

Geraldine Ferraro's Pride to be an Italian-American Woman (1935--2011)

Gerladine Ferraro (March 26, 2011)



Geraldine Ferraro died on March 26, 2011. Perhaps no one as yet, within our community of Italian Americans, has reached her plateau of being the first woman, as well as the first, and still only, Italian American to be a candidate for such a high office as the vice-presidency of the United States. In September 2009 Geraldine Ferraro was honored at the annual luncheon of the National Organization of Italian American Women (NOIAW), the only organization of its kind still today. In her speech to NOIAW and its many supporters, that we report here in full, she underscored the ethnic element of her political and personal life experience.

Thank you, my friend Mario (Mario Cuomo, former governor of the State of New York), for that wonderful introduction. I remember the first time we met in a neighbor's house in Forest Hills. Was it 1972? There he was - this expert lawyer on zoning from Brooklyn - and there I was a stay at home



mom who was part of a community group of lawyers that was going to hire him. I was so impressed after the meeting that I went home and told John that I had met one of the most intelligent, charismatic, nice etc lawyers who was going to handle our zoning. John was also anxious to meet him. It turns out, that if I were a really smart wife, I would have said good looking too since people would be confusing John for Mario for many years to come. Mario was the finest of Governors and it is obvious that he and Matilda have passed on great genes to their children. I am very proud of the work being doing by our current Attorney General, a good lawyer like his father. I hope to have an opportunity to call him Governor in the near future. Again thank you Mario for your remarks.

I was thinking about what I would say today as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of my nomination by the Democratic party for Vice President of the United States. What people focus on of course, is that I was the first woman nominated by a national party to that office and until last November, the only woman.

I cannot tell you how honored I am that Fritz Mondale chose me to join his ticket. Since 1984 women stop me on the street, in airports, come up to me in restaurants, and they all say the same thing. Thank you, that I made a difference in their lives. I'm not quite sure it was I who made the difference but it certainly was the candidacy. They frequently start a conversation with "I figured if you could do it, I could too." And I hear about their going to college, their taking control of their lives, their running for office, their asking for a raise, only one woman shook me up a bit when she told me she got up the nerve to get a divorce. And of course, statistics show the number of women in public office has increased exponentially since 1984 and many of those political women give the 84 campaign and me credit for that, not only in this country, but internationally.. So, I am extremely proud that my nomination did make a difference for women and I am grateful to Fritz Mondale and my party for allowing that to happen. Now just imagine if we had gotten elected! Oh well.

What few people talk about however is the fact that I was the first and continue to be the only Italian American to have been so honored. And that's what I want to focus on today in my remarks because, I guess in many ways, that was probably a much more difficult milestone to achieve.

My mother and I had frequently talked about what it was like when she was a little girl growing up in the early days of the 20th century. She was born in 1905. Her father came here in 1885. Her mother when she was 15 arrived from a different mountain town near Salerno in 1888. They were illiterate and dirt poor. My mother's earliest recollections were of living in an apartment in Italian Harlem with a bathroom in the hall, the fourth youngest of 9 children.

My grandfather was a street cleaner for the City of NY who got fired on a complaint of a woman who had thrown her garbage out of the window just as he finished cleaning the sidewalk beneath the window. He had shouted up at her in Italian dialect, he spoke no English, and she yelled back, "I'll get you fired wop." And so she did. Italians were treated badly by the Irish and Germans who came before them, and yes, even by the Catholic Church.

And so Italians kept to themselves in Little Italies throughout the country. They put up with the stereotyping, they put up with discrimination, their children changed their names from Antonetta to Ann, Pasqualina to Pat, Michaelangelo to Mike, Giovanni to John when they went to school, and they spoke only English outside the home since they wanted to be like the other kids. They were ashamed of being Italian.

In some ways, many of these immigrants let either lack of knowledge about how to get help that was available, or pride, keep them from taking advantage of what NYC was offering its citizens at the time which was both a public school education and for those who qualified, at the poverty level, home relief. My grandmother, when my grandfather subsequently had a stroke, took advantage of neither. She sent her children to work rather than school so that she didn't have to take "home relief" which was what welfare was called way back then.

The community, though poor, helped each other. They were patriotic. They became citizens as soon as they could and they showed they were good Americans sending their older kids off to fight in



World War I and their younger sons, and grandsons to fight and die in world war II. Between wars, many of the males worked construction, in fact I have been told that some of my relatives worked on the mid town tunnel, and the girls, including my mother were sent as young teenagers to work in the sweat shops of the garment center.

But outside their conclaves. life was not easy. Even pop songs of the time, made fun of Italians - or dagos, or wops, as they were called and ridiculed their accents. I can remember as a child hearing songs that went far beyond Rosemary Clooney's Come on to my House lyrics which was popular in the 50's. As a little girl I remember hearing a song that not only mimicked the Italian accent, but denigrated the intelligence of the Italian American it was describing. Imagine if that were done today with a different ethnic group. It was wrong then. It is wrong now. Fortunately, it is no longer tolerated.

Of course, those Italian Americans who discovered early on that education was the key to success in this country, never were talked to that way. It just took my family a little longer.

Many of you know that my father did not come here in the same set of circumstances as my maternal grandparents, in fact, if my mother and father had met in Italy he would never have been permitted to marry her. My paternal grandfather was an engineer and property owner, my grandmother a school teacher, my father's brothers were an agronomist with a doctorate, a pharmacist, the youngest a playboy who married a Contessa and we all thought a neer do well until I found out during the 84 campaign that he was with the Italian underground during the war. I was at an event in New Jersey and a person whose life he had saved gave me a picture of the two of them after the war. As for my father, he was a student when he came here and decided to stay. But it's not his story that is our story

My mother's and my story is that of many single heads of household, exacerbated by the fact that she was an Italian American.

My father died suddenly when I was eight. My mother was 39 with two kids to raise. Money my father had left her in Italy could not be repatriated after the war. Like most women in the 40's, all of the family finances were handled by my father and a large home, and two family businesses kind of disappeared with the help of who knows, lawyers, brokers, government - all I know is that in a year we had moved from a large house in Newburgh to a small railroad apartment in the South Bronx, and my mother was back working in a factory as a crochet beader a skill she had learned to help support younger brothers and sisters when her father had his stroke.

My mother never complained. But no one could tell her that her children would not get an education because they had no father. So she worked, and demanded that we work. She knew an education was our only ticket out of the South Bronx which is where we were living after my dad died. And she was the only one on election day in 1984 who believed that my education would eventually lead me through the door of the White House.

I focus on my mother today, because this event is about raising money for scholarships for young Italian American women. It is about giving our grant recipients a key to a future that can't be gotten any other way. It's what the GI Bill did for many Italian American kids coming home after World War II so that they could move away from the tenements and become, doctors, and lawyers. It's something that took a little longer for us as an ethnic group to figure out but we did. You women who are members of NOIAW are I'm sure as grateful as I am that your mothers "got it" when you were young.

My maternal grandparents didn't get it. It wasn't their fault. They expected little. Society helped them little.

Though my mother had only an eighth grade education she was smart as hell. She read everything in sight and kept on top of all of the issues, especially when I was in Congress. But except for the hard work of my mother, I wouldn't have my education. I remember that when I was graduating high school, she was talking to my grandmother about how she was going to send me to college. My Uncle Tom, who was born in Italy chimed in "Why bother, Antonetta, she's pretty, she'll get



married". That did it. My mother responded "you're right Tom, but if you educate a boy (and my brother was by then, finished college and in the army) you educate a boy alone. If you educate a girl, you educate a family."

This past week I was supposed to attend the Clinton Global Initiative which was focusing on the Education of Women and Girls as the means to move entire countries out of poverty, particularly in Africa. I first cancelled out on Tuesday and then on the rest of the week I asked that President Clinton know that the only reason I wasn't there was because I physically couldn't make it but that if there is something I can do in the future, please let me know. Can you believe that the world has finally caught on to the fact that educating a girl, will not only educate her family, but contribute to her country's success?

I didn't come at these views because I am a feminist. In fact, more than once people have commented that I was ahead of my time as a feminist when I kept my maiden name professionally 50 years ago. That's not true. My life's views were shaped by my upbringing as an Italian American. My values are derived from that culture. Feminism wasn't an issue for me in 1960. I was newly married to a rather conservative Italian American man, but one who understood how much I appreciated what my mother had done for me, and my brother too, and so when I said to John as I was filling out my papers for my admission to the New York State bar: "How would you feel if I kept my maiden name professionally since my mother gave me my education. I would use Mrs. Zaccaro at all other times?" John was secure enough to say, if that would make you happy do it.

On graduation day from Fordham law school, I handed mother my diploma and said, "it belongs to both of us".

We Italian Americans have come a long way in the past one hundred years. I have one foot planted firmly in the past which I don't want any of us to forget, as well as one planted firmly in the present to take advantage of what more there can be to accomplish. We are an ethnic group that has achieved the things we did without a civil rights act, without non discrimination laws, without any sort of affirmative action. We have put up with stereotypes - many of which floored me in the '84 campaign, some of which still persist for those with vowels at the end of their names - and name calling. Despite it all, we have been successful.

Take a look at the number of CEO's who share our heritage, the scientists, lawyers, academics, actors, a former Governor of NY, Mayors, the House Speaker, two Supreme Court Justices, the head of the CIA would you believe, and one Italian American who was nominated for national office 25 years ago. It took us maybe two generations more than other ethnic groups, but we were able to accomplish the things we did perhaps because of our peasant ancestry, but certainly because we live in this the best country in the world and only we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us and made sure we got the education that would allow us to achieve.

So you see, being nominated as the first Italian American to be vice president of the United States was a really big deal., I kind of think that if my maternal grandfather was alive he probably would have said in his Neapolitan dialect - I never met him, so we all know, I'm just presuming what he'd say but I bet it would be something like "I had 28 grandchildren, and it had to be one of the girls who was nominated for vice president?"

In any event, I am proud to be here today. I am delighted we are raising money for young women to help them complete their education. And I want to thank all of you who are here to support the scholarship program that NOIAW offers.

And I do have a message as well for the young woman receiving their grants today. I know they're at school which is where they should be. but Donna, if you could tell them for me that I hope that once they have their education, that they turn around and help another young girl behind them get hers. It doesn't always have to be with money, though that's good, it could also be with mentoring and I'd speak to the mentoring expert Matilada Cuomo about this. But I feel very strongly about how important an education is to success in life, and this organization does put its money where its mouth is.



When my mom died in 1990 I set up a scholarship at MMC in her name, the Antonetta Ferraro Scholarship fund. I had two requirements:

It was to go only to girls in financial need whose mothers are single heads of household. I figured my mother was helping the mother and I was helping the daughter. Every year when I receive notes from recipients of that scholarship, two or three depending on the economic strain on the endowment, I know my mother would be so happy. Today as I receive this award I know she is as well. Today I accept it and do so with the same enthusiasm and with the same words I said to her in 1960, on her behalf as well, because this award, my entire professional life, the 84 campaign, none of it would have happened without her and without the education that she struggled to give me.

Thank you.

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