

NIAF DINNER COMMENTS

FRANK D. STELLA*



GOOD EVENING. ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ITALIAN-AMERICAN FOUNDATION, IT IS MY PRIVILEGE TO WELCOME YOU TO THIS VERY SPECIAL GATHERING.

IF I MAY PARAPHRASE THE LATE YOGGI BERRA, MY THANKS TO EVERYBODY WHO MADE THIS OCCASION NECESSARY.

ON AN EVENING SO CLOSE TO THE 500TH ANNIVERSARY OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS' LEGENDARY VOYAGE TO THE NEW WORLD, IT IS ESPECIALLY FITTING THAT WE SHOULD MEET TO CELEBRATE OUR ITALIAN HERITAGE.

IT IS ONE OF THE SARDONIC JESTS OF HISTORY THAT THE WORLD CRISTOFORO COLOMBO DISCOVERED DOES NOT BEAR HIS NAME -- BUT RATHER IS NAMED AFTER AMERIGO VESPUCCI. BUT NO MATTER WHO DESERVES THE CREDIT, HE WAS ITALIAN.

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, TONIGHT WE CELEBRATE THE DYNAMIC GROWTH AND IMPORTANT WORK OF THE NATIONAL ITALIAN-AMERICAN FOUNDATION.

WE REPRESENT DIFFERENT PARTS OF OUR NATIONAL FABRIC. BUT WE ARE UNITED BY A COMMON THREAD OF INTEREST -- AN INTEREST IN ENABLING THE FOUNDATION TO HELP SHAPE THE PRIORITIES OF OUR NATIONAL AGENDA.

ONE MEASURE OF THE FOUNDATION'S SUCCESS IN UNDERTAKING THIS MISSION IS THE RICH DIVERSITY OF ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED TONIGHT. WE ARE HONORED THAT OUR NATION'S MOST PROMINENT LEADERS ARE HERE, TOGETHER WITH A NUMBER OF ITALY'S MOST DISTINGUISHED CITIZENS.

AND WE ARE ESPECIALLY PROUD THAT PRESIDENT BUSH (OR FIRST LADY BARBARA BUSH) AND GOVERNOR BILL CLINTON ARE JOINING US. WE TRIED TO SCHEDULE A DEBATE, BUT SOPHIA LOREN SAID I DIDN'T LOOK ENOUGH LIKE SAM DONALDSON TO SERVE AS THE MODERATOR.

WE DO, HOWEVER, WANT TO EXPRESS OUR THANKS TO ALL OF OUR DISTINGUISHED GUESTS FOR GRACING US WITH THEIR PRESENCE.

WE ALSO WANT TO THANK THOSE PEOPLE, PAST AND PRESENT, WHO HAVE MADE THE FOUNDATION WHAT IT IS TODAY AND WILL BE TOMORROW -- THE NATIONAL ADVOCACY VOICE FOR ITALIAN-AMERICANS.

I BEGIN WITH THE MAN MOST RESPONSIBLE FOR NIAF'S SUCCESS, AND THE ONE MAN MOST ASSOCIATED WITH THE FOUNDATION THESE PAST 17 YEARS -- JENO PAULUCCI.

JENO WAS THE ORGANIZATION'S ONLY CHAIRMAN UNTIL SEVERAL MONTHS AGO. NOW HE ASSUMES THE TITLE OF FOUNDING CHAIRMAN AND CHAIRMAN OF OUR INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD.

JENO PAULUCCI POURED HIS HEART AND SOUL INTO THIS ORGANIZATION. FROM DAY ONE, HE PROVIDED IT WITH LEADERSHIP, VISION, AND PURPOSE. HE HAS PAVED MY PATH TO ASSUMING THE CHAIRMANSHIP IN A WAY FEW PEOPLE COULD UNDERSTAND.

THE DEBT OF GRATITUDE NIAF OWES TO JENO PAULUCCI CANNOT BE MEASURED. YET, FOR JENO -- WITH WHOM I SERVED AS PRESIDENT AND VICE CHAIRMAN, RESPECTIVELY -- THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY HE WILL MEASURE IT. AND THAT IS FOR NIAF TO CONTINUE ITS WORK, EXPAND ITS PROGRAMS, BROADEN ITS MEMBERSHIP, AND EXTEND ITS LEADERSHIP HERE AND IN ITALY.

JENO, IN A VERY REAL SENSE, YOU ARE THE CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS OF NIAF -- OUR FOUNDER, OUR LEADER, AND SOMEONE WHO WILL BE REMEMBERED 500 YEARS FROM NOW BY ITALIAN-AMERICANS.

LET ME ALSO SALUTE OUR OFFICERS -- A GROUP OF OUTSTANDING INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE SERVED NIAF SO EFFECTIVELY DURING THE PAST YEAR. I'D LIKE TO ASK THEM ALL TO STAND AND BE RECOGNIZED:

-- ART GAJARSA (PRESIDENT)

-- JOE MASELLI (SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT)

_____(SECRETARY)

TO OUR FINE BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND REGIONAL VICE PRESIDENTS A SPECIAL THANKS AS WELL.

(DIRECTORS AND VICE PRESIDENTS ASKED TO STAND)

I ALSO LOOK FORWARD TO WORKING WITH OUR NEWLY ELECTED OFFICERS. PLEASE JOIN ME IN WISHING THEM SUCCESS IN THEIR NEW POSITIONS.

(MENTION NAMES OF NEW OFFICERS AS APPROPRIATE)

_____(PRESIDENT)

_____(SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT)

_____(SECRETARY)

OURS WILL BE A PARTNERSHIP COMMITTED TO GROWTH IN NIAF AND
IMPROVED OUTREACH BY NIAF INTO THE ITALIAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY.

LET ME ALSO PAY A SPECIAL TRIBUTE TO THE FINEST STAFF ANY
ORGANIZATION COULD POSSIBLY HAVE.

FIRST, TO ITS LEADER -- OUR ESTEEMED EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DR. FRED
ROTONDARO. HE IS THE INSPIRATION OF THE STAFF BLENDING HIS
INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY WITH A VISION OF THE FUTURE FOR NIAF.

FRED IS ABLY ASSISTED BY A CORE OF PROFESSIONAL DIRECTORS. I'LL
READ THEIR NAMES AND ASK THAT THEY STAND AND ACCEPT OUR
APPRECIATION WHEN THEY HAVE ALL BEEN CALLED.

GIL BECKER
BOB BLANCATO
DONNA DE SANCTIS
LISA GUELI
DICK HIGGINS
DR. MARIO LOMBARDO
MARIA SCARAPICHIA

WORKING WITH THEM ARE FOUR OTHERS WHO KEEP NIAF GOING DAY AFTER DAY, BEGINNING WITH OUR DEAR FRIEND, RUTH RODERICK, AND HER SUPERB STAFF:

BARBARA HURLOCK
JERRY JONES
SERENA CANTONI

FINALLY, LET ME ADD A SPECIAL THANKS TO STEPHANIA NOCOTRA, WHO CAME FROM ITALY AND WORKED WITH US IN WASHINGTON THESE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS.

THE NATIONAL ITALIAN AMERICAN FOUNDATION HAS SUCCEEDED OVER THESE PAST YEARS ONLY IN PART BECAUSE OF OUR OFFICERS, BOARD, AND STAFF.

THE REAL CHAMPIONS OF THIS FOUNDATION ARE THOSE WHO MAKE UP THE COUNCIL OF 1,000 AND OUR ASSOCIATES.

OF COURSE, NIAF IS DEEPLY INDEBTED TO ALL OF YOU HERE TONIGHT WHO HAVE SUPPORTED OUR DINNER AS CORPORATE AND INDIVIDUAL SPONSORS AND TABLE AND TICKET PURCHASERS.

THIS DINNER IS VITAL TO OUR FINANCIAL SURVIVAL, AND YOUR GENEROSITY IS MOST APPRECIATED.

I HAVE ONE CENTRAL GOAL AS CHAIRMAN TO WHICH I COMMIT MYSELF FULLY: I WANT TO SEE THE IMAGE OF THIS FOUNDATION AND THE ITALIAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY WE REPRESENT IMPROVED AND ENHANCED.

I WANT TO SEE IT IMPROVED IN THE MEDIA, FIRST AND FOREMOST. IT SHOULD BE ENHANCED IN OUR UNIVERSITIES, IN THE CONGRESS, THE CABINET, THE FEDERAL JUDICIARY, AND IN OUR CORPORATE BOARDROOMS.

THAT IS A KEY RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ITALIAN-AMERICAN FOUNDATION -- TO DEVELOP PROGRAMS AND SERVE AS EFFECTIVE ADVOCATES FOR THE INTERESTS OF ITALIAN-AMERICANS EVERYWHERE.

THE ITALIAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY IS AN ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL POWER THAT WILL CONTINUE TO GROW OVER TIME. THE PRESENCE HERE TONIGHT OF PRESIDENT BUSH (OR BARBARA BUSH) AND GOVERNOR CLINTON ATTEST TO THAT POLITICAL GROWTH.

YES, WE LOOK TO THE FUTURE WITH GREAT HOPE -- HOPE THAT OUR YOUTH WILL ENJOY AN EVEN BRIGHTER TOMORROW. AS YOUR CHAIRMAN, I WILL HAVE A SPECIAL COMMITMENT TO THE NIAF EDUCATIONAL MISSION.

THERE IS NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT THAN OUR SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM -- AND THIS WILL BE REFLECTED IN THE COMING YEARS AS WE RENEW AND STRENGTHEN OUR COMMITMENT TO OUR YOUNG PEOPLE.

WE MUST WORK TO PROVIDE ITALIAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS EXPANDED OPPORTUNITIES TO PURSUE A HIGHER EDUCATION. NO INVESTMENT OF OUR RESOURCES IS MORE CRITICAL TO THE FUTURE OF OUR NATION OR TO THE ITALIAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY.

ANOTHER PRIORITY FOR NIAF -- TO REACH OUT TO ALL SECTORS IN OUR COMMUNITY -- ALSO APPLIES ESPECIALLY TO OUR YOUTH.

IT IS VITAL FOR THE PRESENT AND FUTURE VIABILITY OF NIAF THAT WE HAVE A STRONG YOUTH PRESENCE AMONG BOTH OUR MEMBERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP.

IN ADDITION, I SHOULD ALSO NOTE THAT NIAF WILL CONTINUE TO WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH OTHER ETHNIC, RACIAL, AND RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS IN IMPORTANT AREAS OF MUTUAL CONCERN.

AS WE PREPARE TO CELEBRATE THE HEROIC ACHIEVEMENTS OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, LET US REMEMBER THAT HE REFUSED TO BE DIVERTED FROM HIS GOAL BY THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM OF HIS TIME.

HE WAS GIFTED WITH COURAGE, AND WITH THE PATIENCE TO STICK TO THE COURSE HE LAID OUT FOR HIMSELF.

"EVERY SHIP THAT COMES TO AMERICA," RALPH WALDO EMERSON WROTE, "GOT ITS CHARTS FROM COLUMBUS."

I GO FURTHER. IT SEEMS TO ME THAT EVERY AMERICAN, EVERYONE WHO IS THE BENEFICIARY OF THE GREAT DISCOVERY OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, GOT HIS CHART -- OR HERS -- FROM THAT DEDICATED SAILOR.

I AGAIN WELCOME YOU HERE TONIGHT. WE GO FORWARD IN THE SPIRIT OF COLUMBUS -- CHARTING NEW WATERS, MAKING NEW DISCOVERIES, AND ABOVE ALL, MAKING A DIFFERENCE.

IT IS A PROCESS I INVITE ALL OF YOU TO JOIN. ENJOY THE EVENING.

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