

National Italian American Foundation Honorees

**The National Organization of Italian American Women
and
Founder Dr. Aileen Riotto Sirey**

Italian American Community Leadership Award

The original members of The National Organization of Italian American Women (NOIAW), now in its 36th year, initially thought their grand vision of uniting, celebrating, inspiring and empowering Italian American women a “pipedream.” At the time of the organization’s founding in 1980, no established groups embraced the explicit mission of supporting Italian American women. For her contributions, NOIAW honored its Founder Dr. Aileen Riotto Sirey, who served as NOIAW’s president for seven years, and then chairwoman for 25 years, at its 2012 luncheon and named her chair emerita. In addition to founding NOIAW and developing the organization into a national and international network, Dr. Sirey maintained a private psychotherapy practice for more than 25 years.

The idea for NOIAW began when Sirey encountered the late Geraldine Ferraro at an event and asked the congresswoman if there were any organizations that catered to Italian American women. The answer, of course, was no. Ferraro urged Sirey to create one. On July 14, 1980, a group of 20 women gathered in Sirey’s New York apartment, where she was chosen as the organization’s first president. In addition to Sirey and Ferraro, other founding members included Matilda Raffa Cuomo, Donna de Matteo, Constance Mandina and Roseanne Coletti.

In a period when traditional roles were changing for American women who were entering the workforce as professionals in growing numbers, the Italian American women who founded NOIAW understood that, belonging to a culture that prizes tradition and family life, the roles, stereotypes and images regarding its women were slower to modernize than those of the rest of the nation. The creation of NOIAW was a push to expand these perceptions, and to mentor and support Italian American women who chose to move outside the boundaries of the home and pursue work in the professional sphere.

A 1982 New York Times article, “Italian-American Women Link Up,” quoted Dr. Sirey as saying that, in addition to connecting Italian American women and offering mentorship and support, NOIAW was also needed because images of Italian American women needed to be altered. “The media often portrays us as fat, fertile and preoccupied with cooking pasta,” said Sirey. “These images must be changed, because they influence not only the way others see us but also the way we see ourselves.”

From that flagship group of 20, the organization has grown to include hundreds of members and counting. According to NOIAW, its mission is “to unite and connect women through Italian culture and heritage; to celebrate the achievements of women of Italian ancestry; to inspire and enrich members with shared interests in cultural programs; and to empower and advance the educational and professional aspirations of current and future generations.”

Through its many educational and cultural programs in the United States, and conferences in Italy, Argentina and Australia, NOIAW continues to support the

educational, professional, business and political aspirations of women of Italian ancestry. The Exchange Program for College students with the Italian Foreign Ministry (MAE) has an important place for the organization. The Exchange Program as well as the Scholarship and Mentor Programs provide important support for graduate and undergraduate students as well as women returning to college later in life.

In addition to founding NOIAW and developing the organization into a national and international network, Dr. Sirey maintained a private psychotherapy practice for more than 25 years. Her interest in her own Italian background grew out of her work with patients and her curiosity about the effects of culture on personality. She developed a research project "Ethnotherapy for Italian Americans," in which she tested subjects before and after a group experience and proved that a positive understanding of one's ethnic heritage and traditions increased self-esteem.

The Republic of Italy Order of Merit honored Dr. Sirey with the titles of *Commendatore* and *Cavaliere*. She served on the NIAF Board of Directors from 1994 to 2002, and was NIAF's first woman Vice President and Vice Chair.

Dr. Sirey's greatest delights are traditional: she loves to cook and travel, taking great pride in the successes of her daughter and her granddaughters, ages 18 and 16. She most enjoys sharing time with her best friend and husband, Charles Sirey. They reside in New York City.