

Thanks to Lidia Bastianich Elementary Students in Harlem Learn Italian

Francesca Crozier-Fitzgerald (March 03, 2011)



Our Lady of Lourdes School, at 468 143rd Street, received a grant from IACE, the Italian American Committee of Education, to begin teaching Italian at the school. This first semester is an introductory course but as teacher, Luciana Curti assures, "They are enriching their inflections and their sounds...next year we will do more with grammar"

Angeline Baez, a third grade student at [Our Lady of Lourdes School](#) [2] in Harlem has grown up speaking both English and Spanish, like many of her classmates. This year, however, Baez is introducing words in a new language to her already bilingual family. These new words are in Italian and they include colors, numbers, animals, and other everyday words. Italian words are not often heard around the neighborhood, if at all, and the Baez family is excited to have their young daughter as their teacher.



Baez expresses her excitement with the new language saying, “I can teach my younger brothers Italian and my mom thinks it’s a really good thing to learn...I am even teaching my grandmom some English and Italian at the same time.”

Earlier this year, Our Lady of Lourdes School, at 468 143rd Street, received a grant from [IACE](#) [3], the Italian American Committee of Education, to begin teaching Italian at the school. Students in pre-Kindergarten through fourth-grade have class with the new Italian teacher, Luciana Curti, once a week. This first semester is an introductory course but as Curti assures, “They are enriching their inflections and their sounds...next year we will do more with grammar.”

Curti, originally from Parma, Italy, also lived in Barcelona for two years. Understanding and speaking Spanish has become a positive asset for the students, as many are from Spanish-speaking households. She understands the similarities and differences in pronunciation and is able to explain these contrasts to her students.

On March 2, the students at Our Lady of Lourdes were able to show off their new language skills and thank IACE for this opportunity. Perhaps, the most vivid representation of the student’s gratitude was found in their impressive progress and their execution of the language. The students sang two songs in Italian with crisp pronunciation and expressive gesticulations. They raised their hands and asked questions in Italian and used proper sentence construction and inflection. Despite the presence of several special guests, the students remained poised and attentive to the language rules they learned in class.

In the audience, four influential members of the contemporary movement to improve Italian-American culture and education sat and observed the student’s new skills. The guests included the Italian Deputy Consul, Lucia Pasqualini, IACE President, Bernardo Paradiso, wife of Italian Consul General, Ornella Talò, and last but not least, the renowned chef, author, and restaurateur, [Lidia Matticchio Bastianich](#) [4]. After the student’s performance, Pasqualini offered her wisdom on the value of language and communication, saying, “Learning languages helps to open your mind, they make you flexible. Learning Italian, and others as well, is very important for your future.”

Throughout the duration of the ceremony, “Nonna Lidia” Bastianich answered questions that the students prepared for her about Italian culture, food and family. She shared stories about the traditions she shares with her five grandchildren. The children watched Nonna Lidia with wide-eyes and remained entertained throughout the ceremony. The room erupted with laughter when Bastianich shared humorous anecdotes from her childhood. When she was a little girl, learning to cook with her Nonna, she and her siblings used to replace the wrapped candies in the house, “le caramelle,” with pebbles. The students loved this new idea to sneak sweets from around the house.

Bastianich has been a positive role model for the Italian-American community. Her presence at the school on March 2 made a valuable impact on the young students. While they may not be of Italian descent, the same themes exist in their own homes and culture, and she made this clear to them. “I tried to talk about the things they’d relate to,” says Bastianich. “It’s all about communication.”

In few words, Bastianich summarizes the greater importance of expanding language and cultural education at the elementary level. International boundaries are not spreading further apart, but becoming evermore entwined with one another. As Principal Cathy Hufnagel says,

“We are taking things to the next level here, and crossing cultural boundaries.” Hufnagel also promises that she will continue to pray and do everything in her power to renew the grant for continued Italian language courses for the future.

Although the uplifting ceremony came to an end for the students' lunchtime, the discussion for renewing the grant to Our Lady of Lourdes will continue in upcoming months. School administrators hope to continue the language classes, made possible by generous service from IACE.

Before getting into her cab, Lidia Bastianich shares her own personal experience with learning new languages at a young age. “I could not even fathom the idea of only knowing one language; to me,



that would be like a prison. I had to learn.”

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- [2] <http://www.ourladyoflourdesschool.net>
- [3] <http://www.iacelanguage.org>
- [4] <http://www.lidiasitaly.com>