IN CHINA**

Speaking of China, one of America's influential scholars on Chinese language passed away in January at the age of 97. John DeFrancis was born Francesco di Francesco to Italian immigrants in Connecticut. With a Yale degree in economics DeFrancis sought his fortune in China where he studied in Beijing and took an epic journey across China in 1935 retracing the path of Genghis Khan. His skill with Mandarin eventually led him to publish the 12-volume DeFrancis series of textbooks widely used in U.S. schools during the 1970s and 80s. But his most ambitious goal was to have Communist Chinese leaders replace China's traditional ideograph writing system with a phonetic Latin script so that China could take its rightful place in the world. DeFrancis presumably convinced Mao Zedong to consider this radical step prior to taking power in 1949. Clearly, such a change never occurred and DeFrancis for the remainder of his life bemoaned the epochal opportunity the revolution passed up.

