

BRIDGING TWO NATIONS: AN INTERVIEW WITH NIAF PRESIDENT ROBERT ALLEGRINI

Bridging the transatlantic divide, the National Italian American Foundation champions Italian American heritage and galvanizes economic cooperation between the two allied countries. Through cultural exchange and mutual understanding, NIAF kindles the fraternal fires of friendship uniting Italians and Italian Americans across the ocean.

As president of NIAF, how would you describe the current situation of the Italian American community in today's society? Are there any specific challenges or opportunities that you would like to highlight?

The current state of the Italian American community is one of

a successful, fully integrated ethnic group. Americans of Italian descent have made and continue to make great contributions to all facets of American society. Today, even two candidates for President of the United States have Italian origin and that should make us all proud. Italian Americans have overcome decades of prejudice and adversity to arrive at this point through their focus on hard work, education and self reliance.

However, this success has come at a price. In many cases integration into American society has meant that

Italian Americans have lost a connection to the true Italian culture and history. Absent any authentic Italian role models, many 3rd and 4th generation Italian Americans allow Hollywood and the popular culture to define their ethnic identity with negative effects. Hollywood wants to portray Italian Americans as loud, crude, covered in gold chains and tolerant of organized crime. Too many young Italian Americans buy into this ridiculous characterization. As such, they have a very skewed view of what it means to be Italian American. The opportunity for NIAF is to serve as a counterpoint to Hollywood and to offer a comprehensive resource for all those Italian American who thirst to learn about what their heritage and culture truly represents.

In terms of fostering relations with Italian institutions, what efforts has NIAF made to collaborate and strengthen ties between the Italian



American community and Italy? Are there any joint initiatives or partnerships that you can tell us about?

One of my main objectives since becoming President of NIAF has been to foster closer relations with Italian institutions in order that the foundation can serve as a true bridge between the U.S. and Italy and as a thought leader in advancing the future of U.S. Italy relations. . As such under my presidency NIAF has begun a partnership with European House Ambrosetti, Italy's leading think tank. Together with Ambrosetti we are producing important position papers that are presented at the annual Ambrosetti conference. Last year we produced a position paper on the strategic value of the U.S./Italy partnership and this year we produced a



position paper on the power of the Italian diaspora. We have also forged partnerships with the American Chamber of Commerce in Milan (AMCHAM) as well as the venerable Council on the United States and Italy and the Brussels based think tank Italy Untold. Moreover, we have now signed comprehensive memorandums of

understanding with both the cities of Naples and Genoa to foster and promote cultural initiatives with these municipalities that have such important ties to the Italian American community. Each year, NIAF also names a Region of Honor in Italy with which to cooperate specifically. This year that region is Emilia Romagna. The



NIAF Board of Directors just visited the region in June and the region was highlighted at our annual NIAF gala in Washington D.C. this past October. Moreover, I am proud to state that NIAF raised over \$80,000 for the victims of the recent terrible flooding in Emilia Romagna that occurred in 2023.

NIAF has been known for its advocacy work in promoting Italian heritage. Could you share some examples of successful advocacy campaigns or initiatives that NIAF has undertaken to raise awareness and appreciation for Italian culture and traditions?

NIAF has a long and glorious history of successful advocacy campaigns and initiatives that have benefited both Italy and the Italian American community. For example, NIAF was instrumental in successfully blocking the expansion of the UN Security council to the exclusion of Italy. It was also instrumental in preserving the Italian language in the American system of university advanced placement exams. Without NIAF's intercession in this important issue enrollment in high school Italian classes would have dramatically diminished.



Another important advocacy initiative which is near and dear to me was making the American public aware of Italy's role in saving Jewish lives during the Holocaust. This advocacy program raised awareness in the U.S. of the noble and unique role of the Italian military and diplomatic service in protecting tens of thousands of Jews in areas of Europe that it controlled during the Second World War. It demonstrated the great humanitarianism of the Italian people. This is the true Italian history that Italian Americans should be aware of as opposed to the fictionalized history of gangsterism and buffoonery which is given to us by Hollywood.

Are there any specific areas or issues that NIAF is currently focusing on in its advocacy efforts for the

Italian American community? How do you envision addressing these matters and making a positive impact?

NIAF is currently engaged in numerous advocacy efforts on subjects as diverse as the need for greater resources for the issuing of Italian dual citizenship requests to preserving an accurate image of the figure of Christopher Columbus which is under attack across the United States by a cadre of militant extremists intent on attacking and destroying the reputation of the principle figures of Western civilization. One of the advocacy efforts I am most excited about is to promote the Roots Tourism initiative of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2024 has been declared the year of Roots Tourism in Italy and as such the oriundi from across

the Italian diaspora are being invited to return to the towns of their ancestors in Italy. We at NIAF are excited to be a partner of the ministry in promoting this important initiative in the U.S. Our social media reaches nearly 200,000 Italian Americans so our foundation is the perfect organization to help spread the word about the year of Roots Tourism. As such, I recently flew to Rome to personally sign an agreement with Minister Tajani at the Farnesina formalizing NIAF's role as one of the official entities that will promote the Roots Tourism Initiative. This important advocacy work will help Italian Americans rediscover their Italian origins while at the same time helping the economies of many small towns primarily in the Mezzogiorno.

I also believe some of our advocacy efforts should be directed toward Italy itself. I am a believer that there is much the Italians can learn from Italian Americans (and vice versa). Every time I am on an Italian television program or have the chance to do an interview I extoll the Italians to be more patriotic and more civic minded. If Italians were more patriotic and civic minded, as are the Italian Americans, I think Italy would be a better country. The lack of patriotic and civic education in Italy manifests itself in everything from the trash that Italians feel free to throw on the streets to the graffiti that blights nearly every building in the country. The graffiti drives me absolutely crazy. The perpetrators of this graffiti are not artists they are vandals. They are ruining the beauty of Italy and they belong in jail. It embarrasses me as an Italian dual citizen that this graffiti is tolerated by many Italians.

Collaboration among Italian American organizations can be crucial in amplifying the voice of the community. Can you tell us about any joint initiatives or partnerships that NIAF



has established with other Italian American organizations to collectively advocate for the Italian heritage in the United States?

I take very seriously NIAF's role to be the voice in Washington D.C. for the entire Italian American community. As such, during my presidency I have instituted an affiliate organization program whereby Italian American organizations from around the country can affiliate with our foundation. One of the benefits of this affiliation is that each organization is allowed to send a student on NIAF's Ambassador Peter F. Secchia Voyage of Discovery Program which is a two week all expensed paid trip to Italy so that students can grow closer to their Italian roots. As a result of this successful initiative we now have more than 40 affiliate organizations in 16 different states and the Voyage of Discovery initiative has truly become national in scope. On a national level, NIAF is also one of the founding members of the Italian American Leadership Forum which is comprised of the largest and most important Italian American organizations. The purpose of the Italian American Leadership Forum is to coordinate amongst its member organizations to ensure that the Italian American community speaks with one voice on issues of importance to the community.