

## **NIAF Gala. This Year Convention Focuses on the Next Generation**

Letizia Airos (October 25, 2010)



An intense two days of activities during the 35th annual NIAF convention, the most important Italian-American event of the year. i-Italy was there and brings you the highlights

The 35th annual [NIAF gala](#) [2]. Two priorities for the coming year clearly emerged during the most important Italian-American event of the year: more attention must be paid to the younger generation as well as teaching the Italian language in American schools.

As the President of NIAF Joseph Del Raso stated, NIAF is committed to and invested in the next generation through the Foundation's restructuring on one side and dedication to restoring the AP Italian language program in high schools on the other.



NIAF is no longer limiting its focus on the experiences of past immigrants but is also concentrating on the present day, putting today's Italy in direct contact with today's America.

This year's convention, more so than in past years, saw an increased number of young people in attendance, said Del Raso, "which motivates us to continue what past generations have sown. The experience of most young Italian Americans is not the same as Jersey Shore", he added.

Del Raso also expressed NIAF's gratitude to Victoria Mastrobuono, who recently left the Foundation 2.6 million dollars in her will, a significant amount of money that will be used to finance cultural initiatives.

Over three thousand guests were in attendance, hailing from both the United States and Italy and who participated in many activities over two days spent Washington, D.C., culminating with the annual gala at the Hilton Hotel. The President of the United States was, as always, invited but due to campaign commitments did not attend. President Obama, however, did send a heartfelt video message underscoring the great contribution that Italian immigrants have made to American society.

The convention's program was rich and varied. The Foundation also hosted Expo Italia, a two-day exhibition pavilion showcasing the best of Italy, as well as a silent auction.

Of particular interest was the presentation hosted by the Italian Trade Commission (ITC) entitled Indulge in the Real Flavor of Italy Without a Ticket! Director of [Director of the Italian Trade Commission in North America](#), [3] Aniello Musella, NIAF's Executive Vice President Salvatore Salibello, and Lorenzo Galanti, Head of the Commercial Office at the Italian Embassy in Washington were also present. The keynote speaker and moderator of the event was Lou Di Palo, owner of [Di Palo's](#) [4], the famous Italian grocery store in New York's Little Italy. The message of the event was clear: Italian products continue to dominate the market thanks to their quality and individuality which the ITC advances through its commitment to promoting and defending authentic Italian products.

Dan St. Paul known as the national Italian-American comedian and author opened NIAF's weekend events. There was also a tribute to the quintessential Italian-American entertainer Frank Sinatra with Robert Davi performing Davi Sings Sinatra: A Tribute to Sinatra, The Great American Songbook and America.

Let's Talk About It! was a panel discussion on women's health focusing on preventative strategies for breast cancer, including the newest recommendations for diet, lifestyle, and mammography screenings.

Author Mark Rotella discussed his new book, Amore: The Story of Italian American Song.

Talking Points was an entertaining discussion about the latest sports topics by some of today's leading sports personalities.

This was followed by talk entitled Dumbing Down Our Public Culture: Why the Arts Matter to America, given by Dana Gioia, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. Attendees also had the opportunity to attend a screening of Journey of Hope: Joe Leone's L'Aquila Earthquake Relief Fund.

Host Rossella Rago of Cooking with Nonna gave a surprise chat that revolved around her relationship with her grandmother, her family, the food she cooks, and the importance of a healthy diet.

There was also a screening of No Kidding, Me 2! a compelling and moving documentary by Italian-American actor and director Joe Pantoliano (Memento, The Matrix) about mental illness. A screening of Crimebuster: A Son's Search for His Father, a NIAF grant-winning documentary about groundbreaking Italian-American judge and district attorney Louis B. DeMatteis followed.



Following the film screenings, attendees learned about the Jewish experience in Italy during the Holocaust at a session entitled It Happened In Italy, with author Elizabeth Bettina and Vincent Marmorale, Chairman of the Human Rights Committee of the New York State Council for the Social Studies. In addition to the various programs, there were booths from all over the country showcasing the best of Italy within the United States featuring fine wine, gelato, and other Italian treats.

There was, of course, the annual live auction and NIAF's silent auction showcase to accompany the event. The evening's top sale: a first edition FIAT 500 auctioned at \$69,000.

At the eagerly-awaited NIAF gala on Saturday evening, there were, as expected, numerous Italians and Italian-Americans who have achieved prestigious positions within the U.S. in many diverse fields such as politics, finance, culture, and entertainment.

Giuliana DePandi Rancic, anchor and managing editor of [E!](#) [5]News and star of the [Style Network show Giuliana & Bill](#) [6]served as emcee and introduced the evening's guests. As a daughter of a famous tailor to the jet set and born in Naples, Rancic told the audience that she learned English by watching television since her family only spoke Italian at home. Italian Ambassador Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata greeted the guests and warmly welcomed them to Washington in his speech.

The dais and the dinner tables in the Hilton's immense banquet hall was overflowing with stars and famous figures from different worlds, including [Danny De Vito](#) [7] [Tony Lo Bianco](#) [8], [Joe Pantoliano](#) [9], [Annabella Sciorra](#) [10], [Michael Badalucco](#) [11], [Linda Fiorentino](#) [12] [Mike Piazza](#) [13] [Dion Di Mucci](#) [14] and [Lidia Bastianich](#) [15][General Peter Pace](#) [16], [John Podesta](#) [17], [Judge Samuel Alito](#) [18], President of [CNN](#) [19]Worldwide Jim Walton, CEO of [PepsiCo](#) [20] Americas Massimo d'Amore, Italian deputies [Amato Berardi](#) [21] and [Fabrizio Cicchitto](#) [22], as well as the entire corps of the various diplomatic missions to the U.S. were all in attendance.

The Foundation conferred awards to Italians and Italian-Americans who have excelled in their professional and civic roles. Awards were presented to [Aurelio De Laurentis](#) [23], filmmaker and president of the [Naples soccer team](#) [24], and [Fulvio Conti](#) [25]administrative delegate of ENEL who received the Achievement Award in International Business.

Awards were also given to Tom Izzo, head coach of the men's basketball team at Michigan State University, Christopher J. Nassetti, President and CEO of Hilton Worldwide Business, Dr. Thomas M. Scalea, physicist at the R. Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center at the University of Maryland, and Joe Uva, President and CEO of Univision Communications One America.

NIAF also presented a special award to the President of RAI, Paolo Garimberti to commemorate 50 years of Italian broadcasting within the United States.

Danny De Vito, as entertaining as ever, presented Aurelio De Laurentis an award along with hilarious jokes, but also expressed deep respect for his work in the Italian film industry. In between rounds of applause, De Laurentis promised to bring his soccer team to the U.S. soon. (The interview will appear on i-Italy shortly.)

During the red-carpet evening there were many more movie stars than politicians present due to campaigning for the upcoming mid-term elections, but the Italians and the Italian-Americans who did attend gathered together for a celebration that continued long after the gala ended. Many guests at the gala were staying in rooms and suites scattered throughout the Hilton so that they could spend more time together in a more relaxed environment.

Italian and Italian-American music was also the star of the show, with many traditional and contemporary tunes adding to the festivities.

There were many informal and private moments throughout the gala event, less publicized but no less important. Between one toast and the next, and perhaps a bit of dancing, cherished friendships between Italians and Italian-Americans were established, rekindled, and shared during the event that continues to blossom year after year.



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The National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) is a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., dedicated to preserving the heritage of Italian Americans. Visit [www.niaf.org](http://www.niaf.org) [26] for more information.

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