

NOIAW Annual Luncheon. What it Means to be an Italian-American Woman

Marina Melchionda (September 29, 2009)



This year's edition of the National Italian American Women's Organization Luncheon was held at the Waldorf Astoria on Sept. 26. Five scholarships were given to young college students from around the country. During the ceremony, Geraldine Ferraro was presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award. Among those attending, also the former Governor of the State of New York Mario Cuomo and his son, the Attorney General Andrew Cuomo

"If you educate a man, you educate one person; if you educate a woman, you educate a family".

This was the crowning moment of Geraldine Ferraro's speech when she received, her Lifetime Achievement Award during the Annual Luncheon organized at [Waldorf Astoria](#) [2] on September 26.



"When I graduated, I gave my diploma to my mother and told her 'this is both mine and yours'. I owe my political career, my life's work to her. Being a widow, she raised me and my brothers alone, and from a very early age she asked us to work towards only one goal: getting an education. When I ran for the Vice-Presidency in 1984 my mother was pretty much the only one who thought that my entrance into the White House depended entirely on my education!", said Geraldine to a public of young and not so young Italian-American women that crowded the dining room of one of the most elegant hotels in Manhattan, on Park Avenue.

That's why, on that day, the NOIAW awarded five 2.500 \$ scholarships to 5 very young Italian-American women bearing her name. Of them, the only one who could attend the ceremony was Teresa Principe, who is currently studying law at Saint John's University. Geraldine had a request for her and asked her to pass it on to the other four: "When you finish your studies, do not forget the kind of support you received. Look back and find a young woman that, just like you, needs a hand, an encouragement to pursue her dream and become an active part of this society. Help her out, however you can. This is what my mother taught me to do, and what she would ask you."

The other winners were: Theresa Brown (Human Resource Development and Public Administration, Northern Illinois University); Sarah Evans (Italian Culinary Arts, Italian Culinary Academy); Tatiana D'Ambola (Journalism, Boston University); Valene Bummara (Sociology and Business, Texas State University, San Marcos).

It is not easy to say what an Italian-American woman is, and the role she typically has or should have in both her family and the society she lives in.

During the luncheon, officials, politicians, members of many different Italian-American/Italian Organizations in America and guests followed one another onto the stage, praising the winners for following Geraldine's path.

After the two national anthems sung by [Michael Amante](#) [3] and the blessing given to all those attending by sister Marian Defeis, NOIAW Vice Chair Kim Azzarelli passed the microphone to the Consul General Francesco Maria Talò, who was the first honorary guest stepping onto the stage. "It's an honor to be here today. The dream of all Italians coming to America was first of all greeted by the first lady they met, the Statue of Liberty. Her welcoming face exemplifies that of all Italian-American women. We are living in a time of false values, no values, but there are strong ideals that are still kept alive. And their best guardians are our Italian-American women represented by NOIAW. They keep our traditions alive, and hand down to their children all their knowledge in terms of traditions and culture. They are the ambassadors of Italy's 'soft power' in the United States".

He was followed by Vincenzo Scotti, the Undersecretary of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "My government and my citizens are all thankful for the work that NOIAW has done in this country which Geraldine Ferraro's social and political commitment so well represents. Since you did not forget the land from which your ancestors came, you have contributed both to the growth of this country, and of Italy. Geraldine Ferraro is also a symbol for Italian women; they look at her as a mother".

Consul Talò and Minister Scotti occupied the central table just in front of the stage. Sitting with them were also the Consul's wife Ornella Romano Talò, the Italian Baroness Mariuccia Zerilli Marimò, Steven Acunto, Honorary Vice Consul of the Republic of Italy in New Jersey, and the Luncheon Chairwoman Vivian Cardia.

Their table was right at the center of the dining room, side by side to Geraldine Ferraro's. At her table was her husband John, Dr. Aileen Riotto Sirey (the chairwoman and founder of NOIAW), the former governor of the State of New York City Mario Cuomo, his wife Matilda and their son, the Attorney General Andrew Cuomo.



Soon after their speeches, actors [Renee Taylor](#) [4] and Joe Bologna lead a live auction with the purpose of collecting extra funds for NOIAW's activities which include cultural events, cultural exchanges, and of course the annual project of granting scholarships to young Italian-American women. "We know that students need a great deal of money to pursue their studies. Our goal is to grant at least 5 scholarships of 5.000\$ each next year", said Renee. Many of those attending the celebrations showed their generosity by bidding to buy trips to Italy and beautiful jewels. Among the hundreds of people interested and actively participating at this part of the event, were Cav. Uff. Joseph Sciamè, President of the Italian Heritage and Culture Committee of New York, and Vincenzo Marra, Director of the [Italian Language Inter-Cultural Alliance](#) [5], accompanied by his wife Susi and their children.

In turn there was a silent auction held from 11:30 am to 12:30 pm, organized and chaired by Joann Sicoli, CMP.

By the time the luncheon was about to end, the atmosphere in this elegant and extremely fancy restaurant was warm and familiar, hundreds of guest chatting with each other in the best Italian tradition. It was soon time for the moment everyone was waiting for: the presentation of the award to Geraldine Ferraro. Mario Cuomo had been asked to introduce the moment with a brief speech.

Mario Cuomo and Geraldine Ferraro have been friends for more than 40 years. His speech gave us a better idea of what she must have meant for all Italian-American women back in the 1980s. "When I first met her, Geraldine was married to John, she had two children to raise, a household to run. Nobody could understand why she had decided to become involved in social and political activities that would take her so far away from her "traditional duties". (...) But no matter how long this world will last and how many governments we have seen in our past and will see in the future, one thing is for sure and will always remain true: Geraldine is the first woman who has run for the Vice-Presidency of this country and the fact that she is Italian-American makes us particularly proud. She was courageous, and found a way to overcome the prejudices we used to face back in our days when people like us were called "degos", "waps", and so on, and became an example for women of all ethnicities and for Italian-Americans in general, both women and men."

As he later added to our microphones: "Italian-American people must still work a lot to defeat those prejudices. And NOIAW is a good place to start working on this. They must get into positions of influence and power and be excellent at it. All the women in this room who are encouraging education are all being like Geraldine Ferraro. They are becoming productive for their community, and thanks to them the image of all Italians improves."

When Dr. Aileen Riotto Sirey gave Geraldine Ferraro her award, she gave the most touching speech for an Italian-American woman of any generation. With her words "If you educate a man, you educate one person; if you educate a woman, you educate a family", she resumed in a few words the real role of an Italian-American woman: a mother, a wife, but also a mind and a body that can greatly improve the lives of those surrounding her, her society, her country.

People were just overwhelmed by her words. As Matilda Cuomo told us, "She covered a very touching point that means a lot to women, all women...not just Italian-American. She is right when she addresses the girls and advises them to get an education. If you stay in school, you will be responsible in the future for the education of your family. What better gift than the gift of education could you give your children? Look at the tribute she always gives her mother. I do that with my mother as well. Even though my mother was illiterate in English, she understood that in this country a girl has to go to college just like a boy. Today, we are all professionals, and I know that's thanks to her. I encouraged all my children in the same direction".

Her speech touched many of the men attending also. John Marino, President of the [National Italian American Foundation](#) [6], told us he feels a great amount of gratitude towards Geraldine, "she has smoothed the way for all of us Italian-Americans".

Andrew Cuomo echoed him: "It's not just about women. She must be an example for all of us, and



she is especially for me since I have grown up looking at her as my personal mentor. Things have changed for all Italian-American people over the past decades, we must thank her for what she has encouraged us to pursue, for helping us in giving our contribution to the enrichment of this country”.

The National Organization of Italian American Women is a sisterhood of diverse women from varied professional backgrounds. Members include doctors, lawyers, artists, scientists, nurses, businesswomen, educators, writers, judges, and women working in the home. It is the only national membership organization for women of Italian ancestry.

NOIAW sponsored events are educational, cultural and social in nature and focus on issues of interest to Italian American women. The programs recognize and promote the accomplishments and contributions of women of Italian ancestry as well as acknowledge women as keepers of the culture

[7]

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