

## Staten Island. @ Casa with Gina

Letizia Airos (June 22, 2010)



Casa Belvedere. A new 360-degree Italian cultural campus that will host Italian language, culinary, art, and music classes, as well as galas, fashion shows, wine tastings, exhibits, and symposiums focused on Italian themes. i-Italy took the ferry to Staten Island and crossed a short strip of sea to get there ...

Staten Island. [Casa Belvedere](#) [2] is located on more than three acres of garden, atop a green hill. It is a place that you will be hearing about, and that will make people speak in Italian. We are sure about it.

Just before it, you can admire a marvelous view of the bay of New York, while the distant and suggestive Verrazano Bridge conjures up memories of great challenges of the renowned XV century Italian explorer.

The challenge, in our specific case, has just started. It consists of founding in Staten Island a



360-degree Italian cultural campus that will host Italian language, culinary, art, and music classes, as well as galas, fashion shows, wine tastings, exhibits, and symposiums focused on Italian themes.

The structure, at 79 Howard Avenue, was built in 1908 by merchant and philanthropist Louis Boebling-Stirn and his wife Laura, niece of the architect that originally designed the Brooklyn Bridge. The architectural details of this "house" make it a suggestive and most welcoming venue. Gina Biancardi, founder and president of the Italian Cultural Foundation of New York, who first discovered the "Casa," decided to transform it into something special. We agree with her... it is not hard to see the strong potential that lies just beneath the surface.

The twelve bedrooms at the upper level will become classrooms for teaching Italian language, while other rooms will be transformed into offices, and the largest ones, in turn, into spaces for exhibits and lectures.

i-Italy took the ferry to Staten Island (everybody should have that experience!), and crossed a short strip of sea to get to this place that has all the potential to become not only an important cultural center for the residences of States Island, but also a venue for all of those who, coming from Manhattan or other boroughs of New York, are in search of new Italian cultural activities.

Once we arrived, we immediately felt engulfed by a very special and festive atmosphere, given that the ceremony that was going on involved all of those attending, the youngest ones included. We need to point out, indeed, that there was a consistent number of younger people and children among us, and this is not a detail to ignore. It is rare to find young people in meetings of this kind. But on that day we really felt surrounded by a family atmosphere at Casa Belvedere.

Executive Director Louis Calvelli opened the nicely timed program of events. Indeed, while Deputy Amato Berardi, Consul General Francesco Maria Talo', New York State Senator Diane Savino, Congressman Michael McMahan, and gracious "hosts" John Profaci, Chairman of the Foundation, and President Gina Biancardi, all gave their speeches, we could see some of the children playing in the next room.

Gina Biancardi's words reflected well the atmosphere mentioned above. They were decisive and communicative, as well as extremely warm, feminine, sweet and familial at the same time. We feel the need to underline the "womanly aspect" of her speech, precisely because we are confident that it will characterize the story of the "house" from now on. In her speech, in fact, memories were mixed with present-day references. From the tomatoes and basil growing in her family house backyard to the sophisticated designs of modern times.

"Many had not understood what I meant when I talked about this place, my vision of it, before they came here tonight. I am proud to be Italian American - she said - and to have roots both in Italy and America, the countries that I consider the best of the world". "I am the daughter of Pino and Rosalia Biancardi, who came here in the 1960s with a dollar in their pockets and a dream, as they used to say. And, just as many of your parents, grandparents, and great grandparents, they worked to make the impossible become possible."

She described Casa Belvedere as a source of both tangible and intangible sensations. They are tangible because it is by now an existing reality; intangible for the feelings we experience there, such as those originating from the aromas of the past that we remember and love. "They are blood of our blood - she continued. "This place pays tribute to both ordinary and extraordinary people that, preceding us, contributed to make us become what we are now."

She described the villa as a symbolic structure that can properly represent the Italian heritage and culture. It is a place where people can learn what it means to be Italian.

Gina knows that there is a real risk that young people can detach from their culture of origins. Her idea is to use all means possible that can help in creating "a new connection", including the teaching of Italian language, art, architecture, music, cuisine, wine, fashion, cars, and so on.

Gina sees "connection" as a form of power. "Think about it -she said - "We are number one in



everything that we do." She finally ended her speech stating that she wants Casa Belvedere to become a most vibrant cultural center.

"It will happen, it is just a question of time. I can feel it, I can taste it, I can smell it, I dream about it every day. Together, we can make the difference. Together we can make the impossible possible, just as our parents and grandparents did".

In his speech, Chairman John Profaci praised the strong personality of the founder of the institution. "Gina's dream will come true in these 5,000 sq ft. Those who know her, know that it will happen."

The microphone was then given to the deputy of the Republic of Italy Amato Berardi who, together with Consul Talò, awarded her with a medal on behalf of the President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies Gianfranco Fini: "You are the proof that dreams can come true."

Seated among the public, next to her daughter, Mrs. Biancardi listened to the praising words of the speakers that followed one another at the podium.

In particular, Consul General Talò highlighted how Gina has shown to be extremely pragmatic in the pursuit of her goals. "Nothing is more concrete than a house, and this one in particular is a palace full of ideas. It is a structure that well shows what it means to think global and act local, essential in our times. State Island is a great center for a culture that can be both Italian and universal at the same time. It is a culture open to everybody. It will be important to create a network of centers like this one to nourish a global vision suitable for the new global world." He then concluded: "Staten Island and Casa Belvedere are not sleeping beauties anymore, but have become a valid example of the path that we are following".

Another woman efficaciously traced back the work carried on by Gina Biancardi. New York State Senator Dianne Savino. stated that "culture is important, but first and foremost we are Italians. We must not forget where we come from, and I am happy to see the dreams of Gina coming true. They are the same of my Nonna Domenica Roselli who came here by boat when she was 16 in 1906."

She went on to tell us how she came to know about Casa Belvedere. "I must confess it: my first reaction was to ask myself if we needed another Italian center in Staten Island. Then I met Gina and talked to her, and understood that it was necessary. She was right.

I

am the President of the Italian American Legislators Association. There are 50 of us of Italian origins, and we represent nearly every area of the State of New York. Staten Island is the one with the greatest Italian population density. We need culture. Just like many others, I do not belong to the first but to the third generation. We are not Italian anymore, it is like having another nationality. We must not forget the problems of our ancestors, the discrimination that they were subjected to."

Senator Savino invited us to continue to be vigilant, because, although Italian Americans cover prestigious positions in the more diverse sectors today, it can happen that, if we forget our culture of origins, we can once again fall victim to systemic discrimination.

The most valid example for this is the question of the teaching of the Italian language in American schools: "We must remember how important our culture is. We are Italians, and we will be discriminated if we forget where we come from. Casa Belvedere is important for this."

Congressman Michael McMahon confirmed the importance and necessity to support the promotion of Italian culture; and he mentioned how vital to his political education was his long-ago meeting with the Italian-American senator of Staten Island John Marchi.

He also quoted Leonardo da Vinci: "There are three kinds of people, the great Italian used to say: those who see, those who see only what they are shown, and those who don't see. Gina Biancardi was able to see".



The building will be remodeled in some areas, retrofitted in others, and adapted to its new functions. Facilities for people with disabilities, for instance, and elevators will also be installed. Approximately two and one half million dollars will be needed. Gina, however, is not easily discouraged: "We are already collecting private funds to start the works".

i-Italy wishes Gina Biancardi, Chairman John Profaci, and Executive Director Louis Calvelli the best for Casa Belvedere, with the promise to follow as closely as possible those activities and events they will be organizing.

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#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.iitaly.org/files/casajpg>

[2] <http://www.casa-belvedere.org/>