

NJ Italian and Italian-American Heritage Commission. A Meeting at the Coccia Institute

Marina Melchionda (March 23, 2010)



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On March 11 the [New Jersey Italian and Italian-American American Heritage Commission](#) [2]gathered in the headquarters of the [Coccia Institute](#) [3]in [Montclair University](#) [4] to discuss plans and cultural activities to organize for the community in the near future.

It was a very significant day for the Italian-American Institute created by Cav. Joseph Coccia and his wife, given that the Commission expressly called the meeting to be held at its Dickson Hall instead of



the New Jersey State House, where it usually gathers. By making this choice they recognized in the Coccia Institute a corner stone in the promulgation and promotion of the Italian heritage in the State.

The director of the Coccia Institute, Mary Ann Re, PhD, introduced Chairman Gilda Rorro Baldassarri, who proceeded to present to the audience the other members of the commission attending, among which were Executive Director Michael Genevrino, Vice Chair Bob Rafano, Commissioners Frank Gargione (Community Outreach); Richard Bilotti (Website); Tina Segali (Public Relations); Joseph Alessi (Community Outreach). In a laid back and informative panel, each of them described the main projects to enhance in their different fields of competence, and informed on the different plans of action designed to meet the Commissioner's goals.

According to its statute, the Italian and Italian American Heritage Commission was founded to "build and strengthen the cultural identity of Italians and Italian Americans through public educational programs that preserve and promote an accurate, bias free and non stereotyped understanding and awareness of historical and current contributions and accomplishments of people of Italian heritage". Today the State of New Jersey is home of one of the largest Italian-American communities in the United States, with an average number of two million, who are all potentially involved in the educational programs, forums, seminars, and exchanges that the Commission organizes with both private and public sponsors.

"The main goals we set for this year are to enlarge and develop a new website in order to reach the whole community of New Jersey, and interact with it in a more active way; build coalitions of support with Italian-American Organizations; upgrade and expand our programs aimed to support the spreading of Italian culture within our territories of competence; build on and enhance the existing relationship with the trade council; and enhance our relationships with the Italian consulates of New York, Newark, and Philadelphia", announced Vice Chair Baldassarri at the beginning of the seating before passing the floor to the other commissioners participating.

We soon learned that the Commission, in spite of a quite small budget, is deeply active in fields that are considered to be of vital importance for the survival and expansion of Italian culture in the US. In particular, it is involved in the effort to promote the teaching of the Italian language in schools: "We will go on presenting our teaching programs to schools, universities and colleges located in the different counties in which the State of New Jersey is subdivided. It is also very important to start new partnership relations with Italian schools, just as we did with those of Umbria and Sicily through the 'Amicizia Program'. This way our students can have a better clou of how Italian culture is evolving nowadays, and approach it in the smoothest way possible", continued Mrs. Baldassarri.

The development of a new website (Italian Life in New Jersey) can fairly serve this goal, and can also improve the Commissioner's relationship with the community, as the Commissioner responsible for Media Communications, Richard Bilotti, suggested. "We will not only explore new ways to use social networking sites for promoting the commission among the audience, but we will also use our own website to communicate with the public directly, listening and responding to their requests. The platform could also serve as an instrument for them to address their representatives at a political level, and as a tool for us to advertise and promote the events we organize."

The Commission, as the Commissioner for Public Relations, Tina Segali, concluded, is indeed organizing a number of educational activities that will take place by the end of this year. Among them, a teacher training session to be held at the Department of Education of the State of New Jersey (October 4, 2010) and a conference scheduled for November and focused on Immigration.

The first meeting at the Coccia Institute was a success under many points of view for the Commission. Not only did all members of the panel find themselves deeply sathisfied with this year's programs and projects, they were also joined by quite a large public that included Cav. Joseph Coccia and his wife Elda, and by the Consul General of Italy in New Jersey, Andrea Barbaria.

After a brief coffee break, they all gathered again in the conference room to greet Professor Nancy Carnevale, who presented for the occasion her new book "A New Language, a new World", in which she described how Italian immigrants approached the English language and adapted to the American way of life when they first arrived in the U.S.



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