



The Importance of Italian American Civil Service

Joelle Grosso (October 07, 2016)



On Thursday, October 6th, the John D. Calandra Institute held a symposium about the forty years of Italian American Civil Service Employment in New York City and New York State.

The day started off with a presentation of the research conducted by scholars Vincenzo Milone, Itala Pelizzoli, and Carmine Pizzirusso regarding the history of employment of Italian Americans in the Civil Service field within the state of New York. The research examined how Italian Americans have progressed over the last forty years, the achievements they have made, as well as the challenges they are still facing.

[Anthony Tamburri](#) [2], the Dean of the [Calandra Institute](#) [3], introduced the guest speakers who would participate in the following commentary panel including the former First Lady of New York State, Matilda Cuomo, New York State Senator, [Diane Savino](#) [4], New York State Assemblyman, [Thomas Abinanti](#) [5], President of the National Council for Columbia Associations in Civil Service, Joseph Guagliardo, and the Dean of Arts & Sciences at York College, Donna Chirico.

One of the reasons it seems that Italian Americans gravitate towards civil service as Diane Savino puts it is due to political patronage and fraternal organizations, not discriminatory patterns as some



might believe. Speaking about the fire, transportation, and sanitation departments, she says that “there is history, tradition, and family tradition that goes back to days long before [Teddy Roosevelt](#) [6] ever envisioned the civil service merit system.” The reason for the success of Italian Americans was “that ability to sit down with a pencil and what was in their head and being able to compete against their neighbors is what got them in the door.” The FDNY Deputy Commissioner John Benanti added to this idea of tradition by noting that the past three Fire Commissioners have been Italian American as well as the current Governor and Mayor of New York. In other words, some of the greatest contributions that have been made in this state are thanks to Italian Americans.

Perhaps the most significant conclusion from the research which Donna Chirico expressed so eloquently is that “Italian Americans are unique because although they lag in educational attainment, they don’t lag in economic achievement.” This is very unusual because normally there is a direct correlation between education and wealth, but strangely for Italian Americans this doesn’t seem to be the case for some reason. The commentators all tried to shed some light on what could possibly be the reason for this phenomenon. One of the common threads seemed to be that Italian immigrants didn’t stress education as much as they did work ethic. From Matilda Cuomo describing her father as well as her husband’s hard work and diligence to Joseph Gugliardo explaining his humble beginnings as a high school drop out, they both made it clear that it wasn’t necessarily education that gave them their success, but the work ethic that was instilled in them from a young age.

Despite all of the great contributions Italian Americans have made to society, everyone was in agreement that there is still much more to be done. We all must work together to improve the lives of all Italian Americans and as Mrs. Cuomo said, we must “do it as a family, not alone.”

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